The Unexpected Pitfalls of Hybrid Working Arrangements

By Stephanie Vozza
November 9, 2021

As workplaces start to reopen, the majority of employees have made it clear they want to continue to work from home part or full time. Nearly 60 percent of corporate leaders said they’ll honor the request to work from home occasionally.

While a hybrid work arrangement may seem like the perfect compromise and the best of both worlds, having some of the team outside of the workplace could harm office dynamics and introduce proximity bias. Managers may give preferential treatment to employees who are working in the office near them, negatively impacting remote workers.

"We all have biases that impact our behavior," said Marie Kretlow, people experience and programs lead for the email service Superhuman, based in San Francisco. "Many are subconscious. With proximity bias, we are more likely to favor the people that are immediately around us or who are in our same time zone."

The Risks

Because the bias is subliminal, it can creep in without a manager recognizing that it's happening, Kretlow said.

"Folks who are physically closer or immediately reachable will be more top of mind," she said. "As a result, they could experience preferential treatment, giving them advantages over employees who are less visible. They might get invited to more meetings or tapped for more projects. Those who are distanced by time or location may lose work opportunities. By missing those interactions, it could impact their ability to do their job well. And it's possible they could be at higher risk of resigning because they feel disengaged."

Proximity bias can also show up in office politics, said Jack Wiley, author of The Employee-Centric Manager (Employee Centricity LLC, 2021).

"Those who have more face-to-face interaction with their bosses may very well have more influence, regardless of the quality of their ideas or perspectives," Wiley explained. "Employees may come to see themselves as either being in the manager’s ingroup or outgroup. And that could set the stage for conflict between internal camps."

"Office politics is rooted in gaining personal power and influence," said Kurt Motamedi, professor of strategy and leadership at Pepperdine University’s Graziadio Business School in Los Angeles. "When you’re online, you’re no longer socially anchored like when you’re in the office with a social menu where you could express some of your concerns. Zoom is a two-dimensional form of communication. Informal conversations that happen on the side and nonverbal communication are diminished. It can raise a great deal of anxiety for individuals whether they’re aware of it or not."

When an employee’s time with leaders and colleagues is truncated, navigating office politics turns into the challenge of "How can I calibrate myself to get my way with this organization?" Motamedi said. "We are collaborating and competing with co-workers at the same time."
The Fix

Awareness about the negative aspects of a hybrid work arrangement is key, and Kretlow said leaders need to be intentional about all of their communication and interactions.

"It's super easy to tap someone on the shoulder who's sitting at a desk nearby and say, 'Hey, let's go grab coffee,'" Kretlow said. "One instance may be OK, but leaders need to be hypervigilant about equity in the treatment of their teams. They need to evaluate how they're spending their time and with whom. They also need to make sure the opportunities they're creating for folks are equitable, no matter where the person is located."

Kretlow suggested prioritizing communications and meetings that create a level playing field. For example, continue to hold meetings over videoconferencing even when people are in the office. And keep workflow conversations on collaboration platforms like Slack that create a transparent flow of information.

"Virtual-first sets up the team in a way that creates equity for all, regardless of location or working hours," Kretlow said. "Creating norms from the beginning is a great way to get ahead of proximity bias."

Leaders also need to demonstrate empathy, especially with workers who are completely remote or working from home most of the time, Motamedi said. "Build rapport with employees," he said. "Have Zoom check-in sessions. Let them know, 'I'm here for you.' People are quitting left and right. We used to live in a world that was high-tech and high-touch. Today, the tech is there, but the human touch has fallen behind, which can create a lot of alienation. So much communication and community building use nonverbal and emotional connection."

Leaders should also have frank discussions to defuse the complexity and ambiguity that can happen when teams are distributed. "People don't like uncertainty," Motamedi said. "When they don't get information from the hierarchy, they make things up in their minds. If you don't reply to an e-mail right away, for example, someone who isn't in the office may make assumptions and find things to reinforce it."

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