Staying Connected – Advice for Managing the Challenges of a Global, Remote Workplace Culture

Culture and Values in a Global Team

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How people work is constantly evolving as technological advances help us do our jobs better. For many workers, the widespread availability of fast internet means they can perform their jobs from anywhere – home, office, or neighborhood coffee shop. Over the last several years, many industries, clinical research included, have begun to allow workers to take advantage of technology to work from home. This is an attractive option for workers looking to optimize their work-life balance and can help employers recruit and retain talented professionals without requiring them to live in specific areas of the world.

The flip side is that remote or partially remote workforces, inherently, offer fewer opportunities for employees to interact face-to-face. With remote work, the conditions have shifted where the human interaction for shared learning in the workplace is not there anymore. Instead, interactions and working relationships are mostly online. Building and maintaining a corporate culture in a hybrid environment, where some are fully remote and some are on a hybrid arrangement (spending some time in the office and some time working remotely) requires the creation of opportunities for face-to-face interactions. In a regular office environment, the rhythms of a workday offer lots of opportunities to connect and collaborate outside your immediate team. Remote settings mean we must think differently about how to evolve a digital culture and offer people new places to interact, create and learn.

Transparent and Frequent Communications are Vital

Building and maintaining a culture in a global remote organization is crucial. It's important to gather the team around a set of shared beliefs, making sure that everyone feels like they are part of a team, all working together towards a shared goal. Technology allows us to be productive in a remote environment and also presents creative opportunities for virtual interactions. Building strong relationships help people stay productive and connected. The following tips can help your team bond and stay connected in a remote setting:

- Schedule check-ins – on an individual level as well as on a group level. Turn on your camera and say hi to managers and teams on a regular basis

- Develop creative team engagement opportunities such as social gatherings (where you have the whole team playing trivia), or schedule coffee breaks where people can engage in casual conversations

- Set boundaries – agreeing upon standard hours of availability for video meetings and team chats – this becomes even more important for global organizations with workers spread across multiple time zones

- Take a deep dive into your people practices and listen to what matters for your people. Listening to your employees is crucial, giving them a voice in a remote world where you don't have the same opportunities to connect with others as in an office

- Make sure that you champion health and wellness, conduct a step challenge, host a virtual yoga session etc.

Behavior Modeling from Leaders Can Help Maintain Consistency

Leadership behavior is one of the most important factors in building and maintaining a winning corporate culture. Leadership needs to set a compelling vision, promote specific behaviors and mindsets, and hardwire them in the organization.

Frequent communications from leadership show co-workers that employers are engaged and committed to keeping teams connected. It is important to hear from leaders often, and not only about business-critical announcements. Regular meetings can be called to check in with workers and get their feedback on the business and their work. Some of these sessions can be focused solely on celebrating successes or showcasing the work of certain team members. Transforming the leadership communication approach from all-business to all-people can foster a culture where workers feel valued and empowered to use their voices to make the organization better.

Mindful Planning Can Foster a Sense of Belonging

To build a sense of team, interactions should not be limited to business talk only. One of the chief benefits of working in a brick-and-mortar office surrounded by people are the fun elements like wacky outfits, free food, and team building activities where workers can relax and share their personalities. When co-workers are friends, it becomes much easier to deal with job challenges. Workplaces where people care about each other on top of the job responsibilities helps to build a culture of support and collaboration.

While this is easier to do in a face-to-face environment, the same technology used for video conferencing, team chat, and/or file sharing can be used to encourage workers to interact throughout the day in friendly ways. Hold "mandatory" pet meetings where any worker with pets at home can show them off to friends. Give gift card prizes for employees with the funniest augmented reality video background, or the most festive holiday outfit. Focus virtual events on mental and emotional wellness with video yoga or meditation sessions. In a remote environment, it is crucial to go the extra mile to foster connectivity, provide fun and interesting ways to interact with team members as this demonstrates that the organization cares about and values its people for who they are and not simply for their productivity. Because we really do care about our people.

Any human resources leader will tell you that building and managing corporate culture is difficult. When companies have co-workers spread out, working largely from their homes all across the world, it become even more challenging. With the proper forethought and planning, along with a strong example from leadership, organizations can maintain and even strengthen culture and develop a true sense of belonging.

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Denise Wikstrom is the People & Talent Manager at Trialbee, the leading global data and technology platform for patient matching and enrollment in clinical trials. She has spent almost her entire career in the professional services industry. Denise started her career in financial auditing and has over six years of experience of financial auditing in various industries. Denise has also worked in the talent management industry. Before joining Trialbee, Denise spent numerous years abroad, most recently in New York. Denise has a proven track record of running strategic initiatives in large organizations. Denise holds a degree from Lund's University (Sweden) and has also studied Business Administration and Management at Columbia University in New York City, NY.

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