

A LEADER'S GUIDE TO HYBRID TEAMS


7 CRITICAL TRAITS YOU NEED



A cluster of small, semi-transparent dots in shades of yellow, orange, and pink, arranged in a loose, circular pattern in the top-left corner of the slide.

The world of work has changed.

That overused statement is pretty much a cliché now, but it's true. Time Magazine called the global pandemic of 2020 'the world's largest working from home experiment'.

A cluster of small, semi-transparent dots in shades of yellow, orange, and pink, arranged in a loose, circular pattern in the bottom-right corner of the slide.



For most knowledge workers around the world, spending five days a week, 9 to 5 in the office is officially a thing of the past.

Many people will continue working from home for good, while others have returned to the office on a part time, flexible or as-needed basis.

Despite the global uncertainty, one thing is for sure. How and where we work will never be the same again. Remote working, virtual teams and hybrid teams are not a trend. They're here to stay.

WHAT IS A HYBRID TEAM?



Virtual team working isn't new. There are businesses built entirely on a virtual and remote working model, which comes with both benefits and risks.

What's new is hybrid teams.

The term hybrid refers to contemporary teams made up of people working from home and people working in the office.

In a hybrid team, sometimes, team members are physically co-located. Other times, they work together in a virtual, technology-enabled format.

For most employees, this is a welcome change. Hybrid work allows for reduced commute time and costs, enhanced ability to juggle our personal and professional lives and an overall better work/life balance. At least in theory.

In the US, the number of people working from home doubled during 2020 and Gartner research found that 74% of US companies have plans to move to a permanent working from home arrangement.

WHAT IS VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP?



Traditional, in-person leadership as a full-time, everyday format is a thing of the past. According to Forbes, virtual leadership is 'the next big thing.'

In some ways, virtual leadership mirrors in-person leadership. Many of the fundamentals are the same: providing direction, building trust, giving feedback and good communication.

Yet beyond this, the leadership skills and traits required to lead a virtual team are quite different to those in a traditional, in-person team environment. Leading a hybrid team is even more complex.

Research shows that some of the traditional traits of leadership don't translate well in a virtual environment.

BBC Worklife reports that the best virtual leaders are 'goal focused, productive, dependable and helpful.'

While these are great qualities, this doesn't read as a hit list of traditional leadership qualities.

The first research study looking at leadership behaviours and personality traits along the virtual to face-to-face continuum was conducted by Drake University in Iowa in the United States.

First published in the Journal of Business and Psychology, this pre-pandemic study tracked more than 200 US-based teams to see which team members emerged as leaders across in-person and virtual teams.

The face-to-face teams chose leaders who were confident, magnetic, smart-seeming extroverts.

The virtual teams chose leaders who were doers and tended towards planning, connecting teammates with help and resources, keeping an eye on upcoming tasks and, most importantly, getting things done.

Led by Radostina Purvanova, Associate Professor of Management and Leadership, this study suggests a shift in emphasis on what leaders say to what they do.

‘Virtually, we are less swayed by the power of personality... we can more accurately assess whether or not someone is actually engaging in important leadership behaviours. People are more likely to be seen based on what they actually do, not who they are’.



THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE OF LEADING A HYBRID TEAM



Whether you're a seasoned CEO or rookie leader, chances are you're now leading a hybrid team and tackling all of the challenges that come along with that.

Harvard Business Review reports the greatest predictor of success for leaders of virtual teams is experience doing it before.

Yet for most leaders, the hybrid team is a completely new operating system. So without previous experience, most leaders are up for a pretty steep learning curve.

The modern leader is essentially building the plane at the same time as they are flying it, meaning they need to master an additional set of skills to enable effective leadership of both in-person and virtual teams and leverage these skills simultaneously. That's quite an ask.

GOOD NEWS ABOUT HYBRID TEAMS

In another pre-pandemic study, 79% of knowledge workers reported working 'always' or 'frequently' in dispersed teams.

There has been plenty of research conducted into virtual teams and the challenges of getting them right.

Such research reports a mix of problems, challenges and barriers alongside the obvious benefits of allowing employees to manage their personal and professional lives in a flexible manner.

A study of more than 80 global teams showed that well-managed hybrid teams can actually outperform teams in a shared office space.

So, what leadership traits are important in this new operating system, and how can leaders master the new skills they need?



7 CRITICAL SKILLS FOR LEADING HYBRID TEAMS

Based on extensive international research and insights drawn from conversations we have with leaders everyday, we've pulled together this list of 7 traits required to lead hybrid teams.

An outstanding hybrid team leader is:

- 1 a proactive, flexible and mindful communicator
- 2 a connector of people, ideas and purpose
- 3 a manager of information and process
- 4 technology-savvy
- 5 present, always
- 6 a driver of empowerment and autonomy
- 7 a wellbeing advocate.

1

PROACTIVE, FLEXIBLE AND MINDFUL COMMUNICATOR

Effective virtual leaders are
exceptional communicators.



While open, clear and concise communication is a fundamental leadership trait, how and when you communicate is vastly different in a hybrid team. One of the most common communication challenges is the absence of non-verbal communication cues.

Reliance on digital communication undoubtedly limits this critical aspect of in-person communication. Leaders must be mindful of the absence of non-verbal cues and also of the individual communication styles and preferences within their team.

The best hybrid team leaders are proactive about staying in contact, regardless of physical location.

Via email, phone, text, Zoom or Instant Messenger, no matter what communication medium they use, the virtual leader needs to be proactive in staying abreast of what their team is working on – as well as how they are feeling. Keeping in touch with a hybrid team is as much about the people as it is the work.

Virtual leadership research shows that leaders with the most engaged teams seem to communicate with their people at least once a day in a chatty manner, no doubt building strong working relationships.

The best hybrid team leader knows when to strategically over communicate.

When it comes to leading hybrid teams, there's nothing worse than radio silence and (almost) no such thing as communicating too much.

The virtual leader is a precise communicator who has killed ambiguity.

They work purposefully to remove any confusing language from their communication and are clear and concise, removing any opportunity for misunderstanding in their team.

They also create and encourage an open dialogue in their team. Nothing drives team engagement more than open communication.

A good hybrid team leader flows between communication mediums.

Communication, comprehension and engagement is never a one size fits all scenario.

A mindful leader pauses to consider which communication medium is the best in any given situation, taking into account the objective of the interaction, how many people need to be involved, time of day and likely duration.

The most engaged hybrid teams communicate in a variety of ways, guided by a leader who has the skills to navigate between mediums, with ease.

The Social Science Research Network notes that 65% of people are visual learners, making video the perfect medium for engagement. In our post-pandemic work world, many employees are reporting spending more than 6 hours a day in Zoom video meetings, which means Zoom fatigue is a real thing.

Leaders need to use different tools and be flexible about how they use them. The chosen communication medium must be fit for purpose and leaders need to encourage your team to use common sense. Sometimes, it's best to simply pick up the phone.



2

CONNECTOR OF PEOPLE, IDEAS AND PURPOSE

A hybrid team leader is a
connector and relationship builder.



Harvard research shows effective leaders develop a common identity and understanding with their teams. Without this, hybrid teams with members working in the office and remotely could suffer from a 'them and us' mentality.

Leading with an inclusive lens, ensuring equity and fairness regardless of physical location, is a key part of creating connection within your team.

We've all experienced silos within teams and organisations, and we know nothing good can come from them.

Creating ways to connect your team members and encourage collaboration between teams will not only increase performance, it will lead to better employee engagement.

By prioritising building and fostering relationships, the connected leader shows trust and can empower and motivate their team.

Creating a sense of belonging and shared purpose is also a critical task for the hybrid team leader. While clear roles, responsibilities and goals are important in any team, the hybrid team needs their leader to share and re-share this information regularly.

Purpose is powerful, even from a distance.

While completing tasks and meeting deadlines is important, the hybrid team needs their leader to be able to take the temperature and draw the collective attention away from the details and towards the horizon, as required.

The connected leader has mastered the skill of communicating the big picture, often.



3

MANAGER OF INFORMATION AND PROCESSES

Beyond interpersonal and communication skills, the hybrid team leader understands the value of information and processes in the effective running of their team.



HEART
TALENT
COLLECTIVE

A talent community for purpose, powered by Heart Recruitment.
CONNECTING TALENT AND EMPLOYERS WITH PURPOSE.



An effective hybrid team leader is a master at documenting and managing information.

This includes exercising a high level of transparency ie making information, data and importantly, goals and objectives accessible to all.

The days of closed doors and keeping secrets at a leadership level are long gone. While leaders will always be privy to sensitive and confidential information, wherever possible they should communicate with transparency and honesty. This is essential to building trust.

Hybrid teams have a different rhythm to in-person teams, so the leader needs to establish and manage appropriate routines and processes, creating and setting expectations and making sure everyone feels included.

Like any leader, the hybrid team leader must set goals, track progress and have a close eye on team capacity.

What's even more important for a hybrid team is measuring by outcomes, not hours and setting realistic expectations that take into consideration each team member's individual working environment and responsibilities.

In order for flexible working to work, it must truly work for everyone.

A fair and equitable workplace is harder to create with a hybrid team. Leaders must strive for equity and be aware of proximity bias.

Harvard Business School professor Linda Hill, coauthor of **Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader** says leaders often make the incorrect assumption that people in the office are more productive than those that are not.

Successful virtual teams have kick-ass processes. The hybrid team leader may need to create these processes or adapt or improve previous processes to be effective for the hybrid team.

Effective hybrid team leaders love a good process.

Over time, the team can provide suggestions and feedback to improve processes, but the leader needs to provide the starting point.

While hybrid teams may have a mixture of different processes depending on where people are working, there's a very good chance that your new virtual team processes are more efficient. There may be merit in using the same virtual/technology enhanced processes for the whole team, such as all meetings take place on Zoom, even for those in the office.



4

TECHNOLOGY- SAVVY

An outstanding hybrid team leader knows how to leverage technology.

It's no secret that technology is a great enabler. Being a tech-savvy leader has never been more important.

Even the most talented, collaborative and engaged hybrid team won't be effective without the right technology in place. Effective use of technology is the lifeblood of the virtual team.

For teams who've never worked outside of the office before, this is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of hybrid team leadership communication.

The hybrid team leader must be able to effectively use several technology tools to communicate with and engage their team (more than simply email and phone).

Effective remote working communication relies on effective use of technology. If you haven't used Zoom, MS Teams, Slack or whichever other tools your team uses, now is the time to learn.

While technology is one of the basic principles on which virtual teams are built, it has to be fit for purpose.

“

"It's essential not to sacrifice reliability in a quest to be on the cutting edge. If the team has to struggle to get connected or wastes time making elements of the collaboration suite work, it undermines the whole endeavour."

Michael D Watkins, author
of The First 90 Days

The hybrid team leader must choose the right technology to engage and enable their team

Instant Messaging (IM) is an excellent channel for quick and zesty questions and answers but it's also rife with challenges. It's easy for a quick chat to transform into a larger discussion which can be dangerous because it's hard to control tone. Sometimes it's simply more efficient to pick up the phone.

Leaders with well developed virtual leadership skills can 'read' the situation and make sound judgments about when a text-based conversation should be transitioned to a voice or in-person conversation.

Great virtual leaders are also well attuned to knowing when a face-to-face session is needed. They understand that it takes time, effort and face-to-face interactions to build relationships. Furthermore, they are mindful that not every conversation or meeting has to be about something, and know that some sessions are simply about checking on members of their team.

The hybrid team leader also knows when to use pre-recorded media for one-way group messaging. This could be done by recording a MS Teams meeting and sharing the link, or using Vidyard or Soapbox.

These one-way mechanisms are perfect for when you need to provide an update that doesn't require interaction.

Another skill shared by effective hybrid team leaders is an ability to block out time to do the actual work. Some teams have nominated 12-3pm each day as deep work time or productivity hours: no meetings or unnecessary messaging.

In summary, the hybrid team leader is not only technology savvy, they can easily flow between communication mediums and guide their team to do the same.



5

PRESENT, ALWAYS

Whether or not they see your face, it's important for the hybrid team leader to be visible to the team.



In a virtual leadership, the metaphor for a closed office door (as opposed to an open door policy) is a leader who hides behind their screen and/or emails and doesn't make an effort to engage with their team members.

Virtual is not a synonym for invisible.

The above statement is a Forbes headline and a strong demonstration of one of the key challenges of leading a hybrid team.

According to Forbes, what it takes to lead is timeless. Leaders lead for the betterment of others. They become a presence in the lives of those they lead.

When it comes to leadership, absence does not make the heart grow fonder. **Virtual leadership requires presence.**

Long gone are the days that presence means an actual physical presence. Before we'd even heard of COVID-19, globalism and the velocity of our working and personal lives had already changed how we build and maintain relationships with others, inside and outside of work.

Leading a hybrid team requires presence, which means being seen, heard and accessible.

Of course this is easily achievable, using the plethora of tools we have available at our fingertips.

A present leader is one who is engaged in the work, conversant with the people who are doing it and available to listen and support.





6

DRIVER OF AUTONOMY AND EMPOWERMENT

Remote leadership presents a powerful paradox for the modern leader. While you need to have oversight of the big picture, it's simply not possible to lead everything all at once.



The effective virtual leader is a skilled delegator who is comfortable giving autonomy and empowering others to get things done.

The good news is that this autonomy and empowerment builds trust, and trust can lead to innovation and creativity. There's certainly something to be said for giving the hybrid team plenty of rope.

An effective hybrid team leader doesn't give this trust and autonomy blindly.

The hybrid team leader empowers their team to embrace failure and learn from it.

They've honed their skills in:

- being clear on expectations
- delegating projects or packages of work to teams or employees
- agreeing on check-in points to evaluate how the work is going
- clearly outlining deadlines
- constantly developing a culture of accountability

It's also important for the hybrid team leader to be patient, empathetic and fair. Expect a team working remotely will make mistakes (at least initially) and likely different and more frequent mistakes compared to an in-person team.



7

WELLBEING ADVOCATE

The outstanding hybrid
team leader is focused
on wellbeing.



While supporting your team is a fundamental of good leadership, in a hybrid team, this takes on a new meaning.

Leaders of hybrid teams must be cognisant of the health and wellbeing of each of their team members individually, as well as their own wellbeing.

Some people thrive while working remotely, others may struggle with not being in the office and physically co-located with others.

For those who work remotely, the flipside of having the flexibility to balance our professional and personal lives is that the lines between work time and personal time become blurred.

The hybrid team leader must look for signs of burnout and encourage team members to take responsibility for their own self-care.

As the airline safety announcement says, you must fit your own mask before helping others. Leaders must also focus on their own self-care.

Harvard Business School professor Linda Hill reminds leaders to 'make it fun'.

Hill says many people in virtual teams miss the energy, laughter and lightness of a traditional office-based team and that leaders should aim to make people feel connected and to create a sense of community.



THE HYBRID TEAM IS HERE TO STAY

To be an effective hybrid team leader, you'll need to evolve your leadership style and master the skills outlined here.

While the international research community continues to explore trends and uncover insights about virtual and hybrid team leadership, the research so far is clear: Virtual leadership is about what leaders do.

Focus on communication, relationships and a shared purpose and you'll drive strong engagement within your team.

Become an expert in managing information and processes while also using technology wisely and your hybrid team will kick some serious goals.

Give plenty of autonomy while keeping an eye on everyone's wellbeing, and you'll have an empowered, high-performing, happy hybrid team.

If you're responsible for hiring leaders, we hope this ebook will act as a useful guide to the skills, traits and leadership style you should look for in your next new employee.

As part of our commitment to helping leaders to hire the best talent, Heart Talent is constantly evolving and improving our knowledge and processes.



"Where and when we work will never be quite the same again. While this is largely a positive change, it presents a significant challenge for leaders"

Cynthia Harris, Heart Talent

If you have any comments or feedback on this content, please get in touch with Cynthia Harris at cynthia@hearttalent.com.au or 0432 044 527.



FORGET WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT RECRUITERS.

EXPECT BETTER

www.hearttalent.com.au
cynthia@hearttalent.com.au

0432 044 527

Helping purpose-led people build great teams and careers.