

# Six Critical Strategies to Build Culture and Engagement in a Hybrid Workplace

By Manar Morales



# The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic.

-Peter Drucker

**W**e are living in an uncertain, sometimes volatile, world. Our workplaces have been impacted by this uncertainty becoming more complex. Obviously, in 2020 COVID-19 turned everything we knew on its end and forced us all to reevaluate the way we work. But beyond the pandemic, there are a myriad of new forces at play affecting today's workplaces.

For the first time, we have five generations of talent working together in the legal industry. Two of those generations are "digital first," meaning they grew up with technology. Further, many of those new to the workforce in the last three years have never worked full-time in-person in the office. As we think about the hybrid workplace, consider that connecting in person does not come naturally to some in your workforce.

Additionally, technology is growing at a rate faster than many can keep up with. For example, artificial intelligence is advancing and expanding its reach before we really understand its true capabilities and impact. In fact, in just two short months Chat GPT reached one hundred million users!

The global economy is uncertain. The global climate is volatile. The political climate is unpredictable at best.

I do not say this to be alarmist, but to put the evolution of the workplace in context. I often say, "The way that 9/11 forever changed the way we travel, COVID will forever change the way we work." We're not going back to the pre-COVID workplace. We need to accept that the evolution of the workplace must go hand-in-hand with the way the world is changing. The future of work is much bigger than simply adapting to the challenges and opportunities COVID brought about.

## The Future of Work is Hybrid

Peter Drucker said, "The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic." Organizations must evolve along with other industries to meet the needs of current and future employees. At the [Diversity & Flexibility Alliance](#) we collaborate with organizational leaders from different industries. It's clear to us that the future of the workplace is hybrid. We advise our members and clients to take the best of

what they had when they were in person, with the best of what they had virtually, to create a hybrid workplace that prioritizes culture and engagement.

Developing a successful hybrid workplace is not easy and for many professionals it can be quite a challenge. Many leaders who would prefer to have everyone in the office everyday are struggling to wrap their heads around the new reality of a hybrid workplace and will need time to process the change. Leaders also need to understand that this is not about one individual's preference to work in the office or at home. This evolution of the workplace is about creating a culture where your employees are the most engaged and the organization performs at its best. While we advocate for workplaces to become more human-centric, this evolution is more about a clear business case for the hybrid workplace, rather than giving employees a nice perk.

Organizational leaders must understand that there's a cost to inaction. If we look at history, we understand there is a trajectory towards a more flexible working environment, and businesses must move forward with this evolution.

The question is do you want your organization to evolve and win the competition for talent or do you want to wait until you are forced to change?

Maintaining culture and engagement are the backbones to the success of any organization. As you build your hybrid working environment it is important to focus on prioritizing culture and engagement using six critical strategies.

## 1 Reframe the Hybrid Discussion by Building on Strengths

The discussion around the hybrid workplace must begin with establishing a compelling purpose for the change. Why does it matter to your organization? What has hybrid made possible? This is a powerful opportunity to reframe the discussion on hybrid and determine how to make it a competitive advantage. You want to recruit and retain top talent and your successful hybrid environment is essential to this quest.

When developing your business case for flexibility, think about how to build on your organization's unique strengths. Remember, when it comes to hybrid, it's not about an "either or mindset." It's a "yes, and" mindset. Reframe your challenges as opportunities and think about what you did well. Center the conversation on hybrid around what your organization needs to be doing such as mentoring and building relationships.

Build on the positive strategies that surfaced during the pandemic such as greater opportunities to develop relationships with clients during zoom calls or the deeper connection developed with team members as you saw a "window into their lives."

Perhaps, during the pandemic, you were able to train more individuals at scale virtually rather than in person. Incorporating virtual training across all offices could have financial and cultural benefits. Perhaps your organization has always had a strong one-on-one mentoring system that could be enhanced with virtual office hours along with in-person events. Empower your leaders to incorporate a blend of both in-person and virtual strategies.

It's important to consider that COVID highlighted many cracks in organizational systems as well. Perhaps your firm or company was not great at building community before COVID, and that weakness became abundantly clear when everyone was virtual. Now is your chance to reevaluate your policies and

practices to rebuild or improve your systems. Create intentional systems to build on weaknesses in your organization. For example, one firm with whom we worked noted that "cross selling" had been left to serendipitous discussions before the pandemic. Then when everyone worked virtually and there were no longer "water cooler moments" to discuss clients the firm incorporated an intentional monthly meeting to discuss the possibilities of cross selling, leading to greater success in this area.

## 2 Define and Reinforce Your Organization's Values

Creating and maintaining a positive and unique organizational culture is paramount to the performance and engagement of your employees and the overall success of your hybrid workplace. In fact, a recent Gallup poll found that employees who felt connected to their organization's culture were 3.7 times more likely to be engaged at work. Further, employees who feel connected to the culture were 5.2 times more likely to recommend the organization and 55% less likely to be looking for a job according to the 2022 article, [\*Don't Confuse Being in the Office with Culture\*](#).

It's important to note, however, that culture can't just be described in your marketing, employees need to recognize the culture in every interaction. Culture is not about a place or a building, it's about building relationships and committing to organizational values.



When developing your culture, it's important to survey your employees, collect the data and then communicate your shared value statements. Ask yourselves: What values are important to the unique organizational culture we want to create? Are your people aligned with that culture? How do your employees experience and identify with the culture? Do they know what it is, do they believe it, and do they want to be a part of it?

It's not just about creating an office space and communicating how you do things. It is about how people are treated every day. Are your

principles, policies and people aligned with your daily practices? Make sure your values align with your talent and diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. Then train to these values, read them at firm events, share examples of how people are living them, and reinforce them throughout the year. Hold every employee accountable for stewarding the values and contributing to the culture. Everyone owns the success of the hybrid workplace.

The biggest mistake that I have seen companies and firms make is writing a standard



# When developing your culture, it's important to survey your employees, collect the data and then share and communicate your shared value statements.

flexibility or hybrid policy that is unrelated to their organizational values or culture. Remember the unwritten rules are just as important as the written ones. Who you say you want to be, must be reflected in your values and culture and your employees must know them and experience them.

## 3 Develop and Advance Agile Leaders

This workplace evolution is not just about reacting to the impact of COVID, it is about developing leaders who are agile enough to adapt to any circumstance down the road. Leaders need to have the skills to innovate and pivot to whatever challenge comes their way. In today's workplace, agility is a core leadership skill.

The fact is all professionals, leaders in particular, must learn how to successfully communicate and engage virtually. Regardless of one's personal preference to be in the office or work from home, everyone in an organization must learn to virtually communicate effectively with

clients and colleagues around the world. The ability to adapt to this type of working may be challenging for some but is essential to performance and success.

It's critical that organizations provide training in virtual communication to all employees as these unique skills may not come naturally. Professionals need to know how to build a relationship and be persuasive on zoom and leaders need training on how to lead a hybrid team. Organizations also need to ensure that all employees have the appropriate resources and technology to successfully fulfill their job requirements when traveling or at home.

## 4 Make the Implicit Explicit

One challenge we have heard repeatedly from our members is that employees don't know exactly what is expected of them in this new hybrid workplace. We often tell our members that when it comes to flexibility "clarity is kind." Vagueness masked as flexibility is not. Tell people what success looks like. Clear

and constant communication is essential when creating your new behavioral norms. Confusion around mandates for days in the office will build resentment and miscommunication. If your leadership expects people to be in the office three days a week, you must make that clear.

Remember, as you are defining your hybrid workplace, there will be resistance and many individuals will express fears. You are essentially redefining mindsets around work, what it means to work and where and when we work. When you find resistance, often it means that person doesn't yet have the right mindset to embrace the hybrid workplace. Take the time to listen to fears, address concerns, have an open conversation around the benefits of hybrid work and clearly communicate the organization's expectations.

In the years that I have been advising organizations on flexibility initiatives, I have found that there are five prevalent fears that I call "the 5Cs." They include the fear of the loss of control, loss of culture, loss of collaboration, loss of contribution, and loss of connection. These fears are well-founded. By default, some of these challenges are likely to happen in a hybrid workplace. However, if leadership takes the time to design intentional initiatives and practices, these workplace priorities can be preserved, and even enhanced.

It's important to frame the discussion and all communications around the business case for hybrid. For everyone to buy in leaders must

"walk the talk" and infrastructure must support all employees wherever they are working. Organizations need to prioritize engagement and create opportunities for people to want to be in the office to engage face-to-face. It's important to offer a Return on Experience (ROE) to those coming into the office. While having lunch as a team is certainly important from time to time, ROE does not just mean luring people back with food. True ROE comes when intentional opportunities to positively connect and collaborate with colleagues are created.

Policies don't bring people back, experiences do! Employees need to know when to come into the office, when to work from home and how they should be abiding by the new workplace norms. While only 28% of organizations have created new meeting norms since the pandemic, we counsel our members to develop virtual and in-person meeting norms and make sure all employees understand them.

Don't prioritize presenteeism over purpose. Remember, hybrid is about "Yes and...." Successful hybrid workplaces incorporate both virtual and in-person meetings. Consider the benefits of virtual meetings and the possibility that your people might be able to mentor or collaborate across offices more often virtually. Perhaps virtual peer circles across the country or world would benefit your associates.

It's important for individuals to do their part as well within the guidelines of the new workplace. Make sure your colleagues understand the importance of being strategic and creative,

not reactive. Individuals must learn when it is important for them to be in the office and when they might benefit from working at home.

## 5 Interrupt Bias and Prioritize Inclusion

With some team members in the office and some working from home, it's easy for a two-tiered system to emerge. Make sure that you are aware of bias and have systems in place to ensure fairness and inclusivity in work distribution and evaluations. You don't want to send the message that you will only get the good projects and praise from leadership if you are physically in the office.

Three types of bias are prevalent in the hybrid workplace. *Proximity bias* emerges when leaders always default to the person in front of them. *Confirmation bias* occurs when there is unfounded speculation that those working from home are not engaged. Leaders then assume that anytime they do not hear from these individuals they must not be working. *Similarity bias* occurs when leaders choose to collaborate with people that look just like them and work just like them (in this case in the office every day.)

In redesigning your hybrid workplace, take the time to create an infrastructure that combats bias and includes everybody. It's important to embed systems and strategies in every process

to fight these types of biases. For example, make sure that your organization has a system in place for tracking recruitment, advancement, work distribution and turn over. When you track these outcomes, you can identify trends and issues related to the type of employee and where they work.

Organizations must also invest in bias training to ensure that even the leaders and teammates with the best of intentions are not inadvertently judging colleagues working from home. Ultimately there must be a shift in mindset so that all employees value diversity in teams and include all types of workers.

## 6 Continually Evaluate and Reinforce What's Important

We tell our members that the process of creating the hybrid workplace must be "intentional, inclusive and iterative." By iterative we mean that you need to work from an always improving mindset and continually evaluate whether your practices are successful. To reinforce the success of your hybrid workplace you need to occasionally go back to the beginning and reestablish your purpose and make sure it's still aligning with your values and culture.

It's important to remind yourself that the success of your hybrid workplace is not about individual preference. It's not designed to appease an employee who wants to work from home any more than it revolves around a

leader who wants everyone in the office. The goal of your hybrid workplace is to establish a successful system where you are retaining the best talent, maintaining an engaged and productive team, and operating a thriving business.

Data is one of the most important factors in the creation of any new practice so make sure you are surveying your employees to understand the sentiment of everyone involved. Track your recruiting, attrition and DEI data and perform off-boarding interviews.

When you establish systems for tracking the success of your hybrid workplace, you can continuously evolve and tweak your processes and practices as you go along. It's helpful to incorporate surveys, focus groups and polls to gauge employee experience and satisfaction. We also advise incorporating "upward reviews" so that all employees own the success of the hybrid initiative and have an opportunity to call out behavior that does not support the hybrid team. Keep your finger on the pulse of the firm to ensure that your hybrid workplace is working as a competitive advantage for your organization.

Ultimately incorporating hybrid into your organizational culture takes time and effort. No one will get it right the first time. But if you and your colleagues agree that fundamentally flexibility is a business imperative you have the opportunity to build a first-class, future-facing organization.

Once your purpose, policy, practices, and people are aligned to fully embrace your hybrid workplace, your organization is guaranteed to gain performance and profitability. Organizations that prioritize adaptable leadership, a value-driven culture, and employee well-being and engagement are poised to lead the industry into the new era of the humanized workplace. +



**Manar Morales** is a recipient of the Joseph R. Biden 2023 Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award and is President and CEO of the [Diversity & Flexibility Alliance](#), where she collaborates with organizations to develop inclusive flexible work cultures.