

Hybrid Workforce Mastery-Leadership in the Post-Pandemic Era

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A multi-faceted transformation of work has taken place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The remote work experiment that began in earnest in early 2020 is becoming the new normal across virtually all organizations around the globe by the end of 2025, as the traditional office and home work environments become the hybrid workplace, where employees will spend part of their time in physical offices and part of their time remotely. As such, the hybrid workplace, originally thought of as a temporary measure during the pandemic, has become a defining characteristic of today's organizational life. This report explores how leaders can adapt their mindsets, skill sets, and organizational practices to succeed with the hybrid workforce. Using the most up-to-date academic research and empirical data from multiple surveys, we identify critical competencies that are unique to effective hybrid leaders when compared to those who are struggling. In addition, we provide a framework for developing these capabilities on a large scale. We argue that the post-pandemic world will not only require leaders to do more than they did before but will also require leaders to lead differently [1].

Key Insight

Gartner (2023) identifies that organizations with intentionally developed hybrid leadership frameworks report 27% higher employee retention rates, 21% greater levels of productivity, and 34% better talent acquisition results than do organizations that rely on ad hoc hybrid work arrangements [3].

The New Topology of Work

From Emergency to Strategy

At the onset of the pandemic, there was an immediate move to working from home due to the need to restrict movement during lockdowns. That is to say that many organizations simply did what they could to keep their operations running with new use of technologies like Zoom, MS Teams and Slack. As the pandemic progressed and the number of infected people remained stable (along with people getting vaccinated), organizations were faced with a more complex strategic question to address; what should work look like in the future?

According to McKinsey Global Institute, more than 50% of knowledge workers in advanced economies now work under a hybrid work model - that is, they are working in the office 2 - 3 days a week and working remotely the other days [2]. This makes for a significantly different management style than that

which has been used in the past; managers now need to manage employees who are in the office and those who are working remotely, and oftentimes, both types of employees will be involved in the same meeting or in the same project team.

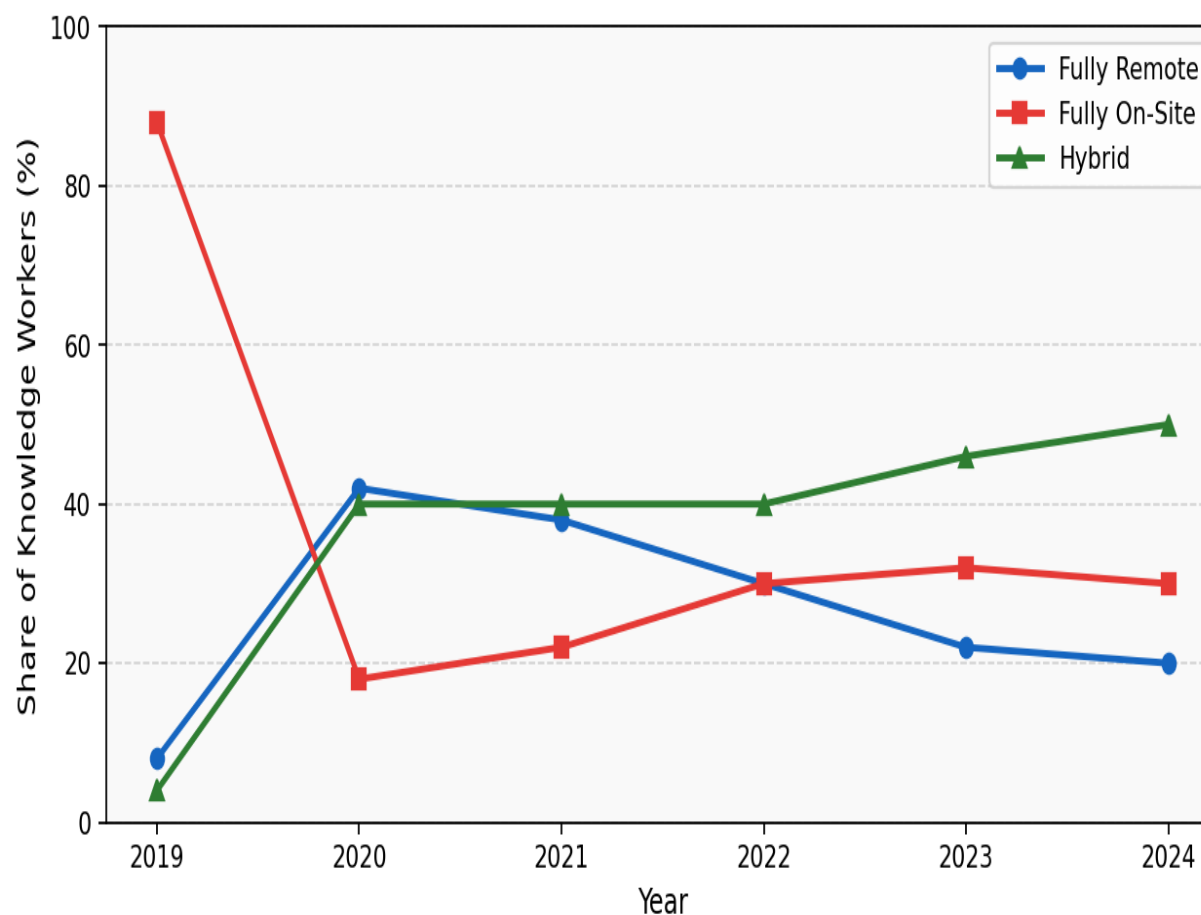


Figure 1: Global work model adoption trends among knowledge workers (2019–2024). hybrid arrangements surpassed fully remote work by 2021 and continued growing through 2024. source: Mckinsey global institute (2024); gallup state of the American workplace (2024)

Figure 1 shows the growth of the hybrid work model, with the peak of 100% remote working in 2020 at approximately 42% of knowledge workers; then declining to 0% in Dec 2022 due to the redesign of collaboration strategies. In comparison to the fully remote working arrangement, the hybrid model has increased from 0% prior to the pandemic to an estimated 50% by the year 2024, while the fully in-office arrangement has remained stable at approximately 30% - significantly lower than pre-pandemic levels of 88%.

The Coordination Tax

According to the structural and process theorists, hybrid working is subject to various organizational coordination costs. When working in a hybrid system, employees (both at home or at work) will face problems synchronizing with 3 different locations (home, office & hybrid) [4]. For example, those working from an office may have the benefit of spontaneous interaction with other employees in their company, while those working remotely are less likely to have this same benefit. Managerial proximity/interaction (a.k.a "proximity" bias) creates disadvantages for remote employees in addition to the asymmetrical nature of working/remotely in the workplace.

If leaders do not actively attempt to create these inequalities, the result is the creation of "two-tiered" worksites. The resulting lack of inclusivity; as well as the decreased feelings of psychological safety exhibited by remote workers lead to higher

levels of attrition among the best, most talented and mobile employees.

The Hybrid Leadership Imperative

Why Traditional Leadership Fails in Hybrid Settings

Historically, walking around; mentoring informally; observing/monitoring performance in real-time; and coaching in spontaneous ways were hallmarks of successful leadership. Because of how heavily the workplace relies on being in a physical environment for these functions, those who work in hybrid environments will miss out on these types of leadership. As documented in Microsoft's WorkLab (2022) Report, there is a significant perception issue in measuring productivity in hybrid environments for managers. The majority of managers believe that they lack methods in determining how to treat both remote and in-person employees equally. Not only are these perceptions causing difficulty for managers to measure productivity, but they also create consequences associated with how well employees perform, who receives promotions, and whether there is a cohesive team.

The Competency Gap

Figure 2 maps the gap between competencies that HR leaders consider critical for hybrid leadership and the self-reported proficiency of managers in those same competencies. The data

reveal a consistent and troubling shortfall across all five dimensions examined.

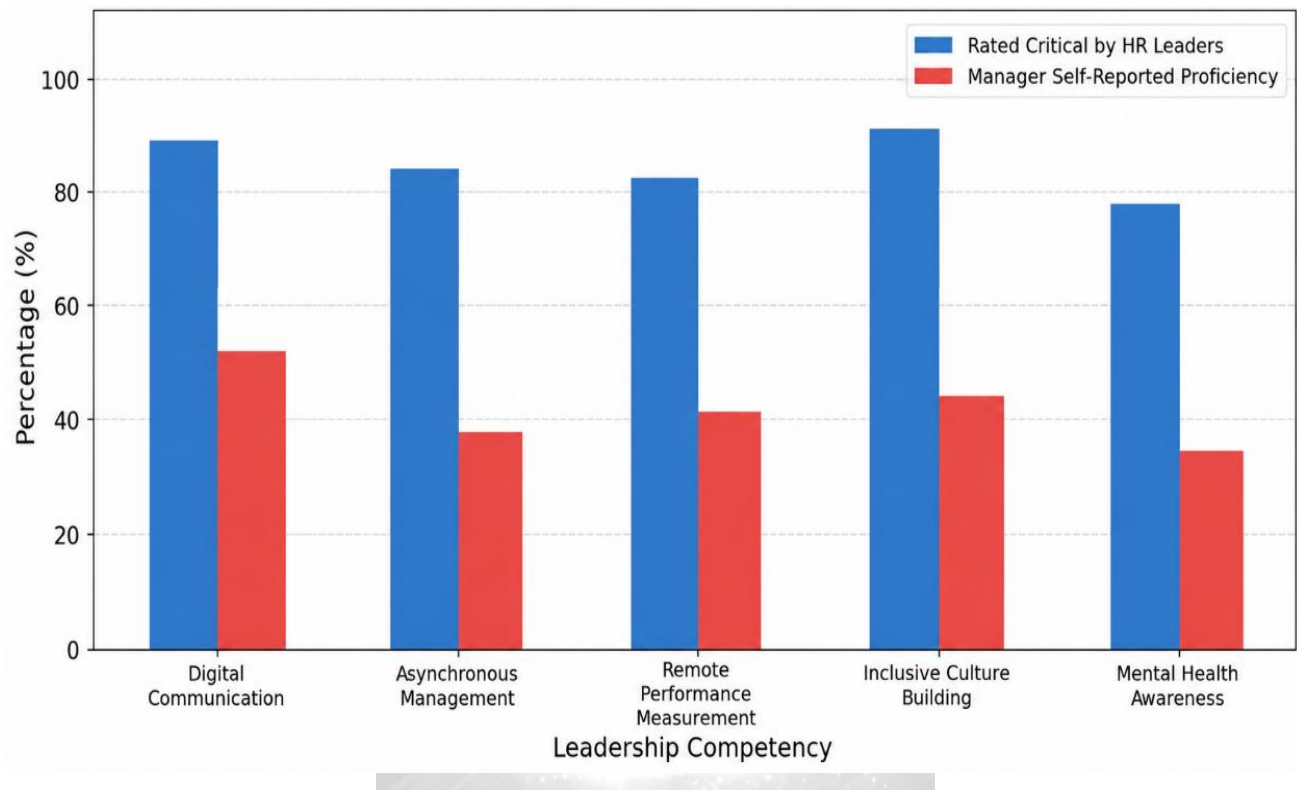


Figure 2: Hybrid leadership competency gap (2023). bars represent the percentage of HR leaders rating each skill as critical versus the percentage of managers rating themselves as proficient. source: gartner HR survey (2023); SHRM hybrid work leadership report (2023)

The gap between the competencies HR leaders views as necessary for hybrid leadership and managers view themselves as proficient in is mapped in figure 2. There continues to be a gap across all five dimensions examined. The largest gap was in Asynchronous Management (84% critical vs. 38% proficient) and Mental Health Awareness (78% critical vs. 35% proficient).

These results suggest that although organizations have identified the behaviors needed to effectively lead in a hybrid environment, they have not developed those competencies in their managers through an institutionalized skill development process. The gap in competencies is a skill development infrastructure problem, not a knowledge issue.

A Framework for Hybrid Leadership Mastery

The CARE Framework

Through the analysis of the relevant literature from academia and practice, we developed the CARE framework to organize

hybrid leadership development as summarized in table 1. Each domain of the CARE framework is interconnected and supports the development of leadership capabilities.

Table 1: CARE framework

Communication (C)	Autonomy (A)	Results (R)	Equity (E)
Mastering digital and asynchronous communication tools; establishing clear norms for responsiveness and transparency.	Designing work structures that empower employees to manage their own time, location, and task sequencing.	Shifting from presence-based to outcomes-based performance management, anchored to clear metrics.	Ensuring equivalent development opportunities, visibility, and inclusion for all employees regardless of location.

Communication: The Connective Tissue of Hybrid Teams

The most significant design choice a hybrid leader can make is to establish the norms for effective communication. When teams are not co-located, the flow of information must be designed specifically. Hybrid teams that excel have at least three common traits: they document all decisions asynchronously; they tend to provide too much contextual information, rather than assuming that team members have the same level of understanding; and they create distinct channels for different types of communication - video conferencing to build relationships and solve complicated problems, and async messaging for providing updates or coordinating routine tasks. To aid in this process, leaders should create a "communication charter" for their teams, which is a continuously updated record that defines expected response times, preferred channels for particular types of messages, applicable meeting protocols, and

applicable documentation procedures. Harvard Business School researcher Tsedal Neeley found that teams that had explicit communication agreements exhibited significantly greater levels of trust and lower levels of conflict than teams without any formalized communication protocol.

Autonomy and the Shift to Asynchronous Management

The industrial-age management model of close supervision and ongoing performance monitoring simply does not work in a hybrid work environment. Hybrid managers who are effective view autonomy as a good thing, not as a threat. In order to do this successfully, managers must make a considerable shift in their management style; they must spend extra time upfront creating role definitions and establishing goal parameters - letting employees work independently, rather than relying on continual check-ins.

Examples of practical measures include:

- Replacing weekly status meetings with weekly written status reports, allowing all team members to maintain focus on their work regardless of their time zone.
- Having one location for all of a team's collaborative projects (e.g., Notion, Asana, Monday.com), which allows managers to have instant access to the project's status without requiring a synchronous meeting with the team.
- Publicly declare a defined set of delegations that outline decision-making authority based on staff member's level of seniority and minimize delays for staff members attempting to get things done by making sure staff members are able to make decisions without getting 'stuck'.
- Create structured coaching conversations around employee performance, either quarterly or bi-annually. This eliminates the need for informal performance coaching during hallway meetings

Results-Based Performance Management

The most important change needed in the culture of the hybrid organization is the way they measure performance. Organizations must begin to measure performance based on results rather than presence, and require a renewed focus on goal setting and performance. When there are no specific goals and/or timeframes associated with delivering against those goals,

managers will typically rely on observable behaviours to measure how well employees are performing (i.e., their physical presence in the office, who responds to calls and emails the fastest). Reliance on observable behaviours as proof of productivity will create systemically disadvantageous conditions for remote or virtual employees. Organizations adopting OKRs (Objectives and Key Results) as a framework from which to build their remote workplace (popularized by both Google & Intel) provides an established framework for taking organizational strategy and developing measurable individual and team responsibilities that can be assessed separate from the location of work performed. Organizations using OKRs consistently within a hybrid working environment report an increased alignment and fairness within the organization as well as increased employee engagement.

Equity: Designing Out the Proximity Bias

Proximity Bias - The tendency for managers to favour those employees who they see or have the most interaction with on a regular basis - is the most problematic risk in a hybrid working environment. Proximity bias can have an effect on making decisions around promotions, assigning employees to projects and providing employees with constructive feedback for developmental purposes as well as creating an environment where all employees feel included.

Research published in the Journal of Applied Psychology indicates that remote workers receive 21% less face-time with senior leaders and are given 17% fewer opportunities to participate in high-profile projects compared to their in-office counterparts, even when their performance is controlled for. To properly address proximity bias, leaders should introduce structurally intentional measures such as rotating whose location determines which meeting format is used and establishing clear policies that require teams to have equal access to all major project opportunities beforehand. Additionally, leaders can examine promotion and salary decisions through a lens that does not consider the location; in some cases, companies use hybrid equity audits, which are periodic evaluations that look for patterns in developing and identifying sources of bias in order to stop systemic bias before it becomes entrenched.

Organizational Enablers and the Role of Senior Leadership

Culture Cannot Be Mandated — It Must Be Designed

Most organizations fail to recognize the difference between policy and culture when transitioning to hybrid work. While return-to-office mandates make for great headlines, they often do not create the collaboration and innovation expected. Research consistently shows that when employees perceive hybrid policies as being imposed on them rather than being collaboratively created, they lose trust in their leaders. Voluntary

attrition rates increase; the employees most likely to leave are those who have the best marketability outside of the organization. Senior leadership has an invaluable role in promoting the concept of hybrid work as a permanent, valuable part of the organization's culture, rather than a concession. Being visible means being there (visibly present) in the office and at a distance, mentoring from afar or in person regardless of the person's location and counteracting the natural bias that we all have when making decisions about who appears to be present in the workplace.

Technology as Infrastructure, Not Solution

It is true that investing in technology will not automatically guarantee the success of leaders who run hybrid organizations. Those that commit significant resources to building robust digital collaboration platforms will underachieve compared to those that invest both in platform development and also in creating behavioural and cultural frameworks to support the effective use of these tools. The digital platform represents the infrastructure of the work environment while the ability of leaders to lead represents the architecture of a successful work environment.

Strategic Recommendation

Organizations need to evaluate their readiness to provide leadership to a hybrid organization in three main areas. First, do employees have equal access to the digital platforms that are necessary to collaborate effectively in a hybrid format? Second, have managers been provided with executive coaching designed to increase their ability to apply the CARE framework in the work environment? Third, are the norms, incentives and criteria for promotion in the organization aligned in a manner that promotes equity in a hybrid format?

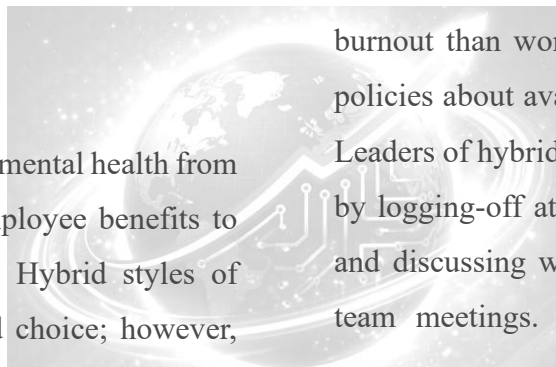
Mental Health as a Leadership Priority

The pandemic has changed the position of mental health from being a peripheral issue associated with employee benefits to being a front-of-mind organizational issue. Hybrid styles of work provide a great deal of flexibility and choice; however, they also create an opportunity for blurring the line between work and personal life which can result in increased rates of burnout. The American Institute of Stress found that hybrid workers unable to access clear information about when they could be on-call or off-work would be 40% more likely to experience burnout than workers in environments with explicit norms or policies about availability (American Institute of Stress, 2023). Leaders of hybrid workforces need to model healthy boundaries by logging-off at a reasonable hour, taking full vacation time, and discussing workload management with

employees during team meetings. When organizations develop mental health awareness as an integral part of their leadership development programs instead of treating it as an HR issue, they report significantly higher levels of team resilience and lower levels of employee dissatisfaction.

Conclusion

The American Institute of Stress found that hybrid workers unable to access clear information about when they could be on-call or off-work would be 40% more likely to experience burnout than workers in environments with explicit norms or policies about availability (American Institute of Stress, 2023). Leaders of hybrid workforces need to model healthy boundaries by logging-off at a reasonable hour, taking full vacation time, and discussing workload management with employees during team meetings. When organizations develop mental health awareness as an integral part of their leadership development programs instead of treating it as an HR issue, they report significantly higher levels of team resilience and lower levels of employee dissatisfaction. The hybrid workplace is not a temporary condition, but a destination. Organizations that outperform their competitors over the next decade will have made intentional, ongoing investments in developing hybrid leadership competencies across their entire organization. Addressing this issue is not a technology issue (technology does not address this problem) or a policy issue (policies cannot



effectively solve this challenge); it is an organizational/human development issue that needs clear and thoughtful rationale and long-term commitment with courageous leadership to find solutions. The CARE framework (Communication, Autonomy, Results, Equity) can provide an organizing structure for this developmental journey; however, the capability of this framework is dependent upon applying it through effective leaders. The true measure of having mastered hybrid leadership will lie not in how sophisticated the tools used are or how elegant the written policies are, but rather in the lived experience of every employee, no matter their physical location, being seen, valued, and truly included in the organization's life. Hybrid leadership will be a measure of an organization's character in the post-pandemic world. Organizations and leaders who pass the test will, in addition to retaining their workforce, have the ability to attract the very best talent from an increasingly global and mobile, purpose-driven talent pool.

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