

# How to help off-site and co-located direct reports work together as a team

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You're supposed to be managing a *single* team, right? Yet lots of managers feel like their team has two distinct cultures: one for those in the office and another for those who work remotely.

So what can you do to shrink this cultural divide and prevent co-located and remote direct reports from feeling marooned on either side? Plenty!



## 1. As a team, openly discuss the benefits and challenges of remote work.

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People's views and experiences with remote work are way too varied to operate under the dangerous assumption that you all share the same understanding of how it may affect the team. By initiating group discussions — perhaps in monthly or quarterly video lunches — about what remote work means for everyone involved, people will become more sympathetic, accommodating, and prepared to find solutions to challenges (e.g., finding good days or times to collaborate across multiple locations) and will capitalize on benefits (e.g., the chance to hone their communication skills and get a fresh perspective).

You can start a conversation regardless of whether your team recently added remote members or has had some for a while. For example, if you've long had remotes, you could kick things off by saying:

*"Some of you have been working remotely for a while, and I thought it might be helpful for the whole team to check in about what's working well and what we could all be doing better to make things better for one another. Sound OK?"*

You won't be done after this initial talk. Keep the discussion going over time so that your team finds solutions that work for them.

## 2. For co-located teams who sometimes work from home, try to have the team in the office at the same time at least half the week.

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As Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson write in *Remote*, “If you ask people where they go when they really need to get work done, very few will respond ‘the office.’” Enter an easy fix: working from home. But how often? Research suggests that if team members see one another only one or two days a week, the team’s dynamics could erode — progress reports and feedback requests, for example, can become less habitual.

Put careful thought into creating work-from-home schedules that allow for your team to get plenty of time together. That said, you don’t want to indiscriminately insist on “together time.” Extenuating circumstances (e.g., team members who are new parents, or have an arduous commute, or need a few weeks of quiet time to focus on a big solo project, or have roles that force them to be working in the field) might outweigh the potential benefits.

### **3. Be an active facilitator during virtual meetings (or ask a team member to play the role).**

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Ah, virtual meetings. They’re often rife with technical glitches and frustrating delays. Co-located team members who forget to look at the screen and inadvertently freeze out those who aren’t in the room. Remotes who aren’t sure when to jump in with a comment, or who give up trying and zone out.

Not on your watch! By becoming an active facilitator, or assigning the role to someone else on the team, you can keep these pesky issues from derailing your meetings and causing low-level friction to build up between remote and co-located teammates. Focus on the issues specific to virtual interactions:

- Have co-located participants join the video meeting (with disconnected audio) so that faces appear equally on the screen for remote and co-located participants.
- Explain and interpret for remotes what’s happening in the room that they can’t perceive (e.g., “*Rosa just got up to close the door.*”)
- Ask follow-up questions to ensure everyone speaks. This is critical. And hard. It requires knowing which questions are relevant for which team members, keeping track of who hasn’t expressed anything yet, reining in meeting monopolizers — and putting it all together in the moment.

For more tips, see [How to run a really good meeting with remote workers](#) and [Zipp’s tips: How to stop lecturing and start facilitating team meetings](#).

### **4. Set remote-friendly expectations around team communication tools like calendars and online status.**

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Remote team members can’t see that a colleague stepped away from his desk for only a moment — or that a higher up stopped by and took you into a conference room for an uninterruptible hour. And the more time those remotes spend helplessly waiting for replies or

hesitating over whether to reach out, the less time they spend on the project you need the team to finish this month.

Just a few ways to increase visibility for all:

- Share your calendars (and avoid that generic “busy” indicator that prevents remotes from distinguishing whether a peer is on an important call or just doing some reading).
- Adopt standard online statuses — available, lunch, BRB, on a call, coding, travel, or whatever makes sense for your team. Discourage people from using an “invisible” status.
- Set the tone by conscientiously updating your own calendar and status.
- If any team members drag their feet about adopting another tool, make time for them to learn how to use them.
- And when calling out direct reports for not following team practice, remind them why it’s important: *“Posting our statuses and calendars makes us more transparent about when we’re accessible and helps remote team members feel more included.”*

## **5. Budget for and carefully organize in-person interactions.**

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Bringing your team together, in the flesh, can be hard to plan. But it’s often worth it. You get more laughter. More of those over-the-shoulder, “Hey look at this,” chats that lead to eye-popping insights. Stronger team ties. Higher trust. In other words, the ingredients of an effective, high-performing team — and maybe fewer dispute- or turnover-induced headaches, too.

Try to bring remote team members in more often than just for obvious events, like onboarding and performance evaluations, but not so much that the travel or commute burden weighs them down (you can also lighten the load by going to see *them* sometimes). Also, maximize a visit’s impact by ensuring as many co-located team members as possible will be in the office when remote people visit. (This might mean asking co-located direct reports to swap a few work-from-home days.)

Lastly, be sure you’re prepared for the full team with more workspaces, desks, and ID badges. Nothing says, “You don’t count” quite like scrambling to find a place for a jet-lagged remote to sit when he or she shows up.

## **6. When remote team members are on site, schedule one purely social team event.**

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With so much work to catch up on when your remotes are on site, it’s easy to overlook the less formal interactions that remotes are also missing out on. But social time can strengthen team understanding and connection and, because people are typically less guarded, offer a

true glimpse into how your remotes are really feeling about their work lives — and lives in general.

What should you schedule? A team lunch might be your best bet. Sure, if you have the funds and time maybe you can schedule a dinner, happy hours, a ski trip. But remember that your remote team members may have already had to travel. They're likely busy with meetings, possibly jet-lagged, and may be hoping for a chance to explore a place they rarely see.

## **7. Share news virtually — and encourage others to do the same.**

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You probably don't realize how much news comes to you every day when you're on-site — and never makes it out of the building. Your manager stops by your team's area and shares her takeaways from last week's conference. You take a tough customer call that your co-located team members overhear and learn from. A co-located team member, after going to lunch with someone from another department, mentions a possible new project they discussed. The reality is that remote team members are almost always the last to know, limiting their opportunity to expand, elevate, or deepen the team's conversation.

Don't shrug and accept this. Fight it with the myriad online collaboration tools in your arsenal. Summarize and post news that's relevant (or just plain interesting) to your remotes. Experienced manager [Shahan Mohideen](#) says the burden need not fall completely on your shoulders. "I delegate it," he says. "Any time there's any sort of news or tidbit of advice shared among co-located team members, I specifically ask someone to share it with remote team members, too." Encourage this often enough, and soon your team will share out of habit.

## **8. Suggest that co-located and remote team members pair up for work and/or virtual chats.**

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[Gallup has long reported](#) that having a best friend at work is one of their better predictors of workplace engagement and productivity. Cheesy though it may sound, human connection invigorates us and brightens our days. Plus, team members don't want to let down a trusted colleague — especially someone who's also invited them to their wedding. However, it's often harder for remote workers, who are physically isolated, to cultivate strong working relationships.

To help foster connections, consider pairing work buddies based on coaching opportunities — for instance, asking your remote sales veteran to mentor a new hire. Or, you could simply suggest that remotes pair up for virtual coffee chats with team members they share something in common with, even if it's that they're both remote. And beware of assuming that someone is adequately self-sufficient or too tricky to befriend. That just perpetuates a cycle — Dan is considered independent, shy, or grumpy, so no one bothers to get to know him, and he remains isolated.

## **9. Encourage co-located team members to seek feedback from remote team members, and vice versa.**

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A lot of feedback happens in the moment — for those in the room, that is. Since your remotes aren't, they frequently miss out on spontaneous sessions (“*Hey, got a sec?*”), as well as opportunities to weigh in on group decisions. This isn't just bad for them. It's bad for the entire team to operate without the different perspectives your remotes can bring to various projects. Also, explaining an idea over the phone or online gives team members a chance to flex a fuller set of communication skills, since they can't rely on nonverbal cues and visual aids.

Look for opportunities to build a robust feedback culture on your team: When co-located or remote team members have an interesting idea that might benefit from further input, suggest they present it to a distant peer. You can also model this behavior yourself, and give reinforcing feedback when you notice a direct report proactively involving colleagues, regardless of their location. For more see [5 ways to build a feedback culture](#).

## **10. Devise and deploy a range of celebrations that include remote team members.**

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When your co-located team members achieve something, they get high-fives, applause, or even a toast. Whereas your remote team members are more likely to get a few generic words on a chat tool. Over time, this massive inequity can breed massive resentment, causing your remotes to feel so under-appreciated that they're less motivated.

Wise managers proactively try to level the playing field a bit. For example:

- When remote team members are in the office, revisit some of their past, bigger accomplishments — the ones that were only celebrated virtually.
- If your team likes getting creative, urge them to come up with ways to share the love despite the distance. You could even make it an informal contest, voting on ideas — from the thoughtful (e.g., a signed card and gift card), to the silly (e.g., a singing telegram), to the personalized (e.g., a video message from the team posted to your team's chat channel).
- Include remote team members when celebrating the accomplishments of co-located team members, too — live over video or with follow-up posts.

## **11. Set a recurring calendar reminder to assess and address your team's remote culture.**

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If you truly want your co-located and remote team members to remain unified over time, you'll need to consciously pursue that goal. Add a reminder to your calendar to assess your team's remote culture (maybe on a quarterly basis) and build it into your regular team

evaluations.

Pay particular attention to what's changed over time. For example, did team member Usain's departure leave remote Remy without a virtual coffee buddy and he's too shy to ask for someone new? Are some team members growing lax with keeping their statuses updated? Is there a new technology for enabling virtual meetings that's worth exploring? Over time, you might even create a checklist to review based on your team's patterns around remote work.

Next: [Common mistakes](#)

## **Was this article helpful?**

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