How to Sustain Workplace Culture with a Remote Team

In a trend that rapidly ramped up during the pandemic, an increasing number of companies are employing remote employees and building hybrid teams. As a result, more leaders are challenged with aligning people in various locations and across time zones to organizational goals and best practices.

As the workforce evolves, it's more crucial than ever before for leaders to focus on building a strong, high-performing culture. By doing so, they'll create a framework that will unite their staff wherever they perform their jobs and help them thrive.

Behaviors that Drive Remote Work Culture

Many CEOs start the developing culture by identifying a formal set of values they want their company to represent. These principles may inspire employees, but they typically aren't actionable. It's only when leaders define the behaviors that bring the values to life that they begin to build a healthy workplace culture.

To codify the behaviors, leaders need to create written descriptions of what they look like when performed. Once compiled, they should communicate them throughout the organization in multiple ways. In doing so, they provide employees with a "handbook" explaining how people should operate that leaves no room for misinterpretation.

Many behaviors are essential to organizational success, whether people work together under one roof or are scattered in different locations. But some are essential to help bind and support remote team members, especially those that center on:

> These guidance standards are invaluable for remote employees who can't pick up on "how things are done around here" in person. And it gives them the confidence that they're included on a team even when they're working from home.

- **Prioritizing Effective Communication**
- **Showing Meaningful Acknowledgment**

- **Getting Clear on Expectations**
- **Helping to Establish Work/Life Balance**
- **Building Relationships with Team Members**

Leaders should consider which behaviors will facilitate these critical areas in their organization. For example, in building effective communication with remote team members, they should define how their people should:

- Make their written messaging and contributions in virtual meetings easy to understand
- Be responsive; quickly acknowledge others' messages and provide status updates
- Share information, with the understanding that transparency is vital

Virtual Recruiting & Onboarding

Leaders must consider how to recruit, interview, and onboard employees virtually as they transition from an on-site to a remote or hybrid staff.

Recruiting

Today's talent market is tighter than ever before, and a powerful company culture is high on savvy job candidates' list of criteria as they look at organizations.

> Consequently, culture should be a vital part of a company's recruitment tools—with emphasis on how it functions with remote team members.

As they research job opportunities and participate in interviews, prospective employees will be looking at how well a company:

- **Makes its stated values an everyday part of how people operate in a remote environment**
  - o Recruitment tools should showcase examples of culture woven into the employee community regardless of where people work. Hiring managers should emphasize how the culture is built to include remote team members.
- **Connects its culture to purposeful work**
  - o People, especially those who work from home, increasingly choose jobs where they find their work meaningful and fulfilling. HR teams should be prepared to answer questions about how the company's culture helps drive purpose and generates a high level of employee engagement.
- **Emphasizes Communication and Teamwork**
  - o Most people who work off-site crave connection with other team members—even if they never work face-to-face. And they want to collaborate with like-minded people who value teamwork over personal agendas. Topics the company values that hiring managers should cover for remote workers include:
    - ▪ Respect and inclusivity
    - ▪ Having a solution-focus vs. a blame-focus
    - ▪ Honoring commitments
- **Helps Remote Workers Advance and Grow**

     o Professional development is important to most workers, but many remote employees are concerned that not being on-site will hinder their ability to advance. Educational opportunities, along with a culture that focuses on behaviors that hone soft skill development, such as problem-solving, communication, and planning, will draw top job candidates.

Onboarding

To counter the lack of in-person interaction, leaders conducting virtual onboarding can leverage multiple strategies to engage and gain the confidence of new staff. They should start by making remote recruits feel part of the team and demonstrating that they are valued before "Day 1."

Emphasis on culture should continue throughout the onboarding process to help new team members plug into the organization.

To extend a warm welcome:

- Appoint a liaison or informal mentor (someone who is not the recruit's manager) to answer questions and "show them the ropes"

- Set up a series of video calls to take the place of in-house introductions with coworkers and management
- Send out a team-wide announcement about the new employee, including a photo, role, and short bio
- Allow time for the new hire to absorb information by conducting the onboarding program, formerly done in person, in multiple video sessions with ample breaks
- Provide access to a digital library with helpful resources, such as employee manuals, style guides, contact lists, an organizational chart with names, and a glossary of company terms

One of the biggest challenges of operating with a remote team, especially with people new to the company, is forging solid relationships. The onboarding process can help initiate these personal bonds, which are critical for people to feel supported, less isolated, and encouraged in their work roles.

Technology offers many tools to replace the coffee-break gatherings, "water-cooler" chats, or even virtual after-hours get-togethers that establish ties. The onboarding manager can utilize IT to help recruits begin to build relationships in various ways, including:

- Creating a digital "new member" lounge to provide a comfortable environment for recent hires to connect—even if they don't work directly with one another
- Setting up a series of one-on-one video calls with people the new employee will interact with regularly to help them assimilate into a strong core network
- Providing access and introductions into chat rooms where teams communicate about work
- Offering a video-conferencing platform for people to connect and discuss common interests
- Inviting them to participate in online after-work activities for fun and camaraderie

People don't merely want to perform their jobs well; they also want to know how their work impacts the company.

- **An onboarding session about how a remote recruit's job contributes to achieving organizational goals will help tether them to the team.**

Rituals & Coaching

A culture's defined behaviors must be reinforced regularly via various methods to become intrinsic in an organization. Leaders with a remote team should develop strategies to practice and coach the behaviors in a virtual environment.

> Another dominant element that drives a remote employee's engagement with the organization is a vivid understanding of their role in achieving overarching goals.

Rituals

One of the best ways to help remote staff adopt specified behaviors is to create rituals around them. Rituals carry weight because they feel relevant—they're not just an action to cross off a list. They reinforce the culture by:

- **Creating connection**
- **Supplying continuity**

- **Elevating engagement**
- **Facilitating training**
- **Building strong habits**

One way to reinforce preferred behaviors is to highlight one per week on a continuous loop. Rituals to emphasize the weekly behavior can include:

- **Making it the focal point of Monday-morning reflections or insights contributed by team members and shared company-wide.**
- **Beginning every virtual meeting with a brief, but lively discussion about how the weekly behavior syncs with the meeting topic**
- **Developing and circulating fun mini-quizzes that ask people to consider the behavior and how they would respond in a situation. Participation can be gamified to increase participation.**

Coaching

Guiding employees to reach their full potential is among a manager's most important responsibilities. And the best resource to help them train and support their team members is a strong culture. It's the foundation managers can rely on to effectively direct in-house staff, and it's critical to bring out the best in remote employees.

A healthy culture can facilitate coaching in multiple ways, including:

- Providing a common language
- Developing an environment of accountability
- Creating a platform for constructive feedback

Common Language

> The "common language" developed by defining the company's preferred behaviors contributes significantly to management's ability to consistently coach and develop remote team members.

This internal vocabulary ensures that everyone uses the same terminology to discuss expectations. Managers can also assess which defined behaviors they could leverage to discuss when problems arise. The common language gives them context for every teachable moment and positions them to become great role models and teachers.

Developing Accountability

Holding employees accountable for their output is even more challenging for managers with remote teams. In recent years, the inability to see how and when their off-site team members were working led some companies to install spyware to track job activity. Understandably, that trend generated mutual mistrust and has largely backfired.

But when leaders identify and define the behaviors they want their staff to exemplify, they create a framework for accountability. These behaviors center more on delivering results than punching a clock—a model that makes sense since remote employees' workdays tend to be more flexible than on-site schedules.

In addition to improving performance, a culture with a foundation of accountability generates:

- **More employee participation and involvement**
- **Greater feelings of competency**
- **Increased employee commitment to the work**
- **More creativity, innovation, and proactivity**
- **Higher employee morale and job satisfaction**

A strong culture with defined behaviors not only helps managers positively reinforce accountability. It also provides remote team members with the tools to take ownership of their outcomes and achieve at a higher level.

Moreover, remote employees feel more aligned with the team when being accountable is a standard operating procedure for the entire organization.

Providing Feedback

A culture with defined behaviors facilitates a manager's ability to deliver a constructive evaluation of an employee's work. To be most effective with remote team members, they should prioritize regular check-ins rather than waiting to offer feedback during annual performance reviews.

Managers can take these opportunities to choose one or more behaviors that are most relevant to current projects or situations. They can also ask employees to identify a few behaviors they want to work on and then open the discussion to explore how to nail these objectives.

Another effective means to assess how well a company's workforce is adhering to the behaviors is implementing annual employee surveys. This process gives team members a chance to reflect

on how they and their coworkers live up to the culture. Their responses help management know where to concentrate their efforts in guiding and supporting their staff.

A Note about Technology

In the absence of physical proximity, companies need to invest in the right technology to sustain a robust company culture, empower staff productivity, and support teams. Leaders with a remote staff need to think strategically about what tools they choose. Those decisions can make or break their ability to communicate effectively and maximize productivity.

Because of the vast selection of software and systems on the market and the speed with which the technology evolves, we don't recommend specific platforms. Instead, we suggest that leaders assess their goals and then consult an IT specialist to determine which tools will help remote team members succeed in their company's environment.