

You Should Let Your Team Decide Their Approach to Hybrid Work. A Behavioral Economist Explains Why and How You Should Do It.

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A November 2022 survey by Gallup finds that 46% of hybrid employees report being engaged at work when their team determines their hybrid work policy of when to come to the office. By contrast, if employees are free to determine their own approach, only 41% report being engaged. If the leadership determines the top-down policy for everyone, only 35% are engaged, and if it's their direct supervisor, 32% are engaged.

It makes sense when you think about it. Team members know best what they need in order to collaborate and socialize together effectively. After all, the only useful function of the office is to facilitate collaboration, socialization and mentoring: people are much more productive in their individual tasks at home. So it makes all the sense in the world for the rank-and-file teams to determine what works best for their needs.

Yet the Gallup survey shows only 13% of employees say that their team determines their approach to hybrid work. That's unfortunate and undermines engagement among hybrid workers. And it's easy to fix.

From my experience helping 21 companies figure out their hybrid and remote work arrangements, the best practice is for

the leadership to provide broad but flexible guidelines for the whole company. Then, let teams of rank-and-file employees determine what works best for them.

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Empower each team leader to determine, in consultation with their team members, how each team should function. The choice should be driven by the goals and collaborative capacities of each team rather than the personal preferences of the team leader. The top leadership should encourage team leaders to permit, wherever possible, team members who desire to do so to work remotely.

To set the stage, first, conduct an anonymous survey of your staff on their preferences for remote work. All companies are different, and you want to know about your staff in particular. More importantly, employees want to feel that they have input on major company decisions. That applies especially to policies concerning working conditions. You'll get a lot more buy-in, even from staff who may be unhappy with your final policies, if they feel consulted and heard.

As part of the survey, have respondents indicate who their team leader is: that keeps the survey answers anonymous, but can be provided to team leaders to help them understand the desires of their teams.

The reason it's important to ask this in the surveys is that many lower-level supervisors feel a personal discomfort with work from home. They feel a loss of control if they can't see their staff and are eager to get back to their previous mode of supervising.

That's why there's a low level of engagement when team leads are given sole discretion to make the decisions. You need to have team leaders understand what are the actual preferences

of their team members without any team member feeling inhibited by giving their team leader undesirable information.

While you may choose to ask a variety of questions, be sure to find out about their desire for frequency of work in the office. Here's a good way to phrase it:

Which of these would be your preferred working style going forward?

- A) Fully remote, coming in once a quarter for a team-building retreat
- B) 1 day a week in the office, the rest at home
- C) 2 days a week in the office
- D) 3 days a week in the office
- E) 4 days a week in the office
- F) Full-time in the office

In all the companies where I consulted, there were never more than a quarter who wanted to go back to the office full-time. In fact, one company with over 3,000 employees had 61% of its staff express a desire for fully remote work. And it wasn't even a tech company.

In the highly probable case that your results aren't too different from the typical company, you'll want to follow the lead of the companies I helped. Namely, you'll institute a hybrid-first model, with some flexibility for employees who want to work remotely full-time and whose roles permit them to do so.

Next, make sure that team leaders justify the time their team needs to be in the office. That justification should stem from the kind of activities done by the team. Team members should be free to do their independent tasks wherever they want. By contrast, many – not all – collaborative tasks are best done in person.

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Team leaders should evaluate the proportion of individual versus collaborative tasks done by their teams. Then, they should use that proportion as a basis for a discussion with the team to determine the frequency of when team members come to the office. And it should be a consensus-based decision-making process, informed by the surveys, with a focus on collaboration, socialization and mentoring. All team members should come to the office on the same days of the week to facilitate collaboration.

What if team members wish to be fully remote and have a team leader who doesn't want any remote team members? If this team member can demonstrate high effectiveness and productivity, and if their tasks are mostly individual – 80% or more – the team leader should allow them to work remotely. That team member should only come to the office once a quarter for a team-building retreat.

However, if the team member needs to collaborate intensely with their team, they might not be able to fulfill that aspect of their role effectively if everyone else is in the office. In that case, they need to either come into the office at least once a week. Alternatively, they might consider finding a new team with a more accommodating team leader. Or they might adjust their role on the team to take on largely-individual tasks.

There should be a very good reason if the team leader desires more than two days in the office per week. Such reasons exist.

For example, in one company for which I consulted, the sales teams who placed outbound sales calls decided to do full-time office work. The team leaders argued persuasively that sales staff benefited greatly from being surrounded by other sales staff during outbound calls. Such calls are draining and sap motivation. Being surrounded by others on the sales floor making similar calls boosts motivation and energy. Moreover, hearing others make calls offers an opportunity to learn from

their successful techniques, which is difficult to arrange in telework settings. However, such exceptions are rare.

Generally speaking, no more than 5% of your staff should be forced to be in the office full-time. Surveys show that about 80% of workers who are capable of working remotely expect to do so. Employers indicate they will continue offering a variety of hybrid work options. Yet many are unsure about how to implement this model effectively.

For maximizing employee engagement, while also facilitating team collaboration, the best practice involves having teams make the decisions. This team-led model will ensure that team members can collaborate most effectively. Using this technique will enable you to seize a competitive advantage in the return to the office.

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