Leadership Confessions: Lessons Learned in a Hybrid World

Insights to help school business officials adjust to the new hybrid environment.

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In today's rapidly changing world, leadership is more complex and challenging than ever before. The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to adapt to a hybrid work environment, where staff members work remotely and in person simultaneously. In this new reality, we navigated a multitude of unique challenges, from managing remote teams to maintaining our agency culture.

Here, we will share how we navigated this hybrid world, and some lessons we learned along the way. Whether you are a seasoned leader or just starting out, these insights can help you adjust to this new hybrid environment.

What We Learned

Trust, teamwork, and communication are key components in leading hybrid teams.

Leading with trust in a virtual setting can be more challenging than leading face-to-face because of the lack of nonverbal cues, limited social context, and difficulty building personal connections. While meeting remotely,

we miss important nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice, making it difficult to understand the emotions and intentions behind someone's words.

To address this challenge, we asked all staff members to turn on their cameras when meeting virtually. We also encouraged them to use virtual backgrounds if they did not want others to see their home or where they were working.

Teamwork is hard to build and promote when some staff members work remotely. Online communication often lacks the social context we experience in face-to-face interactions, such as shared physical space, shared experiences, and a sense of community. Holding weekly, monthly, or quarterly face-to-face meetings allowed our teams to connect in person. It allowed them to have those water-cooler moments, share lunch, and reconnect with one another about things happening outside the office.

If face-to-face meetings are hard to schedule, connect with your staff remotely and mimic what it would be like to collaborate on a project in the same room. Sometimes, we hold virtual "office hours" with our team. We set up two hours when we make ourselves available online to staff members to pop into our "office" to check in. These unstructured meetings are opportunities for brainstorming, discussing solutions, sharing stories, and "hanging out" remotely.

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Another way we infused teamwork into our virtual teams was to establish team goals. We involved all team members to ensure everyone understood their roles and responsibilities. We held weekly one-to-one virtual meetings with each staff member on our team. During the half-hour meetings, we focused on developing objectives based on individual, team, and organizational goals. It was important to establish clear performance metrics and track progress regularly to ensure the team was on track to achieve its objectives. This approach created a sense of accountability and shared responsibility among team members, increasing teamwork and collaboration.

We also encouraged team members to get to know one another more personally. They were asked to share their interests and hobbies through casual conversations during virtual meetings. This interaction helped create a sense of camaraderie and connection among team members, even in our new virtual world.

Communication is critical for ensuring a team's success when working with a virtual team in a hybrid work environment. When we began operating in a hybrid environment where some team members worked remotely and others worked in the office, establishing effective communication channels ensured everyone was on the same page.

We also set clear expectations for how our teams would communicate and collaborate, including which tools and platforms they would use. In our case, we used a suite of tools from Zoom, Microsoft, and Google. We also encouraged team members to communicate frequently and proactively through virtual meetings in Zoom and Teams or via email and chat. We wanted to keep our culture of open communication and collaboration that we had taken for granted in the office and bring it into our virtual teams to help ensure that our virtual team members felt connected and supported.
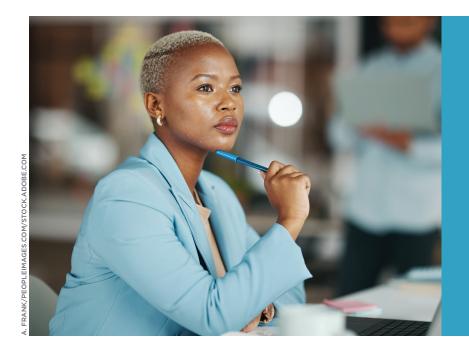
Leadership Confessions

We do have some confessions about our time leading in a hybrid environment.

Confession One: Working remotely is often more productive. When we were in the office full-time, one of us had an office with a window near the main elevator. Everyone who used the elevator would see him through the window and wave or stop by to say hello. Sometimes people would stop to ask for help or ask questions about a technology issue they were struggling with. He did not realize how much time this took out of his day. When he started working from home, he got things done more quickly. Reports that used to take five hours to complete took only two hours when working remotely.

Remote work allowed him more time to focus on the tasks that needed to get done. Being out of the office removed his unofficial role of "Walmart greeter." Although he may have missed potential connections with people, he recognized newfound power in accomplishing more things quickly. Working remotely allowed him to reevaluate where he spends his time and refocus on the day's important tasks.

Returning to the office, he took what he learned during his remote experience. He moved his desk away from the window and closed his office door when he needed time to focus on a project or task.

Thinking creatively and adapting to new things as they come are essential skills in today's ever-changing world.

When working in the office, give yourself permission to close your office door. Or, if you don't have an office, find another quiet area in the building to reduce distractions.

It is also acceptable to schedule a time to connect with your staff in the office—take a coffee break, share lunch, or have an in-person planning session. You can focus on the work but enjoy being in the same room with your team.

Confession Two: New processes and why we will never go back. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to figure out how to move from a paper-based contracting process to another system. Before the pandemic, we gathered all signatures by hand and only accepted original contracts signed by all parties. This process could take several weeks, with paper contracts going back and forth through the mail, sometimes between offices and outside contractors.

So what did we do? After much research on multiple platforms, we decided to use Adobe Sign. It was a significant step forward in streamlining business operations. What could take weeks of time-consuming back-and-forth to process paper contracts now took hours or even minutes to complete with Adobe Sign. With this cloud-based solution, we could create, send, and sign contracts digitally. We continue to use Adobe Sign to this day.

Project management was another challenging aspect of our work in the hybrid environment—not because we didn't know who was handling tasks, but because we couldn't have impromptu interactions throughout the day. We needed a solution to keep everyone on the same page and have a place where we could communicate with one another and track the day-to-day tasks related to our work.

We had been using several tools over the years, but found that Microsoft Teams and the addition of Task by Planner best fit what we were trying to accomplish. With the built-in chat in Teams, we had a way to capture our thoughts and communicate about a specific project in one place, and with Planner, we could allow teams to work together in real time. This tool also provides a centralized platform for task management, where team members can track progress, set priorities, and communicate with one another about specific tasks and projects.

Confession Three: There are no perfect answers! Leading with trust, teamwork, and communication in a hybrid world is difficult. There are no perfect answers. Thinking creatively and adapting to new things as they come are essential skills in today's ever-changing world. You need to be willing to explore new ideas and approaches that may differ from what you are used to. This change in mindset will enable you and your team to solve problems creatively and find innovative solutions to challenges in the future.

By staying open-minded and adaptable, you can embrace change and make the most of new opportunities. Ultimately, whether in the office or working remotely, it is about the people you work with and how you connect with them.

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