Communication and Collaboration

Resources and best practices related to communication and collaboration within and across teams while navigating a flexible work environment.

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What's Included in this Section?

1

Guidance on How to Work in a Hybrid Environment

Considerations and advice for how teams should work in a flexible or hybrid format

2

Tips and Tricks for Effectively Working Together

Guidance on how team members can communicate and collaborate in order to foster an open, efficient, and creative work environment

When to Consider Working Together In Person

While many tasks can be completed remotely, there are five types of tasks that are best to do in person.

Creativity



One of the values of a blended hybrid model is the unplanned encounters between coworkers that inspire big ideas.

Examples:

- Conversations in the elevator or in shared meeting spaces
- Spontaneous lunches or coffee check-ins with coworkers
- Brainstorm or design sessions

Communication



Though most conversations can be just as effective virtually, in-person chats may be necessary under some circumstances.

Examples:

- Disciplinary performance reviews or discussions about productivity, conduct, or growth areas
- Difficult conversations about well-being, mental health, or accessibility

Collaboration



Virtual and blended teams can be highly efficient and connected but bringing everyone together in-person can help to get the job done.

Examples:

- Team-building or strategic labs/workshops
- Site walk-throughs or demos that occur on-site
- Onboarding of new team members to introduce and show them site locations

Critical-thinking



Some types of work are best done in-person to promote ideation and innovation.

Examples:

- Hands-on training
- Problem-solving sessions
- In-person technology troubleshooting or replacement
- Equipment maintenance

Celebration



In-person celebrations and parties are a great way to promote social bonding and networking.

Examples:

- Employee birthdays
- Holidays
- Announcements for expectant parents
- Promotions or other career and development milestones
- Award ceremonies

When to Consider Working Virtually

Many activities that used to be in person can be more effective in a virtual format.

Individuals and Teams → **Size of group for the activity** → Large Groups

Individual tasks

Individual tasks such as proofreading and reviewing documents, approving requests, building spreadsheets, or managing personal email.

One-on-ones

Schedule a casual check-in with a colleague with whom it is difficult to see in-person due to distance or challenging schedules. Virtual coffee chats can help maintain lasting relationships.

Webcasts

Live webcasts are great for leadership presentations about important news or sharing updates without interruptions. Use polls or surveys to collect participant input and feedback.

Conferences

Virtual conferences allow attendees to participate in leadership conversations or skill development without coordinating travel, taking time off, or leaving their families. Breakout rooms can facilitate small discussions.

Virtual trainings

Self-paced virtual trainings allow employees to learn key skills on their own time and from the comfort of home. Even live instructor-led courses can be adopted to a virtual or hybrid setting.

Forums

Zoom and Teams are great for small workshops or roundtables meant to discuss specific topics or connect participants. Using video helps keep participants accountable and engaged!

Public meetings

Live, virtual public meetings have been shown to expand constituent access to leadership by enabling participation from anywhere.

Balance a Hybrid Remote and On-Site Team

Balancing the needs of a hybrid, remote, and on-site team can be daunting. These tips can help you maintain a great natural flow and overcome the challenges that teams may face when some employees are at home and others are on-site.



Vary Your Interactions

Zoom fatigue is a common side effect of working from home. Mix up your interactions with remote team members by **communicating through a blend of channels** that make sense for their lifestyle and home office set up (e.g., Slack, texts, email, phone calls)



Keep Content Highly Visual

The online world favors visual media that amplify the underlying message – not detailed blocks of text. **Keep meeting slides simple** and send more detailed reports or lengthy documents separately for offline review.



Prepare Your Audiences

Find fun ways to help your team members understand new information, engage with their peers, and get comfortable with the hybrid environment (e.g., live polls, ice breaker games, surveys sent in advance). If an in-person meeting requires participants to look at something physical (e.g., reports), make sure a digital copy is available so remote attendees can follow along.



Re-Create a Natural Rhythm

To the fullest extent possible, **try to recreate the ebb and flow of face-to-face discussions**. Always invite remote team members to join in-person meetings via Zoom, and make sure the webcam is set up so the whole team is visible and able to talk as if they were together in person.



Check in with Your Team

Make sure everyone is comfortable and always give quiet voices a chance to be heard, especially when teammates are off-camera. **Encourage team members who are not on-site to use the meeting chat feature to share thoughts** if they are anxious about speaking up.

Lead Successful Meetings with a Virtual Component

As a team leader, you already have plenty on your mind. Follow these simple steps before and during your virtually enabled meetings to ensure they run smoothly.

Before the Meeting



Be consistent. Establish a team meeting cadence, such as daily or weekly stand-ups or monthly all-hands meetings, and define objectives for each. Vary interaction methods (e.g., Zoom) for meetings to increase engagement.



Be mindful of your audience. Consider who you invite to the meeting—the smaller the group the greater the interaction. Are all team members required? Can some team members be kept up to date via email?



Be prepared. Send an agenda with relevant discussion materials and expectations in advance of the meeting. Test your technology and identify and address accessibility issues.

During the Meeting



Be present. Put your webcam at eye level or higher. When speaking, use the gestures and mannerisms that you would typically use in person, and make eye contact – try to look at your webcam versus the screen.



Be inclusive. Encourage everyone to participate. Invite, listen, and respond to different perspectives. Tip: users with disabilities can participate in video meetings using accessibility features.



Be proactive. Let attendees know that collaboration can, and should, continue after the call ends by setting expectations for follow-up notes and actions.

Define Your Team's Rules of Engagement

Work becomes more productive and meaningful when managers set expectations for how their employees will work together. Discuss the following with your team members to define your own rules of engagement.[1]

Reignite Your Team's Purpose

Revisit your team's purpose to reinforce a sense of direction and belonging among your employees. Ensure that your team collectively understands their role and how they deliver their agency's mission.

Establish Structured Team Connections

Decide how often and when you'll connect as a team: daily, weekly, bi-weekly, etc. Predictable connections provide stability and routine for your remote teams and help keep everyone on track to meet your goals.

Define Your Team's Norms

With your team, discuss your boundaries for:

- Team work hours
- Individual availability
- Meeting attendance
- Tracking projects and deadlines
- Timely response to emails

Confirm Individual Roles and Responsibilities

Confirm that each of your team members understand their individual role and responsibilities, their work schedule, how their role impacts your team as a whole, and performance expectations.

Create a Feedback Loop

Establish open lines of communication between yourself and your team:

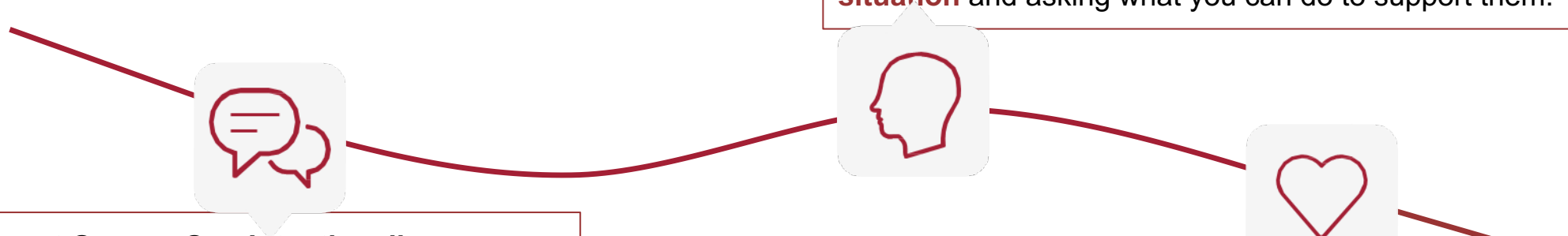
- Establish a culture of feedback
- Keep an open mind when receiving feedback
- Show empathy and understanding when giving feedback

[1] See "Team Work Plan Template, Form B" for Rules of Engagement format. The Rules of Engagement will help teams establish working norms in a hybrid environment.

Be Present and Check In Routinely

It's not only team collaboration that builds trust in a flexible environment – personal interaction is just as important. Team members look to you to help the team improve as it learns about working norms and needs over time.

General Reminder: Periodically check in with your full team to discuss working norms and suggested changes to help the team.



Connect One-on-One Intentionally
Schedule routine check-ins (15-30 minutes per week) with your direct reports to offer a **consistent time and space for them to share their experiences**, and assurance that you are listening.

Keep an Open Mind
Stay open-minded to the shift in each of your team members' working environments, schedules, and needs. **Lead with empathy and understanding by accepting your employee's situation** and asking what you can do to support them.

Be Flexible
Problems happen and your employees will not always follow through. If something is really bothering your employees or they're feeling under the weather, **look for the clues and give them a helping hand**.

Collaborate Consistently and Creatively

Proactively scheduling face-to-face time is the first step to building a connection, but it doesn't have to be a formal meeting. The next two slides offer several creative ways to connect through collaboration.



Encourage Virtual Coffee Chats

Establishing a routine connection builds trust and transparency among your employees. One way to do this is scheduling informal virtual coffee chats with your employees, either individually or as a team.



Brainstorm Spontaneously

Choose one person each week to facilitate a spontaneous brainstorm session to problem solve, uncover new ideas, and give your team a break from their routine. Whether meeting with virtual or remote team members, think about mimicking a "whiteboarding" session.



Review and Share Feedback Together

Use the "present" or "share my screen" tools to review documents with your team when video conferencing and to give them the opportunity to ask questions and share their feedback live. If participation is weak, asking directly for input helps team members feel engaged.



Schedule Optional Coworking Times

No agenda, just a set time for your team to work with cameras on or chat on if they'd like to recreate the experience of working side-by-side in the office. Just as in the office, folks can work in silence or shout out if they have a question.



Be Aware of Proximity Differences

If your team is partially remote, don't punish those who are not physically present by meeting only with the employees on-site, or letting them speak more than those who are video conferencing or dialing in. If somebody in the meeting room does something that can be observed only visually, make an effort to tell all those who dialed in what is happening.



Connect New Hires with Buddy

Starting a new job remotely adds an extra layer of challenges to building rapport with colleagues. When a new employee joins your team, assign them a virtual buddy to help them learn the ropes and have someone to connect with regularly.

Communicate Strategically and Frequently

In times of uncertainty, the more communication the better. All team members are responsible for consistently and openly communicating with their colleagues and with you. Here are a few ways to communicate with and engage your employees.



Delegate Messages

Coordinate and structure your communication. Delegate who in your team, including yourself, delivers what messages and when.



Celebrate Success

Remote victories deserve to be celebrated! Make time to recognize your employees' hard work, dedication, and overall success, and take time to celebrate professional and team milestones.



Get Creative

Sending traditional emails isn't your only option. Experiment using different formats and platforms to communicate, like a video newsletter.



Inform Employees

Your employees look to you for guidance about events outside of work, too. Make it a priority to be transparent about the latest updates related to COVID-19 and how MIT is taking action.



Ask For Feedback

Keep a pulse on your team and ask them how they prefer to receive information from you, and what they most want to hear.