



HOW TO AVOID “NETWORK DRIFT” DURING HYBRID WORKING

HYBRID WORKING CAN'T BE SOLVED WITH A FORMULA

The office is opening, the office is closing again. LinkedIn are offering a permanent remote working option; Apple are bringing everyone in three days a week. When it comes to hybrid working, employees have different wants and those wants keep changing. Hybrid working is not about building the perfect business model. Rather, it is about finding equilibria between evolving employee preferences, differing government mandates, and financial sustainability. With no one-size-fits-all solution, leaders are naturally feeling self-doubt and stress to balance remote and in-office work needs.

HYBRID WORKING IS A RELATIONAL CHALLENGE

In a climate of uncertainty, organizations are falling back on tangible and easy-to-control fixes. Many of our clients are busy redesigning the office space, buying additional web cameras, and helping remote employees create a home office. Ensuring proper infrastructure is important, however hybrid working is more so a relational challenge than it is operational.

At a time when we need thriving social support, we are increasingly task-focused and operational. Our “weak ties” – people we value but don't speak with frequently – are drifting further and further apart. This is more than silo formation where functions isolate. Transitioning to hybrid working creates a risk that whole networks drift apart. When whole networks drift apart, the cultural fabric of an organization threatens to fray.

With a bit of creativity, the risk is not only entirely avoidable but also allows us to realize the full benefits of hybrid working. To do this we must foster relationships, which are shown to activate success in our business strategies. For example, YSC research (YSC, 2021) shows that a strong sense of connection to colleagues is predictive of operational effectiveness. This is backed by research from McKinsey and Co, that found social cohesion was one of the largest predictors of work effectiveness, engagement, and employee well-being.

When people are connected, engaged, and can derive a sense of purpose from their work, the logistical issues of whether they come in on a Tuesday or a Wednesday just feel that much less weighty. To sidestep network drift and get the most of hybrid working benefits, we've identified three watchouts and strategies to safeguard your people and culture during this transition.

1 Networks are smaller and less joined up

In hybrid working environments, leaders are collaborating with a smaller number of colleagues but on a more frequent basis. Research indicates that, compared to those in the office, remote workers work harder, but feel less connected to colleagues and tend to have smaller networks.

The more comfortable we feel with a colleague, the more candid and open our interactions. This “inner sanctum” is where we experience the most psychological safety.

As the strength of our relationships weakens, we share less openly and engage in more “self-monitoring”. When we self-monitor, we care more about optics and presentation. Of course, managing our reputation is a valuable skill, but it also drains our energy and limits creativity and constructive feedback.

When working remotely, we are spending more time with our inner sanctum while pushing our weak ties further into the realm of outsiders. As such, our networks are solidifying but not interconnecting as much. Overall, this network drift can lead to less communication, more conflict, and erosion of resource sharing.

What you can do

Leaders can proactively reset cultural norms to encourage serendipitous connections by promoting cross-network teams with a shared purpose. Our weak ties create bridges to new networks and give us access to diverse ideas and resources. For example, leaders can sponsor initiatives like Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), which pull together employees from across the organization for a common goal.

Leaders can use other organizational initiatives or projects to encourage cross-network teams. By selecting a “non-obvious” group of people to work with one another, leaders can intentionally create serendipitous connections without adding unnecessary Zoom meetings to the calendar.

2 Team isolation fragments organizational culture

Teams operating solely within their respective “inner sanctums” risk developing distinct sub-cultures. Sub-cultures are natural and common but need to be proactively shaped and managed. As unintended sub-cultures increase, an organization’s power to influence the broader culture fragments. With the increase of network drift, organizations won’t be able to execute on strategy at scale or be able to shape broader values.

Sub-cultures ritualize new norms distinct from the organization’s broader culture. These sub-cultures are usually created by individual team leaders, and they explain the biggest determinant of employee behavior. More than the CEO’s vision or HR-driven culture initiative, a team’s leader will determine what employees value and prioritize.

Like linguistic accents, sub-cultures thrive on isolation where they can incubate and diverge. At the height of COVID-19, our clients who divided their workforce into shifts experienced sub-culture divergence within weeks, leading to variance in the quality of employee engagement and effectiveness.

What you can do

To keep a cohesive culture, leaders across the organization will need upskilling to manage their team’s sub-cultures. By creating consistent leadership behaviors, leaders can more consciously promote unified organizational priorities. To do this, leaders can intentionally reflect on and align what behaviors they expect from direct reports, what stories they share with their team, and what gets celebrated within their organization.

3 Reset onboarding to get the most of new joiners

Hybrid work has made onboarding much more difficult. New leaders navigating the intentionality of Zoom meetings are struggling to embody the culture and create the depth of relationship necessary to influence and create followership. (As one client recently put it, “In the past I knew I had assimilated with the culture when my peers sought me out for a joke. With hybrid working, I don’t know how to create that connection now.”).

Along with promotions and retention strategies, onboarding is a vital lever in talent management. In the era of hybrid working, new joiners are falling through the cracks of network drift, latching onto a small group’s sub-culture rather than fitting into the broader organization. When this happens, new joiners may fail to gain traction, and ultimately, organizations lose the ability to control the composition of their employee group.

Organizations, in turn, are attempting to reassure their candidates by extending onboarding evaluations from three to six months. While done in good faith, this ignores the real social dynamics at play. Even as HR processes are

extended, key stakeholders surrounding new leaders are not waiting six months to form an impression. New leaders are subconsciously judged and categorized before they can bridge dispersed networks, leading to inefficacy and rejection.

What you can do

Both Line Managers and Human Resources have a disproportionate impact on resetting onboarding to its original 90 days. To do so, they can support new employees by formally codifying aspects of interpersonal and cultural dynamics that may be hard to glean from sporadic Zoom meetings.

To do so, extra care can be provided to:

- Creating robust stakeholder maps and arranging cross-functional meetings
- Conducting a network analysis to understand real nodes of influence
- Codifying the behaviors, rituals, and norms implicit in the culture
- Providing a history of the DNA of their organization / function / team
- Analysis of change attitudes and pockets of organizational resistance

IN A NUTSHELL

There’s a key risk lurking among all the benefits of hybrid and virtual working: that we spend too much time in our immediate networks and push our weak ties further away. This creates ‘network drift’, a phenomenon which erodes creativity, resource sharing and organizational culture. To get ahead of this, leaders can intentionally increase serendipitous connections, create cohesion across leadership behaviors, and successfully re-engineer onboarding for new joiners. Adapting to hybrid working dynamics is a challenge, but when managed intentionally, can position organizations to win the future of work.

A graphic with the words "LEARN MORE" in large, bold, multi-colored letters (pink, orange, green, blue). The letters are stacked, with "LEARN" on top and "MORE" below it. The background is a light gray grid of small dots.

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