

# LEADING A PRODUCTIVE AND POSITIVE HYBRID WORKPLACE

*By Rob Cooke and Meaghan Smith*

Organizational leaders everywhere are struggling with their new hybrid workplace. During the pandemic people were sent home. When they were told to come back to the office they resisted. They liked the flexibility, the absence of commute time, and their ability to address home and family issues as they occurred. While the benefits of hybrid work for employees are well documented and understood, organizational leaders are experiencing an increasing number of challenges without readily available and proven solutions.



We are working with leaders of hybrid workplaces and are identifying important inconsistencies across different organizational types and sizes. These include:

- Inconsistencies in how leaders define and communicate desired behaviours of workplace flexibility
- Low levels of trust due to lack of personal interaction
- Decreased visibility of work efforts resulting in leaders measuring behaviours rather than outcomes
- Lack of clarity and consistent application of hybrid workplace rules and resultant feelings of inequity and lack of fairness
- Reduced sense of belonging and connection to the organization and its purpose
- Shift in power dynamic from employer to employee and the resulting individualistic approach to work (i.e., what's in it for me?)
- Connections and relationship building are not seen as being productive and there is a weakening of ties between work units.
- Lack of meaningful metrics to assess employee productivity and to determine if people are working as smart and efficiently as they could
- More siloed workplaces, and less cross-team communication and collaboration
- Less informal learning and mentoring of staff resulting in it taking longer to bring new employees up to expected standards of performance

While there is no silver bullet for these issues, the success of hybrid workplace arrangements is dependent upon leaders implementing processes that address the loss of regular physical interactions. In our work with hybrid leaders, we have identified critical success factors for enabling an effective hybrid workplace arrangement that works for both employees and the organization.

These include:

1. Ensuring executive clarity on the details and expectations of hybrid operations
2. Engaging multiple levels of leadership to ensure a successful hybrid environment
3. Creating clarity and consistency in communicating expectations of employees operating in a hybrid environment
4. Linking employees to purpose and vision

5. Monitoring performance and productivity in a new and more effective manner that builds trust

6. Holding people accountable for meeting expectations

7. Enhancing hybrid worker interaction and communication practices

8. Creating meaningful in-office or being together experiences

9. Having visible and accessible leaders



Details of these key success factors can be found in the pages that follow

## EXECUTIVE CLARITY ON THE DETAILS AND EXPECTATIONS OF HYBRID OPERATIONS

Establishing and clearly communicating organizational direction, priorities and expectations is one of the most important roles of organizational leaders. Critical to the success of the new hybrid workplace is the articulation and communication of very clear rules related to how the hybrid workplace will operate. This not only includes clarity of in-office time requirements, it requires clarity and communication of consistent definitions and expectations related to remote work including what activities are expected to be performed physically together in office and what activities are to be carried out remotely.

## ENGAGING MULTIPLE LEADERSHIP LEVELS TO ENSURE A SUCCESSFUL HYBRID ENVIRONMENT

At all levels, organizational leaders need to be engaged in discussions on how the hybrid workplace is operating; what is working well and where there are opportunities for improvement. Leaders need to have a consistent understanding of executive expectations and they need to discuss how these can be applied in each workplace setting. We suggest that leaders meet as a group on a regular cadence with the goal of ensuring the hybrid workplace arrangements are working for both employees and the organization.

## CREATING CLARITY OF COMMUNICATION AROUND PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES

The foremost reason that employees do not deliver or behave as expected or needed, regardless of whether they are in the office or working remotely, is that their leaders have not adequately defined and communicated their expectations. In the absence of clearly defined expectations, employees do what they think is required or what they want to do, not what you want from them. With remote workers this situation is magnified. It's vital that leaders communicate clearly defined expectations — not only at an individual level but at the team level as well. Leaders need to clearly communicate the required results and deliverables as well as behavioural expectations. In the new hybrid world, many corporate policies will need to be revisited and revised to reflect the new dynamics and expectations related to desired culture. This includes everything from hours of work, in-office presence times, performance and status reporting, availability and even dress codes. Employees need clarity of expectations.

## LINKING EMPLOYEES TO PURPOSE AND VISION

Employee understanding and alignment to purpose and vision have always been key to organizational performance, but with hybrid work it is especially critical. When people are in the office, they can feel the energy of being together and experience a sense of common purpose by running into colleagues and chatting about strategy, customers, or what's new with the organization. When people are separated, some of this may still occur virtually, but it will be drastically reduced.

Leaders need to be intentional about articulating purpose and vision, discussing the big picture of the overall goals and ensuring people feel their work is uniquely connected and necessary to the success of the organization's desired outcomes.

## MONITORING PERFORMANCE AND PRODUCTIVITY IN A MORE EFFECTIVE MANNER

One of the most common themes we hear from leaders with remote staff is "how do I know what my staff are doing? Are they actually working or just spending time with family?" The tension lies in the fact that remote employees believe that they are more productive at home, and their managers believe their employees are more productive in the office. In a pre-pandemic office, managers were able to watch people at their desks and see how 'busy' they were. However, what real performance looks like has never been well defined.

Most people want to be productive and of value and will do what they can to contribute while working remotely. While some people may not be as productive as they would be if they were at the office, leaders must start from a place of trust. This must start with the articulation and communication of expectations related to the delivery of desired outcomes and deliverables. These can then be monitored and assessed used as true indicators of productivity.

## HOLDING PEOPLE ACCOUNTABLE FOR MEETING EXPECTATIONS

Leaders who are sensitive to employee needs or challenges can sometimes go too far in providing "space" for them to work through issues. While people certainly need empathy and understanding, they also need to be held accountable for results, deliverables, and behaviours. Accountability is key to an effective culture because it reminds people their work matters, and it reminds them how important it is to the organization and the team. If purpose is the big picture of how things matter, accountability is the mechanism which operationalizes how the work matters.

Effective hybrid cultures must ensure performance for the benefit of individuals and teams as well as the organization. As organizations give employees more freedom over when and where they work, accountability to outcomes and results become increasingly important. Being in the office every day is no longer an indicator that an employee is doing their job well, meaning the focus shifts to what kind of results that person is contributing.

Once result, output and behavioural expectations are clearly defined, you need to follow up to ensure consistency of interpretation and you need to track the productivity and performance. With remote workers you will need to increase the frequency of personal check-ins and you will need to ask specifically about progress and potential challenges to achievement. Hybrid workplaces increase the need for leaders to increase the rigor of performance monitoring and check-ins.

## ENHANCING HYBRID WORKER INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

Most organizations have become familiar with the use of virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Webex, Skype, etc. during the pandemic. There is a need, however, to ensure that meetings being held virtually, or in-person are more effective. People are attending multiple meetings every day, most of which could be shorter, more focused, and deliver better outcomes.

There is also the need for a broader set up platforms to enhance employee interaction. Remote team members can fade into the background when socializing is primarily in-person, with half the team connecting over coffee or lunch in the office while the other half eats alone at their dining room table. Organizations need to provide alternative platforms that enable people to informally connect, where coworkers can hang out, share ideas, grab coffee and virtually chat with other people when working remotely.

Email has become the basis for most employee communication whether they are remote or in-office. Studies have shown the proliferation of email volumes following the pandemic resulting in people being overwhelmed by the responses required, preventing them from getting important work accomplished. Leaders must work with their staff to get email under control.

## CREATING MEANINGFUL IN-OFFICE AND BEING TOGETHER EXPERIENCES

To make the most of in-person opportunities for connection, organizations need to make them voluntary, strategic, and intentional. In-office interactions should be well thought out, just like an off-site. Going in for the sake of going in is not valuable and could be resented. People now see that they can be productive at home. We need to incentivize people to come back for a specific purpose, and to drive toward a specific outcome. Think about location as less about control and more about events—so when staff are brought into the office, they know that being there matters.

When possible it is best to create a hybrid working schedule where staff are required to be in the office at certain times. You should consider cohort schedules in which groups of employees work particular days or staggered schedules in which not every employee's start and finish times overlap. Managers can also create custom schedules in which they set a schedule depending on the team's need to be on-site that week.

## HAVING VISIBLE AND ACCESSIBLE LEADERS

One of the most important elements of effective leadership is when leaders are perceived as present and accessible. This is harder to accomplish virtually, but even more important in a hybrid model. Visibility is key. Often when leaders do not see employees on a regular basis they can be “out of sight and out of mind.” Keep a visible list of employees in front of you to remind yourself to check in with each of them. Be intentional about being personally accessible. Check in with team members regularly. Also encourage team members to have close relationships with each other by pairing them on tasks and assigning collaborative projects.

Closely related to visibility and accessibility is the need for plenty of open communication and transparency. When people aren't in the office, they won't have the automatic opportunities to pick up on what's happening—through hallway conversations or by running into colleagues in the work café. As a leader, be sure you're keeping people in the loop, sharing constantly, and making a point to ensure your team members are in the know about as much as possible—the good, the bad and the ugly. This openness is a primary ingredient of trust which is critical to constructive cultures.

# Summary

Leading a hybrid workforce requires a different set of skills and capability than traditional in-office leadership. You will need to ensure that remote managers and managers of remote staff are trained in how to supervise, manage, and coach from a distance, along with remote team-building skills. Leaders need to understand the needs and expectations of remote staff and to recognize the legitimacy of what they may see as unusual or unexpected.

One of the silver linings from the pandemic is that we've brought a lot of innovation to the way we think about employees, their needs, what gives them meaning, and how that connects back to the organization. It's exciting—despite all the difficulties and challenges we're going through. Create development opportunities to help leaders develop the capability required to effectively lead in this new world.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Rob Cooke is a leadership advisor, strategist and coach who works with organizational leaders who are committed to enhancing their impact to achieve great things.**

**rob@robertscooke.com (250) 516-6432**

**Meaghan Smith is an accomplished management consultant bringing knowledge and experience on hybrid workplaces from across multiple sectors.**  
**meaghan@kismetconsult.com (778) 966-7164**

