



# LEADING HYBRID TEAMS: WHAT LEADERS AND COACHES NEED TO KNOW

**Fredrik Fogelberg** asks what we need to know about hybrid working models and explores how we can support clients to come to terms with this radical transformation in work organisation.

The shift to a hybrid model of work, which for many of us came in quite suddenly, has now become a permanent feature for many workplaces. Inevitably, it has also raised a number of questions for leaders. Some of the ones I have been hearing from my executive clients include:

- ‘How can we create more engagement and a sense of belonging throughout the whole company?’
- ‘How do we set clear principles and expectations for when to work at the office?’
- ‘How can we achieve the proper balance of remote and in-person work, and reap the benefits of both?’
- ‘How can I make sure that people who participate virtually in a meeting or workshop get the same experience as people who are participating in the room?’

Yet there are also huge potential positives in these developments, which as coaches we can help our executive clients to realise.

## NOT BACK TO ‘NORMAL’

Among experts, there seems to be a consensus that even when the Covid pandemic comes to an end, there is no ‘back to normal’, meaning we won’t be back to five days a week in the office.<sup>i</sup>

More and more jobs can be handled perfectly well remotely, and leaders who think that they can expect all employees in a post-Covid situation to be present, in the office, from 9 to 5 are clearly fooling themselves.

A recent McKinsey study showed that 29% of the 5,000 people surveyed were likely to switch jobs if their employers required them to work exclusively onsite and nearly three quarters of people prefer to work from home for two or more days per week (see Figure 1).

Some talk about the ‘Big Resignation’, a trend since the start of the pandemic, where a high number of employees have switched jobs.<sup>iii</sup>

If leaders choose to ignore this trend, they will face a disconnect with their employees and risk losing a large amount of talent, as well as a drop in motivation and engagement levels for those that stay. This is one area where we as coaches can challenge our clients’ view of how work is organised.

On a more positive note, we can help leaders see the return to the workplace as a chance to create a new, more effective operating model that works for the organisation and its employees. Let’s put it in a historical perspective to see how significant the ongoing shift is.

In the 19th century, there was a massive move of workers from fields to factories during the Industrial Revolution. The Second World War witnessed the entry of women into industry on a large scale and in the 1990s, when personal computing and email became commonplace, we saw a huge leap in productivity. Recently, since the start of pandemic, remote working has become the norm and, as a result, the role of the office is fundamentally changing.

## DEVELOPING THE HYBRID POLICY

How do organisations set themselves up for this transition and what is required of senior leaders? The main question is how to manage this

Figure 1: Most employees now report preferring a more flexible working model<sup>ii</sup>

Working model before COVID-19 pandemic and desired working model after COVID-19 pandemic, % of employee respondents (n = 5,043)



Source: McKinsey Reimagine Work; Employee Survey, January 2021

polarity: on the one hand the preferences of the workforce and on the other the core work that needs to be done to get the job done.<sup>iv</sup>

These are the three steps to achieve this.

**1. Starting with the workforce, senior leaders need to identify its needs and preferences. Questions that may be useful to ask at this stage are:**

- How do people define the ideal balance between in-person and remote working?
- Which tasks require in-person vs remote presence?
- Who would relocate if they could work from anywhere?
- How many employees would consider leaving the organisation if they are not satisfied with the work arrangement?

It is important to look at demographic differences in the responses to these questions: are there clear differences across gender, generations, functions, cultures and commuting distances? Which personality differences appear?

**2. Moving to the core needs of the organisation, these aspects come into play:**

- Which of our products and services require in-person presence and which can be provided remotely?
- What type of balance between in-person and remote fits and supports our organisational culture?
- Which in-person meetings are truly necessary? Which meetings are 'nice to have' in person?
- How do we best on-board new employees?
- How do we enhance connection between the organisation and employees, both online and in person?
- How do we ensure team cohesion, both online and in person?
- How do we ensure cross-functional connections, both online and in person?

**3. Developing a framework with guidelines**

Different teams will have different needs, so overall guidelines should be high-level. They may include:

- Defining specific collaboration activities that are best done in person (and why).
- Defining which meetings are mandatory in-person (and why).
- How remote and hybrid meetings are best set up and facilitated.

Adjustments will be made as we go along: this is new territory for everyone, and trial and learnings are part of the journey.

***'Management skills are amplified in a remote setting. A good manager becomes excellent, and a mediocre manager is more likely to fail miserably.'** — Neil Gandhi*

## COMPETENCIES FOR LEADERS IN A HYBRID ERA

Given these challenges, what competencies are required? Here an important role of the executive coach becomes apparent: to help leaders assess their competence and identify development priorities.

Figure 2 is a 'clock' showing the competencies and behaviours that I have found to be important for leaders in hybrid organisations.

Figure 2: Important competencies for leaders in hybrid organisations



## GREEN

**Trust** is at the heart of the model because it is the foundation of hybrid or remote leadership. In the 'old days', meaning a fully in-person setting, the manager could observe whether employees came in on time and did not leave early, and control their activities. However, in a remote or hybrid setting, control and command leadership simply does not work. The leader, whether they like it or not, must shift from an input-based to an output-based model of performance management. There has been plenty of evidence since the start of the pandemic that productivity increases rather than decreases when people work from home, so there is no valid reason to mistrust employees' commitment.<sup>vi</sup>

## BLUE

The blue competencies are related to leadership style – aspects of leadership that work differently in a hybrid setting:

- **On-boarding.** It is important to integrate new employees into the organisation and build their emotional connection to the team, the wider company, its culture, the products and its clients. This is harder to do when the employee works completely from home. My 25-year-old son recently started his career with Deutsche Bahn (German railways) and, despite lockdown restrictions, his team manager invited him into the office on his first day to meet team members in person and to brief him on the organisation, the tasks and how the team works together. He felt very welcome and included.
- **Developing a team** can be done perfectly well remotely, as has been proven in many global teams long before Covid. The principle of building 'virtual closeness'<sup>vii</sup> is about integrating task and relationships aspects into all virtual contacts, a key habit of high-performing remote teams. The hybrid setting, where some team members may be together in person and others are remote, adds a layer of complexity when it comes to team dynamics. Here the proximity bias comes into play: a phenomenon where we, subconsciously, tend to perceive persons who are physically close to us more positively than those who are remote. Research shows that team members who are more present in person tend to have easier access to information, be more visible to senior management and be considered for promotion earlier.<sup>viii</sup>
- **Facilitating hybrid meetings.** In hybrid meetings typically some participants are together in one room and others join via communication technology. This setting, by default, creates an 'us' and 'them' dynamic. The preferred approach is to have every participant join individually, from separate rooms and through their own device. The second best is for the chair of the meeting to constantly engage the remote participants by calling them by name, pulling them into the conversation and using digital collaboration tools.
- **Physical and mental health.** Remote workers tend to work too long without breaks and extend their workdays with what used to be commuting time. This can have a detrimental effect on physical and mental health. Many clients tell me that their day consists of back-to-back meetings, and some even skip their lunch breaks. Hybrid leaders are faced with the new task of

keeping an eye on their team members' wellbeing, seeing them only through technology. This requires more than just asking 'are you ok?' and taking 'yes' for an answer. A deeper type of listening and observing is needed. As coaches we distinguish between different levels of listening, with 'higher' listening including not just the words but also the feelings and values. Many managers find this hard to do and may also miss what is not being said, expressed between the lines or simply by using silence. In an international context, team members are likely to differ in how explicitly they express themselves, something managers must be sensitive to and know how to interpret. For instance, in many so-called 'high-context cultures', saying no or disagreeing with your boss is seen as inappropriate.

As for physical wellbeing, some organisations provide budget for setting up a proper home office arrangement or home visits by an ergonomist, who gives advice about how to arrange a chair, desk and computer.

## GREY

**Networking.** Informal and spontaneous encounters in the office are often seen as essential to networking. One often-heard argument is that the number of cross-functional conversations is reduced in hybrid organisations – the chats at the coffee-machine, elevator or canteen. In my opinion, this is not correct.

First, in the old 100% in-person office days, spontaneous contacts were mostly limited to the building or even the floor where one worked, which tended to house one's closest co-workers anyway.

Second, most networking nowadays is done through digital tools. Ask a 30-year-old how they build and maintain relationships and the likely reply is that this is done mostly on their mobile devices.

## YELLOW

**Digital savvy and cybersecurity.** A hybrid leader relies heavily on digital tools, so they should be comfortable with these. They know which tools to use for which purpose and are curious about new digital developments that can benefit the team. For example, when a working relationship is under pressure, they will call the person rather than address the issue in email.

In addition, being aware of and adhering to the organisation's security policy becomes more and more important as cybercriminals pose an increasing threat to organisations.

## ORANGE

**Using physical spaces.** The role of the office is undergoing a fundamental transition. This requires leaders to think creatively about what the office is for. There is hardly a need anymore for individual cubicles where employees spend the whole day behind their laptop or in remote meetings. The office will be redefined as a place to meet peers and colleagues across functions, collectively engage in complex tasks such as problem-solving, product and strategy development and conflict resolution, to name a few.

## RED

**Cross-cultural savvy.** Hybrid teams are often diverse in nature, so being aware of how cross-cultural differences influence the team dynamic and knowing how to leverage this diversity to the team's advantage is an asset. Also, the leader needs to be sensitive to how different cultures relate to remote working and how they prefer to express themselves in virtual meetings.

We can help leaders see the return to the workplace as a chance to create a new, more effective operating model that works for the organisation and its employees.

## HOW THE EXECUTIVE COACH CAN HELP

The transition to hybrid working is a fundamental change in how we organise work – and therefore also in leadership. The landscape on the horizon is unclear, with many ambiguities. Leaders embark on a journey of trial and error and need to be open to experimentation, learning and readjusting.

Navigating unfamiliar territory and developing new competencies are 'home ground' for the executive coach. Many leaders are going through this process and the executive coach is well positioned to guide their client on this journey. This article has sought to provide some frameworks to support the coach in helping their clients make sense in this land of ambiguity.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Fredrik Fogelberg, reg. psychologist, ICF PCC, specialises in leadership development in international organisations. He has 35 years of experience as a trainer, executive and team coach. His career started at KLM and Nike, and in 1996 he co-founded Nomadic International Business Psychology. Since 2008, he has focused on remote working and live online facilitation. Fredrik comes from a Dutch, Finnish and Swedish background and works in six languages. He published on group dynamics, cross-cultural management and remote working.

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