

# FATHOM

STRATEGIES FOR CREATING THE PERSUASIVE ORGANIZATION

## CREATING A CULTURE:

Best Practices  
for Strong Virtual  
Communication

ISSUE 4 • JULY 2021





# CREATING A CULTURE: Best Practices for Strong Virtual Communication

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Virtual communication, already a significant part of our workplaces, grew to be our only avenue for interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic. The disruption caused by stay-at-home orders forced sometimes painful transitions, but it also created the opportunity for significant evolution and innovation across business. In our last issue, we looked at the overall picture of the advantages of virtual communication, its impact on creative processes, and its potential pitfalls. In this issue, we look at ways to implement more specific best practices to get the most out of virtual communication.

Communication is required to create a strong workplace culture—one that has the flexibility to allow in-person, remote, and hybrid employees to contribute their best work. This kind of culture relies on leadership that clearly and consistently articulates the values and mission of the organization and identifies the practices and policies that support those values.

“Don’t think of recovery as just going back to work and adopting your old habits. Create new meaning. Ask questions: ‘What was the point of this crisis? What will we do if this happens again? What did we learn from this case? How can we move faster next time?’ Find a realistic sense of optimism—‘What should we change?’” writes business psychologist Merete Wedell-Wedellsborg.<sup>1</sup>

“[L]eaders cannot follow the natural impulse to withdraw, lean back, and just assume that the team will reset itself smoothly when the sea starts calming down. There is a need for continued visibility,

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purposeful reorientation, and sustained attention to detail.”


In remote or hybrid environments, communication must be intentional: we can no longer rely on shared space to implicitly transmit culture, expectations, and values. As Pamela Hinds and Brian Elliott write in the *Harvard Business Review*, “When co-located, leaders often implicitly transmit culture by modeling behaviors and values in the presence of their employees. The same implicit signals exist when remote, but they’re harder to detect and interpret. Leaders need to decide on the type of culture they want, the signals that are appropriate to communicate it, and how and when to send them without distortion.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hbr.org/2020/08/leading-into-the-post-covid-recovery>

<sup>2</sup> <https://hbr.org/2021/02/wfh-doesnt-have-to-dilute-your-corporate-culture>





Setting out and modeling explicit, repeated, and consistent best practices enables colleagues to stay connected and allows innovation and collaboration to flourish. In creating these best practices, leaders should:

1. Give employees a clear, attainable set of expectations to work toward.
2. Create buy-in by drafting representatives across all levels of the organization to form a task force that assesses and agrees to these practices.
3. Articulate the culture and values that the practices support.
4. Follow up with consistent check-ins to ensure that practices are being implemented and that they are having the desired impact.

To be successful, a culture that embraces virtual communication must be deliberate, thoughtful, and coherent. It may be helpful to think of the best practices that surround it as serving three connected but distinct purposes: creating connection, offering equitable engagement, and embracing flexibility and adaptation.

## Creating Connection

In some ways, remote work during the pandemic had the veneer of even greater connection than before—after all, we were in each other's homes and videoconferencing at all hours. Our digital ties allowed constant, real-time communication. But all those interactions had to be planned. The impromptu conversation or the serendipitous encounter crucial to the accrual of social capital—those casual but valuable relationships that increase knowledge, encourage collaboration, and expand networks—disappeared overnight.

“One of the biggest and most worrisome changes we saw across these studies was the significant

impact that a year of full-time remote work had on organizational connections—the fundamental basis of social capital,” observe Nancy Baym, Jonathan Larson, and Ronnie Martin, executives at Microsoft who surveyed the nature of work during the pandemic. “Simply put, companies became more siloed than they were pre-pandemic.”<sup>3</sup>

The impact of this narrowing of office relationships is felt not just on an individual level, but organizationally. Baym, Larson, and Martin found through surveys that those with strong workplace relationships were more productive than those without them. And employees who felt disconnected or isolated reported that they were “less likely to be thriving at things that lead to innovation, like thinking strategically, collaborating or brainstorming with others, and proposing innovative ideas.”

Similarly, a McKinsey & Co. study found that “the top three reasons attributed to a fall in productivity while working remotely during COVID-19 were related to a lack of operating model support: reduced collaboration among team members (34%), lack of performance management processes (17%), and lack of motivation in employees and teams (17%).”<sup>4</sup>

Leaders play a pivotal role in consciously creating connections across their organization when their employees are remote or hybrid. Managers should schedule frequent one-on-one meetings, facilitate cross-departmental encounters, and identify opportunities for innovation and collaboration.

Thoughtful use of technology can help create more energy and engagement. Use specific strategies to bring teams together:

- **Use visual technology:** Eighty-seven percent of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://hbr.org/2021/03/what-a-year-of-wfh-has-done-to-our-relationships-at-work>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-organization-blog/three-important-questions-for-the-future-of-remote-work#>

remote users feel more connected to their team when using videoconferencing (perhaps in part because sixty-five percent of communication is nonverbal).<sup>5</sup>

- **Encourage participation:** Assign out responsibilities such as managing the technology, monitoring the chat window, or running portions of the meeting. This allows individuals to feel greater investment in the meeting, as well as creating opportunities for collaboration and mentorship.
- **Be prepared for delays or other technical glitches:** Video lag can interrupt the natural flow of a conversation and create barriers for participants to add to the conversation. Create ways to invite everyone in to offer feedback and opinions; features like the “raised hand” or chat box can be helpful but set expectations for their use ahead of time.

- **Create opportunities for engagement:** Using open-ended inquiries, discussion topics, and follow-up questions draws in new voices and ideas. Polling, whiteboards, and gaming functions all offer engaging ways for people to give feedback and may encourage people hesitant to speak up in group settings a more comfortable way to participate. These techniques need to be aligned both with your audience and your goal: different kinds of engagement work best depending on who they are aimed at and the desired result.

### Offering Equitable Engagement

The truism following the abrupt shift to remote work last year was that the days of entirely in-person office work were largely over; that remote work, in some form or another, was here to stay. Indeed, in a recent PWC survey, more than half of employees said they’d prefer to be remote at least three days a week.<sup>6</sup> And


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“The best practices that surround virtual communication serve three connected but distinct purposes: creating connection, offering equitable engagement, and embracing flexibility and adaptation.”



<sup>5</sup> <https://gigaom.com/report/why-videoconferencing-is-critical-to-business-collaboration/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/covid-19/us-remote-work-survey.html>



83% of employers reported that the shift to remote work was successful for their company.

But it's also important to recognize the nuances of that picture. Remote work doesn't work well for everyone, particularly when it isn't implemented thoughtfully or equitably. And leadership needs to recognize that the benefits and burdens of remote work aren't always distributed evenly across the organization.

An analysis conducted by Microsoft found that the benefits of remote work were more perceptible for those higher up in organizations. "Many business leaders are faring better than their employees. Sixty-one percent of leaders say they are 'thriving' right now—23 percentage points higher than those without decision-making authority. They also report building stronger relationships with colleagues (+11 percentage points) and leadership (+19 percentage points), earning higher incomes (+17 percentage points), and taking all or more of their allotted vacation days (+12 percentage points)."<sup>7</sup>

To close this gap, leaders must clearly and consistently communicate how remote working fits into the organization's values and mission. They should articulate the ways in which remote work can benefit employees directly, provide support for them to grow and thrive while working remotely, and ensure that all employees, whether in office or working from home, feel like equal participants. And leaders need to be empathetic and inclusive in their approach: as Jennifer Howard-Grenville, a professor of organizational studies at Cambridge, writes, "Culture cannot be simply espoused by leaders but must arise from and resonate with employees' experiences."<sup>8</sup>

Creating equitable practices requires consistent implementation of best practices:

- **Provide equal opportunities for participation:** Some companies had already begun instituting best practices around equitable engagement before the pandemic, and these have only gained traction as remote and hybrid workplaces have become widespread. For example, a company might put in place a policy that all meeting attendees must be engaged the same way: if one participant needs to log in remotely, everyone else does so as well, so that no individual feels walled off on a screen.
- **Cultivate awareness of different engagement and communication styles:** While this type of thoughtfulness is a good rule of thumb in any office environment, remote and hybrid workplaces need deliberate processes in place to allow alternate avenues of participation. Create multiple options for input, such as a collaborative document or shared work folder, so that those who don't feel comfortable speaking up in a 10-person videoconference call can contribute their ideas.
- **Avoid micromanaging remote workers:** Managers should be aware of a bias toward mistrusting workers they can't see, resulting in a corrosive amount of micromanaging, check-ins, or after-hours requests. These behaviors ultimately increase stress and erode productivity. Instead, create clear expectations, measure success by results, and offer ample opportunity for communication and support. "Rather than checking up on people as a way to micromanage them, managers need to check in with people and provide them the information, guidance, and support to work autonomously," observe researchers Sharon K. Parker, Caroline Knight, and Anita Keller.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work>

<sup>8</sup> <https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/how-to-sustain-your-organizations-culture-when-everyone-is-remote/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://hbr.org/2020/07/remote-managers-are-having-trust-issues>



- **Invest in infrastructure:** Ensuring that all employees can engage equitably in remote work may require investing in the tools they need to connect to the office reliably, seamlessly, and securely. This may include providing hardware, software, networking capability, and cloud services, among other investments. And once these tools are in place, provide adequate training so that employees can take full advantage of the technology at their disposal.
- **Embrace the opportunity to diversify your workforce:** With geographical limitations lifted by the nature of remote work, executives can broaden their scope to find talent. As Karin Kimbrough, Chief Economist at LinkedIn, observes, “This shift is... good for democratizing access to opportunity. Companies in major cities can hire talent from underrepresented groups that may not have the means or desire to move to a big city. And in smaller cities, companies will now have access to talent that may have a different set of skills than they had before.”<sup>10</sup>

## Embracing Flexibility and Adaptation

The past year has demanded nimble leadership in ways never seen before. The most successful executives met the challenge with creativity, a focus on employees, and an emphasis on supportive, caring

environment. While the reopening of businesses and schools means that some of the typical routines are resuming, many of these traits remain important for executives working to adapt their offices to a mix of in-person and remote work.

Foremost among the considerations business leaders need to address is digital fatigue: the physical and emotional toll that living entirely through a screen can take. “As we look to create a better future of work, addressing digital exhaustion must be a priority for leaders everywhere,” write Microsoft Work Lab analysts. “It won’t be easy, but consider how to reduce employee workloads, embrace a balance of synchronous and asynchronous collaboration, and create a culture where breaks are encouraged and respected.”<sup>11</sup>

In considering best practices, it may be useful to think of it as spheres of awareness:

- **Audience:** Especially if employees are spread across the globe, be cognizant of cultural differences in communication norms. Be proactive about understanding the most effective means of engaging each member of your team—including logistical considerations like time zones.
- **Channel:** The choice of channel for communicating sends its own message—for instance, a phone call


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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work>


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will always send people into high-alert—and offers specific strengths and weaknesses.<sup>12</sup> Being aware of the complexity and sensitivity of the topic, and how it may be received, should inform whether communication takes place in-person or over video, through email or IM, or in a phone call.

- **Situational:** Be aware of limitations and special circumstances that might affect the ability of an employee to participate in virtual meetings. Many people over the past year have had to cope with limited privacy, the demands of children, or external noise. As remote working becomes a choice rather than an imperative, some of these issues can and should be addressed, but leaders should keep an open door to concerns and requests for support.
- **Self:** Leaders must always reflect on how their communication has an impact on their reports, but especially so as they deal with new ways of interacting with their employees. Confronting ones' own biases, blind spots, or weaknesses can help cultivate more empathetic, resilient management.



As these best practices solidify, adapted to support your organization's values and mission, take an equally thoughtful approach to implementation. Offering—and, importantly, participating in—training creates a level-set of expectations and skills across the organization and signals the importance of this work to leadership. Consider creating a wide network of support and resources:

- **Training sessions:** Live training gives individuals an opportunity to ask questions, try out new techniques, and get feedback in a supportive, low-pressure environment.
- **Videos and user guides:** Offering on-demand resources gives people an opportunity to refresh their skills at any time, and on their own schedule.

*“The shared vulnerability of this time has given us a huge opportunity to bring real authenticity to company culture and transform work for the better.”*

- **Feedback:** Giving clear and consistent feedback, whether through regularly scheduled check-in meetings or quarterly reviews, gives people a chance to assess and improve their performance.

Leaders who espouse a culture of learning and adaptation also understand that you can't simply “set and forget” the best practices that guide an organization. They must be regularly reexamined and revised; leaders must be willing to listen to honest input from every level of the organization to understand what works and what doesn't.

Perhaps the greatest lesson of the last year for leaders: embrace your own vulnerability. Compassion, flexibility, and creativity helped many businesses weather the past year and emerge even stronger. Those same qualities can help them succeed in the years to come.

“Before the pandemic, we encouraged people to ‘bring their whole self to work,’ but it was tough to truly empower them to do that,” Jared Spataro, corporate vice president at Microsoft 365, has observed. “The shared vulnerability of this time has given us a huge opportunity to bring real authenticity to company culture and transform work for the better.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.edge.org/response-detail/27212>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work>