Good *Guides*

LEADERSHIP IN THE HYBRID WORLD

HYBRID IS HERE TO STAY

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced rapid changes to our environment, practices and behaviours and has forced many organisations to adopt remote or hybrid working to manage their operations. As returning to the office full time becomes an option, it is tempting to think things will go back to the way they were before. Hybrid and remote working has had a significant impact on both leaders and their people. This way of working is here to stay and here's why:

- Flexible work practices are becoming more widespread and seen as standard practice rather than an additional benefit. Employees and job seekers are looking for more control over where and when they work.

- Collectively we are developing a wider understanding of how work and personal life intertwines. Where once you may have advised an employee to leave their personal lives at the door, we now know that being able to bring your whole self to work improves the overall wellbeing and satisfaction of our people. The last few years of online and at home working has opened a wormhole into our personal lives that we can't close back up again. The ability to flow in and out of work and life is important to many people, and hybrid working can support this.

- Employees have consistently shown the office environment isn't the key to performance, rather a tool they use for connecting and collaborating. Just like there are benefits from working together in the office, there are many benefits from working at home that our people won't want to lose or give up.

- The talent market is very competitive. Hybrid and remote can open new opportunities. Seeking out people in new locations expands your talent pool and demonstrates your fluency in hybrid working, which is still currently a competitive advantage.

With hybrid and remote working here to stay, it's time to rethink how you lead and foster your people in these environments.

Foundations for hybrid working; trust and intention

The foundation of strong teams and of any great relationship is trust. Trust is needed more than ever, now that we're not always physically together. Working remotely can feel like you are missing one of your senses. Not being able see and hear what is going on for each other, or see body language and other behavioural gestures, can leave people guessing and building their own narratives. As a team leader, you need to assume positive intent with your people, and trust that your team members are delivering on what is expected of them. Inversely your team members need to feel safe in being open with you, able to come with questions, look for support and know that you will be there to help. Building trust starts with vulnerability. A key part of this is moving beyond transactional relationships to connecting human to human. It requires going beyond the surface level, being willing to share first about how you are feeling, what is having an impact on you, and how you are looking to overcome challenges. Being open about not knowing all the answers and admitting mistakes when they are made.

Where once leaders might have been able to share vision, build culture, and develop people through proximity, being in different locations requires leaders to be intentional and deliberate in their actions. With incidental connection reduced, opportunities must be deliberately created to ensure your employee are connected with your purpose, are able to build strong relationships with others, have opportunities to learn and grow from their mentors and peers, and have the ability to effectively contribute to and participate in work life, no matter where or when they do that from.

Rethinking how you lead

With trust and intention established as your building blocks, it's important to consider your end users. Your employees. They are your greatest source of knowledge on what empowers and motivates them to contribute within a hybrid or remote working environment. Before jumping to solutions, gain their understanding of what's working well and where any gaps and opportunities lie. Then engage them in the process, designing with them rather than for. We've broken down the hybrid and remote working environment into four key areas for you to explore with your people.
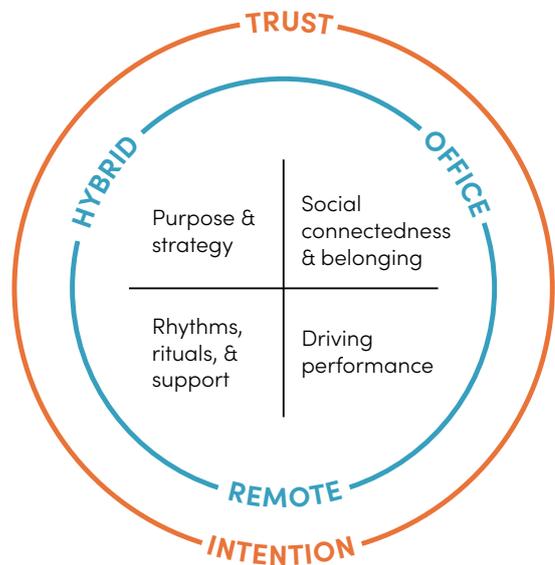
What works will look different to each organisation based on your unique culture and ways of operating. To get you started, we've come up with some practical ideas of how you might foster and lead in this new world.

Purpose and strategy

People's ability to see the role they play and how it fits into the bigger picture has a big impact on how they perform and the autonomy they can demonstrate. Connecting with purpose and strategy provides direction for decision making, whilst values provide guidance on appropriate behaviour regardless of whether people are working in the office or remotely. What ways can you regularly communicate and involve your people in your purpose, strategy, and values?

- **Strategy sessions** – all company sessions to roll out your vision and strategy, plan out activities, and allow your people to take it all on board, ask questions, and get a feel of how they contribute to the bigger picture. Look at ways to get everyone involved both online and in person.

- **Communication** – how do your leadership teams communicate with your people. Agree on what ways you will share important updates and how you will make sure everyone receives them. Try utilising the channels you already have for example, recording important notices and following up with emails or messages on 'teams' or 'slack'.

- **Regular status updates** – how do you provide updates on how the organisation is meeting its objectives. At Humankind we have Monthly Business Updates, which allow us to all be engaged with the direction and performance of the business.

- **Values and behaviours** – review your values and the behaviours that support them to ensure they are equally applicable in the virtual environment as they are in the physical.

- **Values recognition** – create rituals to promote and celebrate your values that transcend your office walls. Share examples of how your people are living your values in your regular meetings or utilise message boards or newsletter slots for people to share their own examples.

Social connectedness and belonging

Belonging and connecting with others is fundamental to our wellbeing and the strength and quality of our relationships has a profound effect on how we contribute and collaborate within the workplace. How can you encourage your people to connect with their leaders and with each other?

- **Coffee dates** – in person or virtual, introduce individuals to someone from another team. Provide some conversation starters or a challenge to complete and watch the relationships start to form.

- **Ice breakers and speed dating** – create the chance to connect before getting down to business. Block time in meetings for ice breakers or speed dating. Breakout rooms in zoom and teams are perfect for this.

- **Cross team collaboration** – how are you sharing ideas across teams? Try blocking out time on a regular basis for teams to present on different topics. Topics could centre on recent learning experiences, examples of great work, or ideas they are exploring or finding interesting. Record these sessions for others to watch at a later time.

- **In person connection** – unless you're completely remote, invest in in-person connection. Create local hubs for people to meet up. Build rituals and create moments for connecting in person, whether it is a social event, team building event, strategy day, or value celebration.

- **1:1s and check ins** – in person feels great and should be encouraged where possible, but don't sacrifice your rhythms. Continue to frequently make time for you and your team members to connect.

Rhythms, rituals, and support

When employees want to work remotely, it's easy to fall on the position that it's up to them to make it work. But what you do to support your people to participate fully from their locations can really empower and charge up their performance. How do you provide your people with the support needed to allow them to perform effectively?

- **Digital meeting etiquette** – co-designing simple rules with your team such as; ensuring all meetings have digital meeting links, and asking all attendees to join on separate screens, can support creating equal 'screen time' within meetings.

- **Communicate how, when, where, and why people should be contacted** – how do people know when others are available, what are the preferred channels for communication, what do you do with a general query vs an urgent query. At Humankind we developed our guidelines for how we work together to deliver awesome work which states our commitments to each other and agreed upon ways to collaborate, communicate, and provide feedback.

- **Optional vs required attendance** – be clear about what rituals are important to your organisation, and when people are expected to attend. For Humankind our daily huddles are important way for us to start the day, so we connect in digitally. Whilst our monthly strategy updates are in-person events. Both are moments of connection that we prioritise.

Driving performance

To drive exceptional performance, your people need to understand what great performance looks like. Empowering your people to perform starts with setting clear expectations and providing open and timely feedback. How can you help your people understand what great performance looks like?

- **Regular and timely feedback** - get in the habit of jumping on a call in the moment to provide feedback, rather than storing it up until your next 1:1. Link your feedback to behaviour and impact to turn the dial.

- **Outcome focussed** – when office based, a common shortcut we used for performance was what we could see, time and perceived effort. So, if your performance measures are based on these inputs, it might be time to have a rethink. How do you talk about performance and expectations? What metrics do you use for performance? Linking performance to outcomes leaves space for your people to determine how they will deliver.

- **On the job learning** – learning on the job can feel harder to do online. What can you do to build learning into your systems and processes. Try holding a debrief time with your people after important meetings to check understanding, answers questions and provide feedback. After key delivery moments jump on a phone or video call to replay their achievement and talk about what they learnt in the process. Utilise digital tools to shadow others and collaborate together online.

Hybrid and remote working aren't going away, so as leaders it's time to rethink how we build culture, connect our people with organisational strategy, and enable and empower our people to perform, grow and flourish within these environments. Our people are the greatest source of knowledge of what is going to work best for them. Don't be afraid to talk to your people and engage them in creating this new future.

We're happy to share our experiences in leadership and employee experience in the hybrid world, feel free to connect with us to hear more.

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