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How to lead teams in a hybrid workspace



Knowledge Institute
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Table of Contents

Why focus on hybrid work?	4
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Tips for leading in a hybrid workspace	5
Plan intentional, flexible hybrid models.....	5
Leverage the benefits of co-located and remote work.....	7
Invest in training and education	8
Prioritize continuous, reliable communication.....	9
Model the values and vision.....	10
Make room for authentic, positive connections.....	11
Foster psychological safety.....	12

Hybrid meetings	13
-----------------	----

References	15
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Why focus on hybrid work?

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered all facets of our lives, including how we interact and work with colleagues and clients. In moving from crisis response to recovery planning, leaders have turned their attention to hybrid work – staff working both virtually and on site.

Over the past two years, agencies in the child and youth mental health and addictions sector (the sector) have not only transitioned to a hybrid service delivery model, but also a hybrid workspace. Leaders tell us they face opportunities and challenges in supporting their teams to thrive in a hybrid work environment.

Hybrid models present unique, complex challenges for leaders.^{1,2} Industry data shows that leaders in the hybrid environment feel disconnected from their teams and challenged to balance their own work responsibilities and staff expectations.³ New tools and methods are required to lead effectively in the face of change and continually innovate in the hybrid workspace.^{2,4,5} To thrive in this new workspace, leaders require strong communication, coordination, adaptability and emotional intelligence.^{2,5,6,7,8}

This document provides guiding principles, tips and examples from the sector to help leaders navigate the hybrid workspace and lead high-performing teams in this new environment. This resource is based on a rapid scan of academic literature, grey literature, industry articles and first-hand examples from Ontario agencies experiencing hybrid transitions.



Want to hear more from the experts?

The tips and examples in this resource are brought to life by sector leaders and industry experts in our webinars: [Leading in a hybrid workspace](#) and [Building routines, rituals and resilience in a hybrid workspace](#).

Tips for leading in a hybrid workspace

We have compiled several guiding principles to help leaders navigate the complexity of a hybrid workspace. Under each guiding principle, we have included action tips for leaders as well as a “sector secret” or example from the sector.

Plan intentional, flexible hybrid models

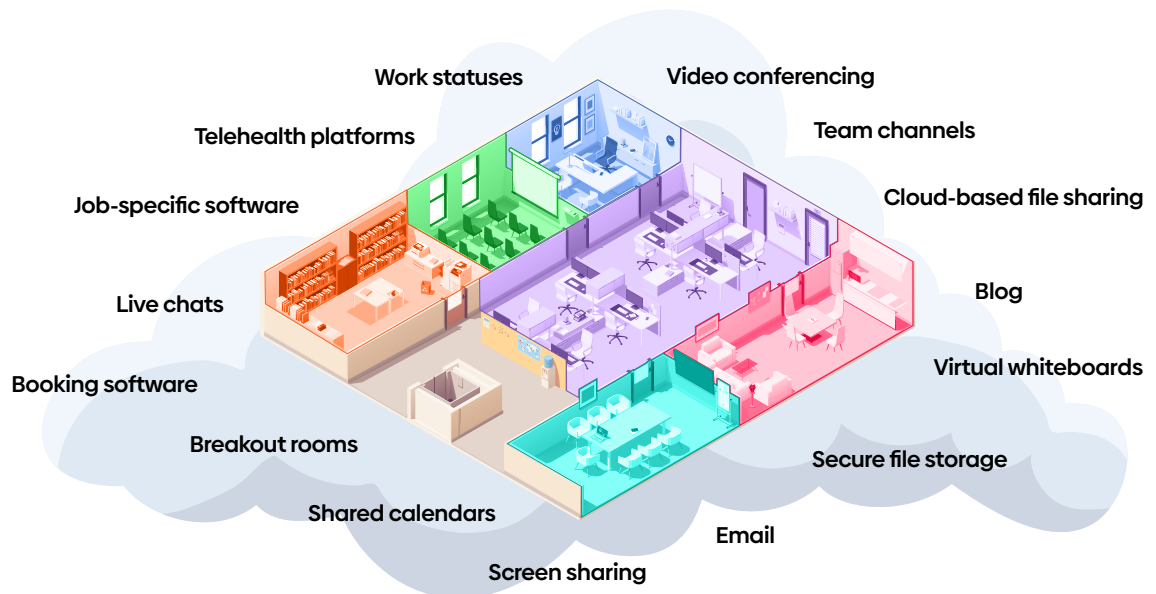
Hybrid work models should be fluid, allowing for modification based on employees’ needs and the agency’s goals. Now that we can proactively plan our hybrid work approach, it is important to think through hybrid models intentionally, and prioritize continued review, innovation and adaptation.^{5,7,9,10,11} The tension leaders are feeling between their responsibilities and the needs of their employees can be used to inspire innovative ideas and new, more effective approaches to work.⁵

- Independently, or with your staff, regularly reflect on opportunities, threats, challenges, successes and room for change within your hybrid model.^{5,6} This will allow you to identify and learn from challenges of the new work landscape.
- Pinpoint strengths and weaknesses of your hybrid approach by assessing the “5C challenges” of hybrid work by Martine Haas¹²: communication, coordination, connection, creativity, and culture. Rate your organization in each area on a simple scale and reflect on why you assign each rating. Make a committed plan to improve upon the weakest area first.



Sector secret: One agency created a F.L.O.W. (Future Location of Work) committee to support planning and logistics for a sustainable, flexible hybrid model. The committee was responsible for assessing risks and opportunities, ensuring alignment with strategic plans and organizing employee and partner surveys to gauge implications for hybrid staff and clients. This approach transformed hybrid work planning into an ongoing organizational priority and ensured all decisions regarding hybrid work were thoughtful, purposeful and grounded in staff feedback.

- Mirror your physical workspace in your digital workspace to enhance continuity and ease the transition between remote and on-site work. Digital and physical spaces should include areas for formal collaboration, informal connection, presentations, scheduling, and storage, as well as independent, synchronous and asynchronous work.⁷
 - All modes of work should be supported in all digital and physical spaces (working together, together; working together, apart; working apart, together; working apart, apart).¹³
 - You can accomplish this through video calls, breakout rooms, team channels, live chat spaces, asynchronous collaboration documents and virtual whiteboards, shared working documents, cloud storage systems or shared meeting calendars.



Leverage the benefits of co-located and remote work

Hybrid models thrive when in-person and remote work are leveraged for their unique strengths – in-person time for creativity, collaboration and socialization and remote work for focus, calm and flexibility. Successful models also consider how to best promote communication and collaboration. They consider what technology is used or not used, for what purpose and when.^{7,14}

- Coordinate hybrid models to leverage the benefits of face-to-face work (days for collaboration and connection) and the benefits of working from home (days for focus, calm and flexibility).
- Coordinate hybrid models with staff instead of dictating a pre-determined model to ensure that in-office days make sense, have purpose and meet individual needs. The benefit of one work mode may not be the same for every staff member.^{11,13} Ask staff:
 - How do you define successful hybrid work?
 - What does purposeful in-person work look like and feel like to you?
 - What does it feel like when a digital approach isn't meeting your needs?
- Consider having all staff or full teams in the office on the same days of the week to maximize the benefits of co-located work. The purpose of the physical office has been transformed by remote work. The office is now a unique place for activities with a special purpose – connecting, collaborating and being together.^{3,16}



Sector secret: One agency created a human resources decision tree that clearly and systematically pointed to where an employee should work according to their tasks, responsibilities, nature of work and available resources. This approach allowed leaders and staff to make quick, clear and informed decision about where to work and why.

Invest in training and education

There are new technical, managerial and job-specific skillsets required for productive and meaningful hybrid work.^{8,13,17,38} A certain level of technology literacy is required to support these competencies and presents an area for skill development.^{9,18}

- Create a work-from-home toolkit that includes quick guides, links to resources, training and educational material, to support consistency and help staff to feel empowered and informed.¹⁵
- Invest in education on virtual meeting facilitation, innovative collaboration methods, complex and adaptive leadership and training specific to technology that supports hybrid work. Look to staff and colleagues for inspiration on where to invest. Seek out resources that speak to their wants and needs.^{8,12,19,20}
- Provide specific training for all programs that are delivered virtually. This is especially important in our sector, to help staff develop confidence and competence in delivering these adapted services.^{15,18}



Sector secret: One agency held educational sessions for leaders on managing remote teams, leading through change, managing for results and strategic thinking. They also provided a work-from-home toolkit to all staff. The toolkit included essential hybrid work supports, including organization-specific policies and procedures, assessment and provision of technology needs for staff and clients, technology support and how-to videos, home office ergonomic training, health and wellness resources and funding to offset home office costs. This approach helped staff build their capacity for successful virtual work, as well as their confidence in using new tools, technology and skills in a hybrid environment.

Prioritize continuous, reliable communication

Clear communication and transparency foster engagement, trust and accountability. These approaches ensure that expectations are clear, which can ultimately drive productive performance.^{21,22,23} Honest communication can only be achieved when a leader is available and approachable.²⁴ Leaders can demonstrate interest and accountability by striving to maintain open dialogue with staff.

- Implement a virtual open-door policy through messaging software and hold regular team and individual meetings.^{8,15,23} Town hall meetings create a space for providing clear, consistent information to clients and staff and a forum for real-time questions and answers.
- Get to know employees' individual work needs, preferences and perceptions. You can achieve this through surveys or informal conversations. Better yet, map out employees' individual work situations to fully comprehend and visualize team norms and potential challenges.²⁵ This will help you understand your team, accommodate your hybrid approach and ultimately drive productivity.²⁶ This information can help you monitor any conflicts or challenges that are difficult to recognize in a virtual space.⁸
- Reserve space and time to speak about hybrid work. Build this into surveys, agenda items, town halls or team huddles, so staff are provided with space and time to think, discuss and connect over their experiences of hybrid work.^{15,22}



Sector secret: One agency created a portal for staff to submit concerns and criticisms to leadership, at any time, anonymously. This approach helped create an atmosphere of trust and transparency.

Model the values and vision

A distinctive and coherent organizational culture can influence work success and the ability to successfully work through change.²²

When employees can connect with the purpose and value of their work, engagement, retention and satisfaction are amplified.^{27,28} The move to hybrid work presents an opportunity for leaders to leverage staff insights into strong, motivational visions and goals.^{5,16} Leaders can seize this opportunity to model the work behaviors they hope to see among staff and demonstrate trust in their team's competence and ability to lead.

- Involve staff in the development of strategic plans, vision statements and goals, so they can collaborate, provide feedback and feel connected to the bigger picture, regardless of where they work.^{8,21} Engage with and act on staff feedback. Don't just collect feedback; listen to it and act on it transparently.^{15,22}
- Walk the talk of a strong hybrid culture by embodying the values of the organization and innovating to optimize the hybrid experience.^{16,19,22} Leaders set the tone for the culture of an organization.²¹
- Model work boundaries by explicitly stopping work at a specific time, starting work at a specific time and taking breaks. Be vocal about actioning these boundaries in your life.^{8,12,29}



Sector secret: One leader modeled one of their organization's values (authenticity) by adding a personal anecdote to the end of weekly updates. In these anecdotes, the leader shared their own perspective and experience of hybrid work, including challenges and concerns with work, balance and change. This approach not only modeled authenticity but also compassion and resilience. It highlighted the leader's appreciation for individual circumstances and life demands outside of work.

Make room for authentic, positive connections

Forming quality connections at work is as important as ever, but it can be more challenging to foster these connections in a hybrid workspace.^{3,32} Hybrid work has reduced the opportunities for spontaneous hallway and lunchroom conversations, lessening authentic connections and interactions between casual acquaintances or “weak ties”.^{14,16,30} Both authentic relationships and weak ties are important for career building, information sharing, well-being and sense of belonging.^{3,30,31,32} Additionally, virtual forms of communication hinder non-verbal reactions and increase self-conscious behavior. This can dampen social expression, humor and lightness in meeting environments³³, which can negatively impact genuine connection, well-being and intellectual safety.^{16,34} In the hybrid workspace, it’s important for leaders to deliberately make room for staff to have light-hearted interactions and positive social connections.¹⁴

- Schedule work-free coffee breaks, team huddles or wellness activities that prioritize making connections. Be prepared to take the lead, model engagement and schedule these activities during work hours. While staff can easily feel that social events are just an added obligation³, reliable, regular connection without work-related outcomes can keep staff from withdrawing from the workplace.⁷
- Positively acknowledge when work and home lines are blurred by hybrid work, for example, when a pet wanders into the screen frame, to normalize the experience and create an inclusive environment that is not excessively serious.¹¹⁵
- Recognize the contributions and accomplishments of each team member. Celebrate their unique abilities and successes.^{7,35} Genuine positive reinforcement can have an outstanding effect on performance, confidence and satisfaction.³⁵



Sector secret: One agency dedicated meeting time to socializing and sharing, rather than focusing on work outputs. This allowed staff to fill in a significant social void created by virtual work. Another organization implemented a “bright spots” board, where staff can share work highlights and give kudos to other staff members for their contributions. These bright spots are shared with the entire team on a weekly basis. This approach shows that small acts of consistent recognition can help prioritize positive thinking and sharing among colleagues, and time dedicated to socializing can provide much-needed cohesion and connection among staff.

Foster psychological safety

A desirable work culture is underpinned by psychological safety. Leaders can support this by cultivating individual and collective trust, so staff feel they can speak up, express challenges, and truly be heard, respected and recognized for their contributions.^{1,36} This means leaders in the hybrid workspace must listen hard, and strive to embody respect, cooperation, care and compassion.^{7,21,37} Leaders can foster trust through responsiveness, empathy, accountability, connection and support.^{7,21,37} Leaders should strive to be attentive and present, set clear expectations, nurture inclusivity and actively recognize biases.^{11,38}

- Turn off devices and notifications during virtual meetings, just as you would in person, to enhance presence.^{8,39} Discourage multitasking, which can hinder performance, concentration and connection.^{39,40}
- Deliberately disrupt lines being drawn between in-person and remote workers. Start by avoiding group labels and “us versus them” language.^{8,11,23,33} Staff need to feel valued and respected for their differences²⁷, not called out according to them. Try shifting your perspective from “the office” to “an office” and envision remote and on-site staff as one team across many satellite locations.¹⁶
- Prioritize ongoing discussions with staff regarding biases and challenges inherent to hybrid work, and how these intersect with diversity, equity and inclusion at your organization.^{11,27} Keep these conversations open and constructive. Take care to listen to differing and challenging opinions and encourage discussion around sensitive topics.^{5,16,22,41}



Sector secret: One agency created and shared clear protocols for communication, work boundaries and inclusion in the hybrid workspace. The protocols detailed expected response times, work hours and breaks, work-life boundaries, time off, appointments, missed meetings, giving and receiving feedback, meeting preparation, minutes and follow-up, spontaneous video calls and the purpose of various communication methods.^{8,18,42,43} These protocols equipped staff with the necessary information and clarified expectations for hybrid work.

Hybrid meetings

Hybrid meetings present unique challenges for everyone in the hybrid workspace. Here are some specific considerations to help leaders optimize hybrid meetings.

Reconsider the need for a meeting.

- Microsoft shows a “252% increase in the time spent in meetings for the average Team’s user since February 2020.”³ Virtual meeting fatigue and overload are real concerns and obstacles for hybrid leaders and staff.^{39,44,45,46,48}
- Hybrid collaboration and hybrid meetings are not one in the same.¹⁷ Many collaboration activities can take place in other creative, virtual ways that happen asynchronously, streamline output, and increase inclusion, equity and efficiency.^{17,47}
- Question whether a meeting is really required, or if another method for collaboration can be used.^{8,14}

Take breaks.

- Schedule time for short breaks between meetings to recharge cognitive and regulatory resources, reduce compounded stress of back-to-back meetings, and more effectively engage in meetings themselves.^{39,48}
- Start meetings five minutes later and end meetings five minutes early, when possible, to allow for a break.
- Reflect on your current practices and plan for how to incorporate short breaks and foster recovery during that time, as strong recovery relies on strong self-regulation.

Adapt to primary room dominance.

- Hybrid meetings hide social cues and can dampen regular social interaction. Lack of reactions from remote participants can lead others to question their engagement and participation.³³
- Paying more specific attention to virtual attendees than co-located individuals, based on the idea that body language and facial expressions are diminished for the virtual audience, making their experience more difficult and stressful.^{39,45,49}
- Ensure communication resembles a round table, where everyone has a space at the physical table, with virtual attendees at the head.⁷

Consider virtual-first.

- A great equalizer is having everyone connect the same way.^{1,46}
- In meetings meant to mirror working together, have all attendees – even those in the same room – turn video on and use their own device to connect. This fosters inclusion by making the perspective and experience similar and relatable for all staff and providing remote staff with a clear view of all attendees.^{43,46}
- Be explicit in meeting invitations whether a meeting will be camera-on or camera-off, so attendees come prepared.⁷

Anticipate disruption.

- Breakdowns in technology can reveal otherwise invisible weakness in organization, structure, leadership, collaboration and psychological safety.³³
- Develop a streamlined, systematic plan for technological disruptions so no one is made to feel lost or embarrassed.¹⁸

Use offsite meeting buddies.

- Pair a co-located individual with a remote individual for each meeting. The remote individual then has a real-time connection to the meeting, ensuring they can contribute, ask questions and stay interrelated with the physical space.^{1,47}
- Debrief meetings in a designated, online space so offsite staff are not left out or missing any information. When spontaneous meetings do occur, make sure to invite offsite staff or update them in the debrief area immediately.

Invest in hybrid technology.

- Hybrid meetings require a robust central system that can house resources, documents, and up-to-date information.
- The central system can facilitate synchronous and asynchronous communication, so staff working anywhere can feel involved, heard and up to date.^{7,33,47,50}
- Ensure your technical infrastructure makes communication and connection between remote and in-person staff seamless, reliable and equitable.

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