



5 New Rules for Leading a Hybrid Team

By Laszlo Bock

As CEO at Humu, where we help Fortune 500 companies build world-class cultures, I've seen firsthand how experienced leadership teams are struggling to navigate the shift to hybrid work and maintain a culture of excellence.

One technology CHRO told me that her 80,000 employees are pulsed weekly on how they are feeling, but admits her boss, the CEO, has no idea what it means when the scores move around.

The CTO of a 30,000-person consulting firm told me the pandemic has been great for senior partners who no longer have to travel the world and are moving to low-cost havens like Bermuda, but miserable for associates who miss out on the coaching and apprenticeship of the "before times."

A CEO of a 50,000-person retailer told me they don't think it's fair that retail staff have to be in their stores while executives and senior managers work from home, but the office workers don't want to come back and he's afraid of losing technology and data science staff.

While hybrid is often presented as a new model, the fundamentals of what transforms a group of people into an exceptional team haven't changed as much as we might think. When I was the senior vice president of people operations at Google, we had many employees, especially in engineering and sales, who worked from home a few days each week (even if we didn't call it hybrid back then). And Google was named by Fortune as the best company to work for in the United States eight times.

In 2015, I wrote the book *Work Rules!*, which laid out a set of guidelines, based on my time building Google's culture, for how to combine data analysis, academic rigor, and human resources best practices to create a world-class company culture. It included rules like, "Make work meaningful," "Hire only people who are better than you," and "Be frugal and generous."

Based on my time at Google and now at Humu, I revisited what I wrote in 2015 to identify the five new rules of hybrid work. Some I've kept from the old guidelines: Meaning and purpose, for instance, matter more than ever in a hybrid model. But others are brand new. Here's how leaders can apply them to build great teams, even when those teams aren't together in-person all the time.

1. Make work purpose driven.

Purpose matters more than ever. Our research at Humu shows that people who don't feel their work contributes to their company's mission are 630% more likely to quit their jobs than their peers who do.

The way to help employees rediscover the purpose in their work is to make every task and project mission driven. For example, CommonSpirit, the largest nonprofit health system in America, starts important meetings with "reflections," stories or videos recognizing how hard it is to be a health care worker in a pandemic while also connecting to all the good they do for their patients and communities. Managers can do the same by tying each team member's work back to the bigger picture of why what they do matters to the world. When assigning tasks, managers should consistently outline answers to: Why is this project important? How will it impact others? How does it fit into the company's broader mission?

2. Trust your people more than feels comfortable.

Encourage managers to offer direction, not directions. To help hybrid teams succeed, managers should clearly outline the milestones they'd like their reports to hit — and then let them figure out how to get there.

At Humu, in the midst of the pandemic, we decided we wanted to offer a product for mid-sized companies. Our leadership team set a clear timeline and success criteria, and then stepped back to let our product managers and people scientists take over.

It felt uncomfortable at first, but by giving our team the freedom to decide their process and work product, we ended up with a better end product — and were impressed by the innovative approaches that arose. Indeed, research from when I was at Google shows that teams that index the highest on trust and psychological safety are 40% more productive than those who are low on these areas.

3. Learn in the small moments. Send people — and yourself — nudges.

Hybrid work means it's easier to miss out on the small moments that make teamwork magical and spark innovation. Google News, for example, was the result of a casual conversation between two employees standing next to each other in line for lunch. In an office, these types of interactions happen naturally; in a remote setting, they fall by the wayside and over time this is highly detrimental.

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Nudges can offer an opportunity to spark these moments in a hybrid environment. At Humu, we personalize nudges based on a range of signals including individual learning goals, team focus areas, and job level. For example, if team members are eager for opportunities to learn and their manager would like to build mentorship

abilities, we might deliver a nudge to the manager ahead of their next 1:1 that offers recommendations for how to have a growth-focused conversation with a report. After six months of receiving these types of personalized nudges, 90% of teams at a Fortune 500 company told us they noticed their managers making clear improvements.

You could send nudges encouraging employees to “Reach out to a team member today” or ones that explicitly communicate unwritten norms, such as “It’s okay to ask a lot of questions.”

4. Provide clarity. Be more decisive than feels comfortable.

While you should offer your people autonomy, you also shouldn’t shy away from putting a stake in the ground. When it comes to company direction, policies, and values, being clear is the kindest thing you can do — even if your decision is unpopular. When people know what’s happening, they can make the best choices for themselves. It’s ambiguity that is more punishing.

For example, rather than leaving it up to managers to determine when people should come into the office, bring everyone together on Wednesdays. Or Tuesdays. Or Thursdays. The important thing is to pick a day when the majority of employees will be together in person — and to not place even more burden on already exhausted managers. Imagine the poor manager who has to justify why her team has to be in the Glendale office each day when another manager allowed an employee to work from Hawaii. Suddenly her fiercest talent competition is from inside her own company.

5. Include everyone. Take a long hard look in the mirror.

Many leaders I speak with ask for ways to maintain their culture in a hybrid model. But most cultures could benefit from some improvement. Part of the reason people don’t want to come back to offices is likely that they weren’t inclusive spaces to begin with, particularly for people from underrepresented backgrounds, introverts, and newly hired employees.

Use the shift to hybrid as an opportunity to identify cultural gaps, and to set new norms to create a better, stronger culture. Encourage managers to take notice of who often dominates the conversation in meetings or receives the most recognition for a project's success. Make the evaluation criteria for projects as clear as possible: The more explicit the rubric, the less room for bias.

Leaders today are operating against a backdrop of unprecedented uncertainty and amid nearly two years of teams being cooped up at home. Those conditions are not likely to change in the next 12 to 18 months — instead, leaders need to change. By following the five guidelines laid out above, they can support their workforces and create world-class cultures, no matter where their people work.

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