Re-creating office bonding in virtual or hybrid teams

From building group rituals to considering which platforms to use, embracing “shared reality” keeps teams closer.



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Online work has brought unprecedented flexibility and independence to employees

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everywhere, and more firms are operating remotely or hybrid than ever before. But it's not all plain sailing. There are challenges to working apart. Not least, how can teams remain connected and united while working remotely?

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We consider this problem through the lens of "shared reality" — the experience of having common thoughts and feelings about the world that we share with others. This sense of connectedness can help some workplaces thrive, even as interactions move online, while its lack may cause others to struggle.

For those who feel their teams could use some help creating these mental bonds, we offer some suggestions on how leaders can create shared reality in a remote or hybrid workplace.

For a happy and productive team, merge minds

When two or more people are on the same page about the world, whatever their relationship, they are experiencing shared reality. In a work setting, this might manifest as having a similar response to a new directive or protocol, and in the physical workplace there would be many ways of expressing this complicity, from observing body language in meetings to chatting at a coworker's desk.

Going a step further, you have merged minds, when people experience a sense of shared reality not only on individual topics but regarding the world at large. For many, having quality interpersonal relationships has been linked to goal success.

Shared reality has been shown to affect the workplace in important ways. Research finds that when employees are experiencing higher than normal levels of shared reality with teammates, they find their work more meaningful, act kinder toward teammates and perform better, according to both themselves and their coworkers. Moreover, this connectedness improves interpersonal outcomes between leaders and followers in a team, decreasing burnout and increasing job engagement.

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Designing shared reality for your remote or hybrid team

Although shared reality can bring important workplace benefits, it comes under particular strain when working remotely: remember the fragmentation and eroded relationships many of us experienced in the months of working remotely during the pandemic.

However, in cases where remote work remains necessary or desirable, there are still ways to re-create the office environment and stimulate shared reality.

Here are four ways to keep staff connected even when they're physically apart.

1. Create spaces where people bond over non-work experiences

Many people get to know their coworkers almost by accident, while waiting together for a kettle to boil, for instance. These transient moments of connection are important, and managers should carve out digital spaces to re-create them.

Consider creating a Slack channel dedicated to employees' interests, from upcoming concerts to restaurants and beyond, with just one limit — no talking shop.

Likewise, you can encourage employees to form groups based on similar life experiences, such as an expat group or a new parent group. The online setting may even promote greater inclusion and discovery of shared interests than the office environment can.

2. Introduce rituals and ceremonies that foster belonging

Create a joint Spotify playlist. Play warm-up games at the start of meetings. Try improv exercises such as "Yes, and" — whatever your colleague's idea, you say "yes" and then add to it. Rituals and actions like these can help promote shared reality within a specific team, while also contributing more broadly to organizational cohesion and commitment.

During the pandemic, the decrease in group rituals was shown to undermine work groups' sense of cohesion and, in turn, their commitment to the organization as a whole. Targeted

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actions can help to reverse that trend.

3. Be choosy about the technology you use

Videoconferencing is a game-changer, but on a personal level, it falls short of in-person communication. The term "Zoom fatigue" speaks to a wider social malaise with remote connection. In part, this is because platforms like Zoom force users to be relentlessly face-to-face, in what has been called a "competitive stance" as opposed to sitting side-by-side in a "cooperative stance."

There are other platforms, like Miro, Mural or FigJam, that take a different approach, allowing employees to collaborate online without the constant baleful gaze of the camera. Augmented and virtual reality (VR) technology may also be used to create shared reality without employees needing to leave their homes.

Perhaps have employees attend a virtual event together and ask them to give a tour of their work station, whether that's a home office or a table in their backyard. This draws eyes from faces to their surroundings, and allows employees to enter into each other's reality, however briefly.

4. Have a plan

Certain moments in remote or hybrid projects will benefit from shared reality more than others. Some meetings just need to be in-person. Creative thinking or brainstorming sessions involving multiple organizational members may require employees to gather in the office. Even so, flexibility is key, whether hashing out a hybrid schedule that works for everyone or identifying which areas of a team will benefit more from shared reality than others.

Sometimes remote work can hamper efficiency and elevate stress. But shared reality introduces a fresh framework for achieving balance, allowing employees flexibility while ensuring alignment and collaboration on key goals.

https://www.iese.edu/insight/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2024/01/How-to-keep-your-virtual-team-close.mp4

Shared reality: the power of belonging was identified as a power skill for managers. Watch the video.

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Assistant Professor of Managing People in Organizations at IESE. Her work has introduced the novel construct of Generalized Shared Reality and she examines its role in improving organizational outcomes, including social connections between coworkers, work meaningfulness and job performance.

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