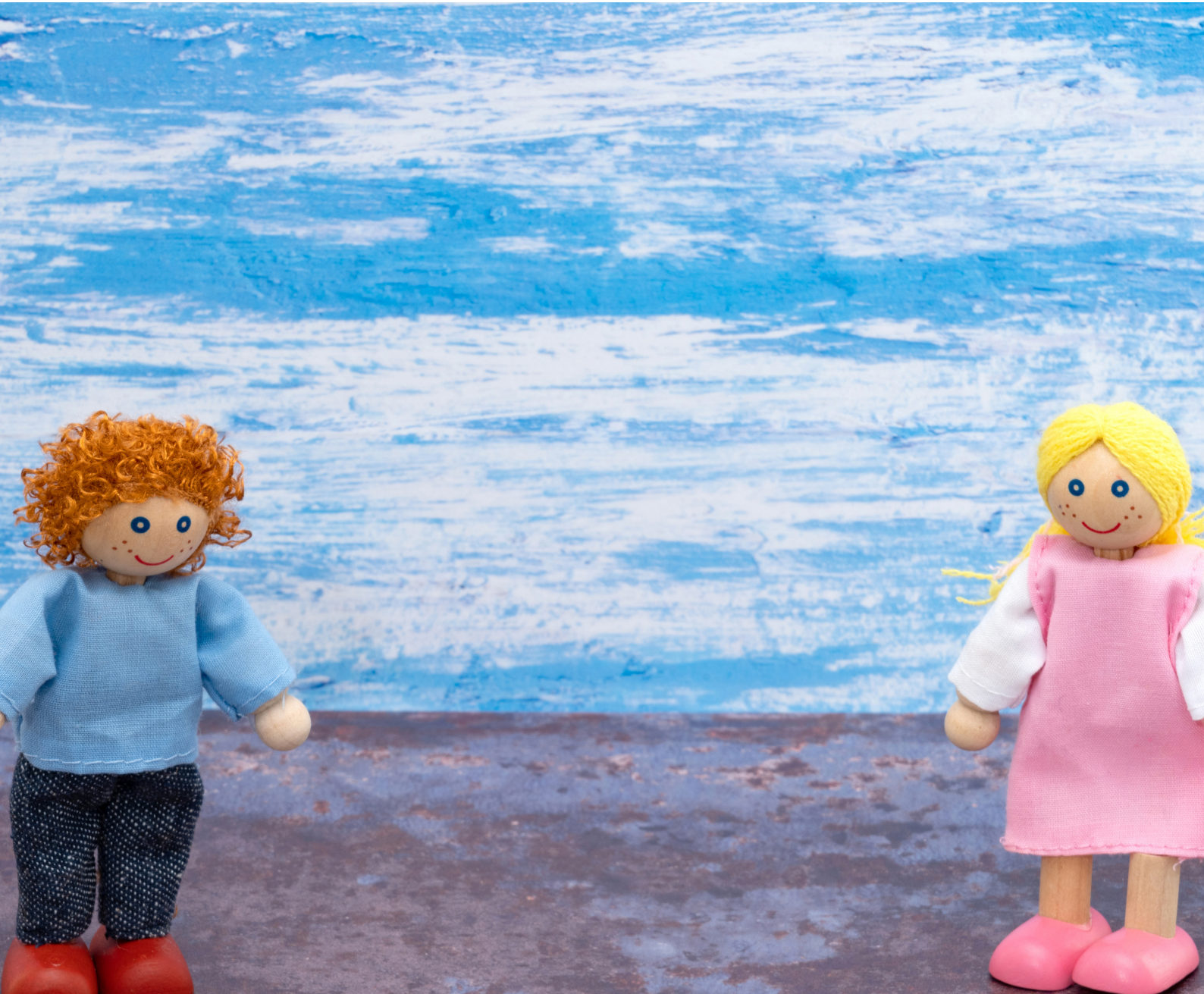


ENGAGING THE HYBRID TEAM

MANAGERS GUIDE TO FACE TO FACE MEETINGS



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CONTENTS

3 HOW TO ENGAGE EMPLOYEES IN THE NEW HYBRID WORKPLACE MODEL

– Our latest thinking given the pandemic & world of work

4 THREE THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN YOU MEET FOR THE FIRST TIME FACE TO FACE

- Make it a success by planning in these three areas

5 FOCUS ON STRONG TEAM BUILDING INITIATIVES

– How to adopt new ways of working in flexible working locations

7 CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEAMS TO SHARE EXPERIENCES

– The best ice breakers to power up & strengthen co-worker bonds, stimulate innovation, and create an atmosphere of inclusivity

9 EMPLOYEES' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

– Steps you can take as part of these meetings that make your hybrid team feel heard, invested in & valued by you as their manager



HOW TO ENGAGE EMPLOYEES IN THE NEW HYBRID WORKPLACE MODEL

Many companies are migrating back to the office with some employees still working remotely and with concerns for wellbeing, the mixture of remote and in-situ work may very well be the reality for some time to come. In this managers guide we take a moment to address this new mix of the two: a hybrid workplace. This new model will likely be the norm as companies seek to keep the flexibility of remote without losing those valuable connections that are best achieved face-to-face. So, to help you through this period as a manager we have compiled some of the latest thinking to help you and your teams survive and thrive during these unconventional times. It will take plenty of diligence and the intention to foster an engaging hybrid workplace environment between those working in the office and at home. As we ease out of restrictions and you come face to face with some team members for the first time in a long while (or even the first time ever!) here are some helpful methods to consider.



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FOCUS ON STRONG TEAM BUILDING INITIATIVES



During the onset of the pandemic, the switch to remote work essentially happened overnight. And, as we all know, change can be very uncomfortable – especially when you’re not prepared. Many employees were left feeling disconnected from their teams and are still battling those barriers today even as more freedoms return. Now more than ever, companies need to be focused on strong team-building efforts. Fortunately, there are plenty of team-building activities out there that can accommodate a hybrid workplace and in the following pages we have lifted the best ones to help you structure your time with your team when you come face to face for the first time again.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEAMS TO SHARE EXPERIENCES

Research has shown that teams who share positive emotions together are stronger and more able to pivot with change.

Specific emotions and feelings we’ve identified here at Choose to Grow that promote engagement and resilience include connection, value and empowerment. These shared emotions can occur much more naturally when teams are working together in person. To foster this shared environment in a hybrid workplace, managers must create opportunities for teams to build up interpersonal skills and share experiences, especially those that evoke positive emotions. This should also be an opportunity for teams to round up and share individual and team “wins” and other accomplished goals.



DON'T FORGET ABOUT YOUR EMPLOYEES' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Employee development and continued learning opportunities may or may not be among the top priorities for you as a manager at this time. However, it's a valuable workplace element that cannot go ignored for too long. According to the 2019 “Future of Work and Employee Learning” report from Sitel Group, 37% of current employees say they would leave their current job/employer if they were not offered training to learn new skills. These early face to face meetings are the perfect opportunity to get development back on the agenda and will ensure your team feel valued & empowered to contribute towards the future company vision.





HOW TO FOCUS ON STRONG TEAM BUILDING INITIATIVES

Adopting new ways of working with flexible locations presents a new challenge and many questions for management teams. How do I make the most of employees' time when we reconnect in person? How do I make sure team members working from home still feel involved and part of the bigger picture if they cannot attend?

Follow these tips to gain the most value from your team as a whole, by boosting their engagement and happiness both inside and outside of the office. When members of your team are on site:

AIM TO MAKE FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS AS PRODUCTIVE AS POSSIBLE.

A key reason to travel to the office for many teams is to make the most of face-to-face meetings. These are often more productive and focused. Facial expressions, body language and natural in-person interactions can help with clearer communication.

According to a study by Great Business Schools, four in five people preferred in-person meetings and they generated almost 30% more ideas than virtual meetings on average. So clearly there is a lot to gain if these meetings are targeted and outcome led.

MAKE SURE YOU CREATE A CLEAR AGENDA BEFOREHAND.

This will give your meeting direction and value for staff coming onto site. Set achievable objectives and try to share these virtually, along with the agenda, three days in advance with any relevant documents to help your team prepare, stay on track, and to give them a chance to air any safety concerns they may have.

ACTIVELY INVOLVE MEMBERS OF THE TEAM WHO CANNOT ATTEND IN PERSON.

Bring them in over video and encourage them to contribute ideas – make a concerted effort to ask them questions and engage them in the conversation to involve them. Create a space where virtual meeting attendees feel as comfortable to communicate thoughts as those who are physically present.

TURN YOUR MEETING AREA INSIDE OR OUTSIDE INTO A NO DEVICE ZONE.

Assign one person to take minutes, and then free your environment of devices (apart from the ones engaging remote workers!). This will encourage your team to bounce ideas off one another instead of hiding behind a screen – when you have half an eye on your emails, it's almost impossible to stay fully present.



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GET THE CREATIVE JUICES FLOWING.

Make the most of these rare hours together by sparking new innovative ideas and problem-solve through brainstorming.

WITHHOLD CRITICISM AND WELCOME UNUSUAL IDEAS.

In order to build as many ideas in a short amount of time as possible, flip the “quality over quantity” notion and opt for “quantity over quality.” Foster a non-judgmental, open environment in which team members feel comfortable voicing every idea, no matter how unique, far-fetched or large scale. Use independent time apart to then build on the ideas that shine.

TRY BRAINWRITING INSIDE OR OUTSIDE - YES REALLY!

This involves group members anonymously writing down as many ideas as they can on a post-it note or flip, then pinning these to a board to discuss in greater depth. This will allow more introverted employees to contribute more freely. You can also involve staff working from home by asking them to email their ideas prior to your brainwriting session to display alongside the others.

PRIORITISE PROBLEM-SOLVING.

The problem-solving process comes much more naturally in person and can be far more fruitful. Before you meet onsite, identify the problem you wish to tackle at this session and then set aside time to work on creative solutions to crack it together.

FOCUS ON BOOSTING TEAM MORALE.

When a team is split across locations, morale can take a hit. Use this time when you are back on site to elevate spirits and build stronger relationships. For Ideas see next section.

STRIKE UP CONVERSATIONS THAT DON'T INVOLVE WORK.

A big drawback to working from home is the lack of spontaneous conversation unrelated to work. So-called “water cooler” conversations can help your team let off some steam, increase employee bonding, and brighten their day. You need to recreate this in the new form of coming together.

HOLD INDIVIDUAL MOMENTS WITH YOUR TEAM IF YOU CAN.

Being in the same place can be a great opportunity to check in with team members face-to-face, allowing them to open up more readily than on a video call. If possible, try and check in one to one at this session to find out if they have any wellbeing worries, and ask for feedback on your management style during this time as this will go a long way to rebuilding that personal relationship.



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CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEAMS TO SHARE EXPERIENCES

Asking "How is everyone?" at the beginning of every meeting isn't always the best way to encourage connection and team bonding, especially if you have been physically apart for while. Sometimes, you need to take it a step further with an ice breaker. The best ice breakers have the power to strengthen co-worker bonds, stimulate better innovation, and create an atmosphere of inclusivity. But it's easier said than done, and the wrong ice breaker questions can lead to awkwardness or even increased tension. To get the most value out of your team bonding moments, we've compiled a list of the best ice breaker games for the hybrid workplace. Next time you get together with your team, use one of these games instead of asking "How is everyone", and you're sure to hear some better, more insightful responses than "I'm good."

ONE WORD GAME.

The One Word ice breaker allows you to provide initial context for a meeting's topic, and get everyone in the right mindset for discussion. For instance, let's say you're leading a meeting on culture post pandemic. Ask the groups to describe the future work culture, or office culture in particular, in one word. Then when your team members share their word, you respond with 'Tell me more about that ?' or 'why did you choose that word?' So your conversation starts with one word but continues with many and everyone is included.

WOULD YOU RATHER WHEN REMOTE.

Next time you're settling into a meeting or team bonding outing, take turns going around the table and asking each person a "Would You Rather" question. Here are a few "Would You Rather when working remote" questions to get you started:

- Would you rather work 80 hours one week and have the next week off or work 40 hours for the week (spread across seven days including weekends) for two weeks?
- Would you rather get paid your entire salary plus benefits all at once for the year or get paid little by little throughout the year?

REMOTE WORKING LESSONS.

This is an engaging and unique way to encourage team members to share fun or interesting stories with one another. Ask each person to share one accomplishment or lesson they learnt during their remote working experience. Undoubtedly you'll get some of lesser importance, but you never know what hidden lesson you might discover from your colleagues.



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FUN QUESTIONS.

Asking fun questions is an easy and effective ice breaker game. To play, simply go around the room and have each person provide an answer to a fun question on a card. The questions are up to you, but if you're stuck, here are a few ideas:

- If you had 3 hours notice to go back into full lockdown and had the option of buying 3 items only from the supermarket what would they be?
- If you could do any job in lockdown what would it be?
- If you had to do lockdown again who would you most like to be locked down with and why?

These questions serve two purposes - first, they allow your co-workers to get into a sillier, more creative mindset. Second, they encourage conversation on topics typically reserved for outside the office, which enables members of your team to get to know one another on a deeper level.

This is Better Than That.

This is a fun activity. Humour is required. Ask your team to bring to the meeting one item from their home that has supported them whilst they have been working remotely. Then they can line them up somewhere safe when they arrive. These items could be something they use daily, like a pen or a cup or anything (it's best not to prescribe). However, you should encourage them to find items that are more odd or unique. This will make the game more interesting. Ask each team member (you are included in this) to share their item, and how it supported them through lockdown. Using an object to share experiences takes the pressure away from the individual themselves. You need to encourage the group to ask questions of one another about the object as again this will create flow, plus it's fun to see the items lined up and teams can take pictures and share on social media which creates a team buzz. At the end if you think it would be fun you could award the most 'unusual support object', and give your reasons as to why this is better than that.'

Share an embarrassing Lockdown Photo.

This is one of our favourite icebreakers because it's a fun way to get to know your team again. For this game, have everyone bring in an embarrassing photo that sums up their home working experience and tell the story behind it. Doing this is a great way to build connection. To make this more interesting, you can have people guess whose photo it is before your team member shares their story if it isn't obvious.

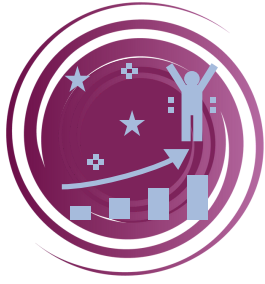
You need to give ice-breakers 15+ minutes to get through and yield some of our biggest laughs and revelations from the remote working experience.



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DON'T FORGET ABOUT YOUR EMPLOYEES' PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

At this initial meeting you want to encourage and empower your team to contribute and generate ideas for the future. This isn't the time for top down management, delegation, pace setting or dictatorship. You're more likely to engage and retain employees when they have opportunities to continually learn new things and advance their careers. So you need to take this early opportunity to tap into the 'what's in it for them' psychology. Be a champion of professional development and encourage staff to build new skills. When employees ask to attend a professional development program, do your very best to honour that request, and proactively seek out learning and development opportunities for individuals and the whole group as a result of what you learn from them about their professional development needs post pandemic. Many learning opportunities are free these days and can be performed as part of the team meeting and delivered through your line management responsibility. That's right - you can develop your own team with bitesize nuggets you think they need to know to enhance their development and it is guaranteed to encourage engagement. So, take a look at the following steps you can take as part of these meetings with your hybrid team so that your team will feel invested in & valued by you:

PROVIDE HELPFUL, ACCESSIBLE RESOURCES.

The internet is full of these so as soon as a team member mentions a knowledge gap get googling and then bring it to the meeting to deliver. An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest. While many managers are inclined to take a "sink or swim" approach to employee training, the statistics are definitely stacked against this approach.

IMPLEMENT A LONG-TERM KNOWLEDGE SHARING STRATEGY.

At this meeting knowledge sharing is about more than simply getting information from A to B. It's about tapping into the individual and collective expertise held by your team members – and making that knowledge readily accessible to each other. Every team member should have a chance to contribute new ideas, solutions, processes, and feedback in order to improve the company as a whole. This is made much easier if you go to this meeting with a planned space where you intend on facilitating this through so your team leave the meeting feeling heard, and so you can then decide the right knowledge sharing strategy for the future of your hybrid team.



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CHOOSE
GROW



That's it!

Best of luck with your face to face meetings from the team at
Choose to Grow L&D Ltd - Developing People & Business

For further support, tools & strategies for effective Leadership please contact:

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