How To Manage an Asynchronous Work Flow

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Asynchronous. What an ugly word. A long, terrible monstrosity with four straight consonants in the middle. I hate it. Yet I've said it probably every single workday for the past six months.

Why? Well, there is no better word that adequately captures the concept. And the concept is fundamental to how we will have to work for the rest of this year, and the next, and a decade after that.

The future of work is asynchronous. And unless you can think of a better word for it, it's going to stay that way.

What is asynchronous work?

We all know that a word's dictionary definition isn't always aligned with how it's used out in the world.

In the case of asynchronous, Webster will tell you that it means, very simply, "not simultaneously." And that's how I've always used it.

For 15 years working on product teams, I used asynchronous to describe a way of working that minimizes blockers and bottlenecks. It's a term that comes from programming; rather than having operations fire one after another in order, they fire at the same time. Or, to put it another way, instead of

following a request-response pattern (synchronous), all of the requests happen at once and the responses come back whenever they're ready (asynchronously).

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Not a programmer? Imagine you just ordered a nine dollar coffee. The synchronous delivery method would involve a single barista making the espresso, then frothing the milk, then ringing up your bill. The asynchronous version of this involves three baristas each accomplishing their tasks independently.

And yet, in the midst of a pandemic and remote work revolution, the word *asynchronous* has taken on a new meaning. It's evolved beyond "not simultaneously" and has come to mean something more akin to "not together."

It's easy to see why. We all got hit in the face with a brick called the global health crisis, and it meant a complete change in how we work. We went from being in an office surrounded by our colleagues to working at home surrounded by family, pets, or no one at all. Of course we continued to communicate and collaborate, but technology now filters all our interactions. There is no getting around the fact that things are different. We simply aren't together.

This has shaped our work lives since March. This new reality is what lends itself to the new meaning of asynchronous. Work might be happening at the same time but not together, and people will call it asynchronous work.

Think of two people independently brainstorming ideas for the same project. They might be working at the same time in their own homes, but they aren't communicating or *directly* collaborating with one another. Most of us would say they're working asynchronously without a second thought. The same goes for those three baristas, working independently but simultaneously.

Internally, I've been calling this the *decoupling* of work. (It hasn't stuck yet, but I'm pushing for it). We're physically separate but no less interdependent.

Unless everyone buys into my decoupling idea – or we come up with a new word to describe this concept – it's time to embrace this new definition of asynchronous.

Now here's how we can succeed in this new reality.

The two keys to asynchronous success

There are two key pieces required for the new asynchronous work to… well, actually work.

The first key is transparency. Yes, asynchronous work is executed independently, but it can't happen secretly.

The magic of async is the ability to produce or consume information on your own time in your own environment. But that only works if the data you need is accessible when and where you need it.

In a meeting, the when and where are clearly defined. Not so for asynchronous work.

Far too often we neglect the impact our approach to work has on other people's ability to work how they choose. Our work style may end up creating new silos. Which is why we spend X amount of time each week just looking for information.

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You know the old saying: "My freedoms end where yours begin." We need to bring that mindset to the work environment. My work flexibility ends where yours begins. It's essential that you consider how your work impacts others, and build transparency into your approach where it's needed.

What does this look like in practice?

Let’s take the example of a Zoom meeting — the go-to synchronous solution right now. Despite the fact that we’ve all suffered some Zoom fatigue in recent months, we continue to press on because we want to make sure everybody has the opportunity to share and receive key information. If there are five or 10 stakeholders on a project, resorting to Slack chats or emails can lead to endless notifications and things getting missed. So, video calls have become the norm.

But an extra focus on transparency can free you from the fatigue: It can free you from talking over other attendees, constantly telling people they’re muted, and noticing how disheveled you look on video.

We use video calls because they’re the closest thing to how we exchanged information in person. But transparent technology platforms like Google Docs and Miro offer us intuitive platforms for communication and collaboration without the eye strain.

Set a time window for people to brainstorm ideas separately — asynchronously — on a shared Miro board. Use a Google Doc to source feedback on a brief. Share a project update in Asana or Looker. You can share your ideas, comment on other people’s ideas, ask questions, and even collectively make decisions without firing up your webcam.

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There’s no shortage of ways to replace video meetings with asynchronous activities. But they all depend on the full transparency of information. That means equal information and tool access for all stakeholders, feedback cycles happening out in the open, and collective mechanisms for decision making.

The second key piece is alignment. Asynchronous work can lead to people on your team starting to diverge and lose the common thread. Alignment ensures that everyone, despite different routines and environments, converges on your goals without the need for half a dozen daily meetings.

Proper team alignment means everyone in your organization knows your company goals and their role in achieving them. Aligned teams are more efficient, they work faster, they're more collaborative, and they're generally happier.

Building alignment has never been easy: It takes constant effort from managers to keep people rowing in the same direction. Remote work has only made this even more challenging by stripping many of the mechanisms we once used to ensure alignment. Things like in-person meetings, desk-side check-ins, and impromptu conversations.

Most business leaders relied on synchronous work to align their teams. Now they're scrambling to adapt.

But that's okay. Alignment can happen asynchronously.

First, build clear, memorable goals and involve your team in the process. Goal clarity is essential for asynchronous work since everybody should be working towards the same endpoint. It's important that goal-setting happens on multiple horizons since you need people at all stages of the organization and at all points in your week, quarter, or year to know what they're working towards. Involving your team is a shortcut for getting buy-in, and buy-in means alignment.

Next, establish clear, functional workflows. Everybody should know or be able to see how work gets from ideation to completion. They should especially know their role in that workflow, and everybody else's. Having clearly defined workflows builds alignment by removing doubt and avoidable questions from the equation. Workflows are like the guardrails. They still leave you a lot of room to adjust and

be agile, but keep you from going off course.

Follow the formula for successful asynchronous work

Transparency and alignment can be looked at independently, but they impact one another. The more transparent your organization is, the easier it is to align your teams. The more aligned you are, the easier it is for your teams to promote transparency.

A transparent, aligned organization is an organization that will thrive no matter how they work. Just remember:

Transparency + Alignment = Asynchronous Success

…*We definitely still need a better word for asynchronous. Let me know on Twitter @marcboscher if you have any ideas for what we should replace it with, or if you like my "uncoupled" work suggestion!*

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