

**Pathway:** Leading high-performing hybrid teams

**Sprint:** Get Hybrid Right

**Program:** Leadership Works

**Written by:** Jacob Wood

This is the third pathway of a full learning sprint, consisting of four pathways, that Jacob designed during his first year at Hive Learning.

Jacob scoped, researched and designed the whole sprint from start to finish, introducing a brand new topic area (hybrid working) to our Leadership Works program.

It's just one example of the many incredible contributions Jacob made to Hive Learning during his time here.

As Practice Lead for Content Design and Delivery, I was fortunate enough to coach Jacob, but I'm also grateful to have learned so much from him.

Jacob is exceptional when it comes to collaboration, combining a curiosity to learn from others with a confidence to share his own knowledge and ideas.

He showed this through his leadership of our accessibility squad, learning from engineers and product experts as well as inspiring them with his knowledge of user-centric, inclusive learning and product design.

This pathway is just a small sample of the contribution Jacob makes to a positive, high-performing, inclusive culture.

**- Daniel Edgar, Learning Experience, Hive Learning**

Over the time Jacob has worked with the Hive Learning team he has excelled in his Learning design delivery to our customers, including enterprise organisations such as Barclays, UKG, and Sunlife.

As a key member of the team Jacob has been a core part of delivering over:

- 20,000 courses
- With an NPS score of +85 (way above industry standard)
- And achieving engagement rates of +80% weekly active usage during live courses

This is an example of a great piece of work from Jacob but not only is he an expert in researching, designing and creating bespoke learning content for our customers - he was at the forefront of innovating with how Learning design develops with GenAI.

**- Laura Keith CEO Hive Learning**

# Team building from afar

## A quick recap

Previously, we talked about the virtual water cooler and how we can be intentional about creating time for individual team members to build relationships.

Let's take that a step further and find out how we can boost collaboration for the whole team.

But first, how do you feel right now about remote teamwork?

POLL

### Agree or disagree: You can't build strong team connections through remote work.

*Nobody can see who voted*

1. Strongly disagree

2. Somewhat disagree


3. Neither agree nor disagree

4. Somewhat agree

5. Strongly agree

## The need for connection

Staying socially connected is important for our mental health and wellbeing. Studies also show that connected teams perform better and are more innovative than teams where everyone works solo.

 According to a McKinsey study of top executives, 66% of the most productive companies say that interactions between team members increased during the pandemic. But only 9% of the least productive business say the same.<sup>1</sup>

**It's a clear indication that increased teamwork improves productivity.**

The challenge is to make sure hybrid teams feel connected so they can maximize productivity.

It's a common myth that remote employees aren't as connected or engaged as on-site workers. The fact is that, with intention, we can ensure remote employees are as connected as they feel they need to be.

👉 Not everyone needs the same level of connection to feel content. Avoid expecting people to be more social than they're comfortable with.

Talk to each individual to find out if they feel like they would benefit from more or less social interaction. Some employees, especially those who are more introverted or neurodivergent, might be at their best with less interaction. Be careful not to attribute this to poor performance.

## Quick tips on building team connections

Blending on-site and remote workers can be hard, but top performers know how to rise to the challenge. Here are a few quick tips to help you achieve success.


👉 **Use a buddy system.** Try pairing a remote employee with someone who works primarily in the office. When the two meet, they can catch up on what's happening. The on-site buddy can also help their remote counterpart have an equal say during hybrid team meetings. They can signal to the team when the remote employee wants to speak up or is having trouble hearing.


💡 **Pro tip:** This doesn't have to fall on any one person's shoulders all the time. Buddies can be mixed up periodically, so people work with other team members. Consider switching up pairs on a monthly or quarterly basis.

📺 **Make your meetings fully remote.** Ensure every meeting is held virtually, even if several people work from the same office. Some people argue this defeats the purpose of being in the office at all. It's up to you and your team to decide which method feels best.

✍️ **Encourage open feedback about meeting preferences.** When something isn't working, give people the safety they need to be able to speak up.

😊 **If budgets and schedules allow, encourage remote employees to join others during get-togethers, potlucks, dinners, etc.** If the team is geographically dispersed, consider budgeting for occasional travel to large team events.

 Bryan Hancock, global leader of McKinsey's talent management practice, says that "the office is the new off-site." When bringing team members together at the office, consider how you can **make the space as magical as a traditional off-site event**. That way, when remote employees do come to the office for work, everyone can get the most out of the experience.<sup>2</sup>

 **Create a culture of kudos.** Most people appreciate being recognized for the hard work they do. Set aside time during regular meetings for team members to sing each other's praises.

This does several things:

- We feel more connected when we're giving (and receiving) compliments. (Improved culture and social belonging.)
- Managers are more keyed into contributions they may not have been aware of. (Reduced proximity bias.)
- Many people are motivated by the positive vibe they get from hearing about their team's accomplishments. (Improved productivity.)
- Spontaneous collaborations can pop up when someone is working on a problem, and they find out through a kudos that their peer has already been working on a solution. (Spontaneous collaboration.)

## Sustaining your efforts

It's important to communicate regularly with team members to make sure your efforts are paying off. Set aside time during team meetings and 1:1s to check in with everyone. Listen earnestly to their feedback. When something isn't working, try something new.

Communication and flexibility are two of the biggest factors of any high-performing team.

## Your key takeaway

It takes a little effort to integrate remote and on-site employees, but it's worthwhile. When team members feel a strong sense of connection, they're more likely to be productive.

Remain flexible and open to feedback to ensure your team-building efforts stick.

## Over to you

What makes you feel more connected to your team? How can you keep that sense of connection on a hybrid team?

👉 Share your thoughts in the comments below.

# Include everyone, regardless of proximity

💡 "People who work remotely are more likely to get passed up for promotions."

Have you ever heard this argument in favor of return-to-work policies? There's some truth to this.

According to the UK Office for National Statistics, employees who work mainly from home tend to work more hours and use less sick time, but are less likely to earn bonuses or promotions.

📊 Between 2011 and 2020, **home workers were 37.7% less likely to receive a bonus and less than half as likely to receive a promotion.** That's despite taking 2.3 fewer days of sick leave per year and working 2.4 more hours per week of unpaid overtime.<sup>3</sup>

The problem is real. But sending everyone back to the office isn't the only way to solve it. We can come up with creative solutions to this face-to-face bias.

## What is face-to-face bias?

🧠 **Face-to-face bias**, also known as **proximity bias**, is when we assign more credit to people we work with in person than we do to people we work with remotely. It's a serious problem for hybrid teams.


### 🎬 Picture the scene

Dominique manages Anya (who works from the office) and Miguel (who works remotely).

Dominique sees Anya's activity more often and believes she works harder, even though she and Miguel do roughly equal work. That leads Dominique to give Anya better performance reviews.

🕒 A related problem is **time zone bias**.

Let's say Anya and Miguel are both remote, but Dominique and Anya share the same time zone. They're more likely to be active on messaging and email for overlapping times each day. Dominique sends a message to Anya and receives a response pretty quickly.

 Miguel responds to a similar number of messages, but they're asynchronous. Dominique doesn't have the same feeling of immediacy, and time stamps on messages aren't as easy to get a feel for as the sudden ding of a notification.

Dominique assumes Anya is more productive, even though she and Miguel both complete the same amount of work. She is more likely to consider Anya for bonuses and promotions.


The good news is that, like any bias, we can learn to recognize and stop face-to-face bias.


## Solving the problem

Sending everyone back to the office is one way to solve proximity bias. But that's like saying there's no better way, so we might as well remove remote work from the equation. In fact, it ignores the idea that it's a bias at all.

It's good to look for our own biases and admit when we have them. It's a step in the direction of learning and changing. Once we recognize it as a bias, we can change the way we view remote work.

On-site workers are perceived as working harder than their remote peers because their managers have an easier time following along with worker inputs.

 Dominique may spot Anya sitting at her desk, have a work-related conversation with her in the break room, and see her up close during team meetings. These are subtle suggestions to Dominique that Anya is working.

 She only sees Miguel when he speaks during virtual team meetings, 1:1s, and while reading his emails or messages. She doesn't have those water cooler moments with him, and his presence isn't as easy to feel. She doesn't think he works as hard because she doesn't see him as much.

The problem isn't with the nature of remote work. It's with Dominique's bias. She's paying more attention to what her employees are doing rather than how well it's being done.

If Dominique were to address her bias, she would measure Anya and Miguel's performance based on their output. She would use real data to find out how well each employee is

doing. With a common reference point, she'd be better placed to give a fair assessment to each team member.

When we measure outputs, not inputs, we're not just getting an idea of a team's overall productivity. We're also taking active steps toward defeating proximity bias. That brings us one step closer to having a productive hybrid team.

! **Bonus tip:** Another simple solution to proximity bias is to be intentional about meeting with remote workers more regularly. Even with our busy schedules, there can be time for regular check ins.

## Your key takeaway

Face-to-face bias is real, and it's a problem. We can't have a truly high-performing team if we're ignoring members' contributions.

Like any bias, when we recognize that we have it, we can take steps to eliminate it. One simple step to get rid of proximity bias is to remember to measure outputs, not inputs.

## Over to you

Have you ever experienced face-to-face bias? What impact did it have on you, or what impact can you imagine it might have on someone else?

 Share your thoughts in the comments below.

# Leading when you're not present

Hybrid leaders may not always keep the same hours as their team members. That's why it's important to set up your team to lead themselves when you're not available.

High-performing teams can function even when their leader isn't present. Whether you're working from a different office or are away on vacation, it's important to set up your team to be successful without your constant oversight.

**The key is to build on your team's connections and trust.** It's something you build up to over time, not a rule you can add the day before you leave. With proper set-up, your team should be able to function without you – whether that's for a few hours or a few days.

## Empower your team to lead each other

**✔ Make sure your team members feel comfortable reaching out to each other for support.**

Nobody is the expert on everything. Chances are good that someone on your team is a better person to ask for help than you on some topics.

Encourage your team members to ask each other for help. Once they're comfortable turning to each other, it'll be easier to remove yourself for a time without people wondering how to find support.

💬 "Jamal is our database expert. Why don't we check with him on this?"

**✔ Let them collaborate without your oversight.**

Our team members have more than just information to share with each other.

Empower them to reach out to each other for help with projects or to form new collaborations. Let them have the freedom to work out their schedules and determine the best tools for the job. If they need your input, they'll come to you.

Everything we've discussed so far about team building, trust, relationships and productivity connects here. If you've enabled open communication and teamwork up to this point, most people should feel comfortable teaming up without going through you first.

💬 "Madvi and Erin, feel free to work out the details of that report and just show it to me when you're done. I trust you to do a great job."

**✔ Allow everyone to take turns facilitating team meetings, so everyone has experience leading discussions.**

Let others set team meeting agendas when appropriate, or ask if anyone has something specific they'd like to share.


Strongly encourage each member to lead a meeting at least once but be respectful of anyone who doesn't feel comfortable.

👉 Be careful not to attribute negative biases to people who decline; it doesn't mean they're not top performers, just that they aren't comfortable leading group discussions.

**✔ Leave your regular team meetings on the calendar even when you plan to be away. Request volunteers to lead the meeting instead.**

Now that everyone has had a chance to practice facilitating a meeting, or at least had practice watching someone else facilitate, it'll be easier to step away. High-performing teams should be able to set their own agendas and handle the occasional meeting without you.

## Try This: Collaborative Speed Dating

 "Collaborative speed dating" is when a team mixes and matches pairs of people for short bursts of creativity. It's a great way to get teams comfortable working with one another, and you may be surprised at the great ideas that come from it.

*Try this in a team meeting.*

✔ **Step 1:** Split the team into pairs. Try using break-out rooms if your software supports them. Or have pairs connect in individual meetings before joining a big group meeting at the end.

Make sure every individual has access to the remote meeting. This is counter-productive if you only pair on-site workers with on-site workers and off-site workers with off-site workers.


✔ **Step 2:** Give them 5 to 10 minutes to brainstorm ideas about team goals or a project everyone's working on. Ask them both to take notes.

✔ **Step 3:** After time is up, rotate. Mix up the break-out room pairs or have people connect to a new meeting.

✔ **Step 4:** Repeat steps 1 to 3 several times. Try to allow time for at least three pairings.

✔ **Step 5:** Bring everyone back together to talk about the results. Ask people to share the idea of at least one other person they paired with, rather than their own ideas. (This should give everyone a chance to practice speaking up for their team members.)

✔ **Step 6:** Put some of the best ideas into practice.

 Trust, connections, practice working together, singing each other's praises, recognition and spontaneous collaboration. It's all coming together.

POLL

### How connected do you feel your team is?

*Nobody can see who voted*

Strongly connected

Somewhat connected

Okay, but we could use improvement

Not very connected

Completely disconnected


## Your key takeaway

Empowering regular collaboration and leadership within the team will pay off. Team members will be more engaged with one another, and you'll be able to relinquish some of the responsibility (and time commitment) of doing everything yourself.

That's in addition to all the benefits that connectedness has on wellbeing and productivity. It's win-win.

## Over to you

What other tips do you have for improving collaboration or trust?

 Share your thoughts in the comments section below.

## Take Action: Get a remote perspective

### To sum it up

With intention and practice, we can build strong team connections even when we don't all share the same space. Taking the time to get this right will pay off.

When teams feel connected and empowered, they're more likely to be autonomous and productive. That frees you up to do your own work (or to take a vacation without worrying about work 🍷).

## **Take Action: Get a remote perspective**

*Host a team meeting where you're remote and others are on-site. Take note of the challenges you face and the feelings that come up for you.*

✅ **Step 1:** Arrange a meeting where you dial in remotely, but at least a small group of workers are on-site.

If necessary, make sure beforehand that they have access to a meeting room with the technology you would normally use to host a hybrid meeting. This is important to remember if your team doesn't normally have clearance to access these tools on their own.

✅ **Step 2:** Host the meeting as you normally would, but from your new vantage point.

For maximum impact, make this a planning or brainstorming session and not just an informational meeting.

✅ **Step 3:** Pay attention to the challenges you face. Write them down.

- Was technology a problem?
- Did you have trouble hearing or being heard?
- Were you interrupted more than normal?

✅ **Step 4:** Get feedback

Afterwards, or at the end of the meeting, ask your team for their feedback. What differences did they notice?

✅ **Step 5:** Iterate

Use what you learned and the feedback to solve any challenges you face. Try this again after coming up with some potential solutions to see how things change.

👉 Take care not to let any biases influence your reflection.

Having difficulty with hybrid meetings doesn't mean they're bad and should be cancelled entirely. It means there's room for improvement.

Think about those workers who normally dial in remotely to hybrid meetings. What can you learn from them? Do you have empathy for their situation?

Do you think your experience would have been different if you weren't the meeting host?  
What if you weren't the one in control of the agenda and flow of the meeting?

## References

<sup>1</sup> McKinsey & Co, [What executives are saying about the future of hybrid work](#)

<sup>2</sup> McKinsey Live, [Getting hybrid work right: What employees are saying](#)

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics, [Homeworking hours, rewards and opportunities in the UK: 2011 to 2020](#)