Employee Engagement

Keeping Hybrid Employees Engaged

by Clara Shih

August 11, 2022

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Summary.   These days, proximity is harder to come by than ever. Even employees who do go into the office may find it empty or populated by coworkers they barely know due to hoteling or hot-desk arrangements. As evidenced by employee engagement surveys, burnout, and attrition across industries, employees' social and emotional needs are no longer being met. Managers are in the best position to tackle this problem because of the personal relationships they have with each member of their team. But managers themselves need more support. Company leaders and HR teams must support managers with specialized onboarding, training, metrics, and ready-to-use FAQs and playbooks. In these dynamic times, corporate leaders also need to grant managers greater autonomy to cut through some of the bureaucratic red tape and make the right decisions to support their employees in real time. Once managers have the support they need, they can take steps outlined in this article to foster emotional connection, team bonding, and fun to compensate for the loss of proximity in the office.   **close**

To this day, some of my closest friends are people I met at various jobs over the course of my career. Before the pandemic, every day I looked forward to seeing friends at work, going out to lunch, getting coffee, being in meetings together, and having impromptu hallway conversations. These friendships transformed what work meant to me — it wasn't just work, it was life.

In sociology, the "proximity principle" describes the tendency for people to form interpersonal relationships with those who are nearby. We often become friends with people we encounter regularly, energizing and bringing joy to each other and sharing a smile, an inside joke, or drinks after work.

It turns out these friendships really matter for employee engagement. A now-famous Gallup survey found that employees who have a best friend at work are seven times more likely to be engaged at their job. For years prior to the pandemic, companies benefited from the proximity principle. Many leaders further invested in office layouts, micro kitchens, and team events to encourage even more shared moments and were rewarded with a workforce that was highly engaged.

Then Covid happened. These days, proximity is harder to come by than ever. Even employees who do go into the office may find it empty or populated by coworkers they barely know due to hoteling or hot-desk arrangements. As evidenced by employee engagement surveys, burnout, and attrition across industries, employees' social and emotional needs are no longer being met. People feel isolated and fatigued working from home, yet most (81%, according to a Harvard Business School survey) don't want to give up the flexibility of not having to come in every day.

In this new reality, how can leaders fill their employees' cup? How do we provide autonomy and flexibility while fostering togetherness? How can we balance social interaction with efficiency, since no one likes long meetings? We need something to replace the daily social dopamine hit we used to get from interacting with coworkers in the office — but as we've experienced over the last two years, more emails and Zoom happy hours aren't going to do the trick. So, what will?

The Growing Importance of One-on-One Interactions

Employee experience can be viewed as the combination of an "air game" (of one-to-many interactions) and "ground game" (of one-to-one and one-to-few interactions). Leadership teams set the strategy and provide air cover with corporate brand, culture, values, and policies such as compensation philosophy, parental leave, return-to-office mandates, and more. The ground game is what employees experience day-to-day with their managers, peers, and direct reports. As Bob Sutton and Huggy Rao describe in one of my favorite books, *Scaling Up Excellence*, the ground game involves managers going out in the field, walking the talk, meeting with people, and confronting real problems on the ground. Contrast that with air-game tactics like company-wide email blasts.

While companies need to have both an air game and ground game, it's very hard, if not impossible, for a corporate leadership team to facilitate deep connection from the top down. In today's

virtual and hybrid work reality, employee engagement and human connection are a person-to-person ground game. To illustrate the point, imagine an electrifying in-person company all-hands, or the last live concert you went to. Now try to imagine watching the same all-hands or concert on your computer. Even if you're lucky enough to not have distractions or disciplined enough to not be multitasking, the online experience is nowhere close. In a remote work environment, the ground game becomes more important than ever in driving employee experience, engagement, and loyalty.

Managers Are the Answer — and They Need Support

Managers are in the best position to initiate and facilitate these tactics because of the personal relationships they have with each member of their team. But managers themselves need more support. A Gallup study showed that those in management positions have taken a greater mental health hit than individual contributors. Over the last two years, many newly promoted managers in particular have been overwhelmed by having to suddenly manage remote workers facing health and childcare issues, relocation, and a slew of other personal challenges.

To succeed in the ground game, company leaders and HR teams must support managers with specialized onboarding, training, metrics, and ready-to-use FAQs and playbooks, such as what to do when an employee stops engaging during team meetings or has a family member who gets sick. In these dynamic times, corporate

leaders also need to grant managers greater autonomy to cut through some of the bureaucratic red tape and make the right decisions to support their employees in real time. With continually evolving Covid mandates and office policies, many situations are unprecedented and urgent, so managers need to be trusted to make the correct decisions in the moment in addition to knowing where to go if additional support is required.

How Managers Can Keep Teams Engaged in a Hybrid Environment

Once managers have the support they need, they can take steps to foster emotional connection, team bonding, and fun to compensate for the loss of proximity in the office. Here are a few:

Have shared commitment and mutual expectations.

In the highest-trust relationships and highest-performing teams, each person commits to what can be expected of them so that the other can support, amplify, and help hold them accountable. In a remote setup, this extends beyond metrics like OKRs to include explicitly where, when, and how individuals prefer to work.

Earlier this year, every team across Salesforce Service Cloud created a working agreement to document each team member's needs and preferences. Often, an individual may belong to multiple teams: a team of peers (their manager plus their manager's direct reports), their team of direct reports (if they're a manager), and perhaps a scrum team. A working agreement

should be created for each and may differ — for example, a scrum team needs to meet more often than a team of managers each running separate projects.

Check in often.

The tidbits of life news and body language we're used to picking up from physical proximity are now gone or drastically diminished, so managers need to be more deliberate about creating space for team members to share — perhaps dedicating part of staff meetings to checking in on life updates or having a Slack prompt inviting everyone to share a photo from their summer. One of the Service Cloud leadership team's highest-engagement (and most fun) Slack threads last year was everyone sharing a photo from Halloween.

Because so much meaning can get lost or easily misinterpreted in text or email, I'm also a big believer in picking up the phone. I make it a point to call or text each person on my direct team (or vice-versa) at least once every few days, even if it's just to say hi and let them know I'm thinking about them. Bring the team together to decide what kinds of updates, requests, and sharing should happen over email or Slack versus in real time over the phone or on video.

Meet in person regularly.

Always have the next in-person meeting planned so the team has something to look forward to. Save contentious debates and collaboration-heavy work for those meetings. Spend extra time planning offsites, which are higher-ROI than ever, as they now need to generate enough team social capital to last between in-person meetings. I've found that first-time managers often need extra coaching and support to plan and execute their first offsite. Leaders should invest the time in sharing best practices as well as providing input, feedback, and encouragement.

Show appreciation frequently in large and small ways.

Without the smiles, nods, and other nonverbal cues we used to give our coworkers in the office on a daily basis, we now have to be more deliberate about giving praise. This was a lesson I learned when starting a new job during the pandemic in late 2020. Due to stringent Covid policies at the time, I didn't meet any of my coworkers in person for over six months. At one point, one of the highest-performing VPs in my organization asked me during a one-on-one whether I thought he was doing a good job. He was (and is) doing an incredible job, and I told him so, but I was taken aback by the question. I realized then how little he must have felt he knew me and what I think, especially in contrast to if we'd been in the office together day-in and day-out. Thanks to this experience, I try to be much more deliberate now about giving out

recognition frequently, celebrating the small wins, and encouraging all the managers across my organization to do the same.

Find a way to be together while apart.

Shared context bonds people together, and Covid has forced us to take a fresh and creative approach to team building. One of the most enjoyable evenings I had during the pandemic was a virtual Italian dinner with my team and our cross-functional partners. Though the 12 of us live in seven different places, we all enjoyed the same bottle of wine (shipped to each person ahead of time) and menu (from a local Italian restaurant in each person's city). It was almost as good as being together in person and something we can do much more frequently than flying everyone to the same location. Another memorable moment was celebrating the holidays together last December with a beautiful virtual musical performance by one of our team members.

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Not only are new methods required to address employees' social and emotional needs, who carries out these methods is shifting from traditional corporate structures (air game) to the line managers running important ground plays. Providing employees with space, flexibility, and psychological safety isn't enough — companies need to go beyond these table stakes to offer today's

remote and hybrid workers experiences that address their human need for the authentic connection, team bonding, and fun that used to come with in-person proximity at the office.

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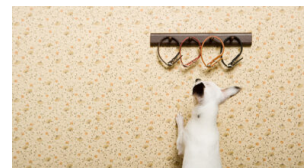
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