Zoom’s CEO thinks Zoom sucks for building trust, leaked audio reveals

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Earlier this month, Zoom announced a surprising decision to require some of its employees to return to the office, where they were expected to work more effectively. Now, leaked audio from an internal Zoom meeting shared with Business Insider has revealed that Zoom CEO Eric Yuan called employees back to the office because he believes that “remote work didn’t allow people to build as much trust or be as innovative.”

None of this seems to jibe with Zoom’s brand, which provides

video-conferencing technology that the company promises enables “immersive in-office collaboration right from home.”

Yuan’s comments came in a company meeting held on August 3, where he told employees that the top reason for the return-to-office mandate was to build more trust among employees.

“Over the past several years, we’ve hired so many new ‘Zoomies’ that it’s really hard to build trust,” Yuan said, describing a situation that many companies that continued hiring through the pandemic can likely find relatable. In 2022, Yuan told the Stanford Business School that Zoom’s employees tripled during the pandemic, from 2,000 to 6,000.

But Zoom is supposed to be the product that makes it possible to build trust and relationships with remote employees. Its homepage boasts that Zoom helps teams become “more connected, more collaborative, more intelligent” and “do more.”

On a page promoting Zoom’s Meetings feature, the company said that 95 percent of “customers who switch to Zoom report an increase” in performance and trust among team members. Now it seems that Yuan has revealed that Zoom as a company found that that promise did not bear out.

“Trust is a foundation for everything,” Yuan said. “Without trust, we will be slow.”

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Another reason why Yuan wanted to get employees back together in the office was to drive innovation that he claimed results from having more heated conversations and debates that just don’t happen as often over Zoom. Yuan said that instead, to the seeming detriment of the company’s ability to generate new ideas, “everyone tends to be very friendly when you join a Zoom call.”

To remedy what Yuan described as a less desirable work environment for his team, Zoom is requiring employees who live

within 50 miles of an office to show up in person at least two days a week. Any employees who are resistant to accepting the policy can apply for an exception, Insider reported.

For Zoom employees clinging to remote work, there may be reason to hold out hope that Yuan will be sympathetic. In 2022, Yuan told Stanford's Business School students that after many of his engineers joined him in working late nights to keep Zoom operating while popularity peaked during the pandemic, his "No. 1 priority is to make sure Zoom employees are happy."

But Yuan has big ideas about Zoom's future, and it seems like he's calling for all hands on deck to help him reimagine what video conferencing looks like and develop what he calls Zoom 2.0 in the next five years.

"From our perspective, we truly believe in the future, from a technology perspective, Zoom can deliver a much better experience," Yuan told Stanford. "You and I can sit at home. I can sit anywhere. Let's say at the local Starbucks coffee. I shake your hands. You feel my hand shaking. I give you a hug, and you feel my intimacy. And even if we speak a different language, we can understand each other. And get a cup of coffee, enjoy the smell remotely. All those technologies will be part of our offering in the future."

Perhaps this futuristic version of Zoom would be better for building trust with remote workers than the current version? We'll see if Yuan bringing his Zoom teams back to the office will allow new levels of creativity as Yuan strives to increase revenues during a challenging year, where Reuters reported that Zoom's growth has slowed.

Zoom did not immediately respond to Ars' request to comment.

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