



CULTURE

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# The Culture Cure

*The What, Why, And How Of Making Your Remote Company's Culture Work Better*

Culture is not your company's dress code or the number of hybrids in the parking lot. It also isn't about your employees' age, race, color, or creed. What defines a company's culture is not what makes its employees similar; it's what unites them to work towards a common goal despite their differences. In this way, what defines a company's culture is different than how we typically define culture for, say, a country.

## 1: WHAT IS (AND ISN'T) CULTURE?

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I suspect that a lot of the confusion surrounding the idea of corporate culture stems from this fundamental difference. Don't be misled by the shared terminology. In the business world, culture isn't about shared rituals, dress, or cuisine. It is about the way your employees view and treat one another. It's about the ways in which interpersonal conflicts are handled. It's about how you celebrate successes, and how you overcome failures. It's about how (and how often) your team communicates. It's about how officers interact with junior employees. It's about a shared commitment to reaching shared goals in a way that everyone has agreed upon.

At BELAY, we make no bones about our spiritual beliefs. The very first thing on our list of core values is "God", and we make clear that our faith in The Bible informs our sense of professional stewardship. With that being said, you don't have to be Christian, or even believe in God, to work with us. We believe that all people should be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their beliefs. The only thing we ask of our employees is that they share in that mutual respect. And that works as an excellent illustration of what is and isn't company culture — what defines our culture most is the shared respect, not the shared belief.

## 2: WHEN CULTURE GOES VIRTUAL

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**R**emote work, virtual culture, telecommuting, work-from-home or in a virtual setting... the idea has become such a hot topic of discussion lately that we've managed to create about a million different terms for it. But whatever you want to call it, one thing is certain - it is becoming an increasingly mainstream way to work. Why has remote work has gained such widespread acceptance? In short, it leads to happier, healthier, and more productive employees; while also saving employers considerable sums of money in real estate and other infrastructure-related costs.

The benefits of remote work are both numerous and compelling. But, it isn't without its challenges. Across the many studies done on the subject, one challenge in particular has been consistent - remote employees feel more isolated, and less connected to their coworkers. That's a major issue, and one that could potentially undo some of the benefits that remote work brings. The good news, however, is that it can be overcome. And one of the key ways to do so is by cultivating a strong remote work culture. In the business setting, remote work culture refers to the shared values, behaviors, and beliefs that unify a geographically diverse team, and guide them towards common goals.

It's an inspiring idea, but it isn't easy to implement. The literal, physical space separating virtual team members can easily manifest as emotional and interpersonal distance as well. Because of this, leaders of remote workforces must be even more committed to establishing and cultivating a robust culture. To do this, you must remain explicit, vocal, and intentional about your company's identity and culture.

### **Be Your Culture's Best Spokesperson**

The greatest spokespersons aren't just cheerleaders. They are also educators. That means that you must clearly define your remote work culture before you can effectively promote it. To bridge the geographical gaps between your virtual team, you need to communicate your company's culture in both clear and inspiring ways. Start by creating a "manifesto" - a document that defines your corporate identity, its values, and its guiding principles... in the most definite terms possible. At BELAY, we have a very strict "no gossip" rule, for example. We believe that gossip is toxic to teams in all its forms, without exception. So, we make that incredibly clear to everyone who joins our virtual organization. We are explicit about it as a rule, and also about why it is a rule. Most often, it is that "why" which best defines cultures, not the rules themselves.

### **Be Your Own Model Citizen**

A leader can bang the drum of mission statements day and night, but unless they actually march to the beat, no one else will. The best way to cultivate your virtual culture is to abide

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by and embody it every single day. Lead by example, and if the culture is an effective one, it will catch on in no time. Provide feedback, express gratitude, get to know your team on a personal level, make an effort to humanize yourself in the eyes of your employees. When you do these things, your team will undoubtedly follow suit. Remember, most people want to feel that they are part of something greater than themselves. And they definitely want to feel connected to their coworkers. They don't need convincing of those things. They need an environment that nurtures and promotes them.

They need a remote work culture that allows personal connections to flourish... no matter the distance.

### 3: THE IMPORTANCE OF EVENTS

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**W**e believe that remote teams are extremely effective in accomplishing one's vision and living one's values. But, we also understand that we have a 100% human workforce. And there's still no replacement for actual in-person contact. So, we make a point to frequently bring our remote team together for in-person events. After years of doing this, we've found that there are five key benefits to in-person events:

- 1. People are social beings.** We want our team to enjoy the time they spend together, and a few times a year we host events where spouses and families are invited. We've seen how this boosts morale and builds happy teams. Happy teams are strong teams.
- 2. Having fun connects people.** We've seen this especially at our bi-annual company events, where we put a heavy emphasis on having great time. When you invest in fun, you show your team that they are valued, and that matters to them. Irresistible events yield employees who want to be there (and it helps with recruiting - who wouldn't want to work for a company who likes to have fun).
- 3. Bringing the team together puts everyone on common ground.** When the executives get to share a bowling lane with their assistants, they get to know each other on a much different level. This, in turn, builds trust and unity. Trust and unity are two ingredients you can't have too much of in a 100% virtual team.
- 4. Putting purpose behind internal events can benefit the organization overall.** Events don't have to be all fun and games. When we have our entire team together, it's a great time to cross train, update each department on the various other projects going on. We mix up where people sit and encourage everyone to find someone they don't know to have lunch with because you never know where the next great idea will come from.
- 5. We believe internal events create loyalty.** Of course, we plan events that we all love to attend so it never feels like wasted time or money. We've learned to leverage these events to build an irresistible culture and a solid team.

## 4: STAY ORGANIZED FOR YOUR REMOTE CULTURE TO THRIVE

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**M**aking your bed every day (when you're working from home) gets you in the mindset of being organized. In a virtual setting, disorganized employees do not stay long OR they quickly determine to get organized. When you are working from home or with a team who's not in the same building, you **MUST** be organized when it comes to your calendar, email, DropBox folders, chart of accounts, Basecamp projects, etc. Organization is a must to succeed and sustain in a remote team – not to mention what peers, boss, board of directors, etc. expect.

If you really want to develop a meaningful virtual culture in your organization, you must take organization seriously. If you are a scattered leader in your office and your on-site assistant is paid to clean up after you and organize your notes, emails, etc. – then a solid virtual culture is likely not on your horizon. When you are disorganized, it also shows your clients and staff how well they're likely to be cared for. And when you are disorganized, it communicates that systems, processes and work instructions are to be disrespected and not adhered to. So, begin by looking in the mirror!

As a leader, by the way you act and “do work” you are automatically giving your employees permission to act in the same way (good or bad). Real leaders understand you cannot expect from others what you are not willing to do yourself. So, if you want a healthy virtual culture, it must be consistently, and completely, organized. Getting organized is tough, especially if it's not something you are in the habit of doing. So, here are seven things to do now to get you on your way to being a better virtual leader or team member.

- 1. Get organized in your email inbox and folders.**
- 2. Get organized with calendars (with colors even) for both your work and personal life.**
- 3. Get organized in meeting notes and templates.**
- 4. Get organized in DropBox folders and naming.**
- 5. Get organized in your chart of accounts.**
- 6. Get organized in your Basecamp projects.**
- 7. Get organized with a list of things you need to organize.**

We see it all the time at BELAY, talking with frustrated leaders who will admit they've hit the lid of their personal leadership capacity. A consistent theme in their words is their lack of organization. If you desire to build a meaningful virtual culture - you, as a leader, will need to take 100 percent ownership of your organization before you can expect it from others. That will set the tone for the virtual culture you wish to emerge.

## 5: TOOLS TO HELP YOUR REMOTE TEAM CONNECT

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**R**esearch has shown that virtual teams are just as, if not more, productive than their in-office counterparts. But that wouldn't be the case without the slew of novel technologies developed to support them. The old saying that "A man is only as good as his tools" holds especially true when applied to remote teams. Without the right virtual collaboration tools to help your team connect, your remote business, and its culture, won't thrive. So, here's a list of our 5 virtual collaboration tools for remote teams:

- 1. Zoom.** There's no replacement for face-to-face interaction. But video conferencing applications like Zoom are allowing virtual teams to maintain intimacy from anywhere on Earth. Zoom also allows meeting participants to share presentations, screens, and other content in real time. Another of Zoom's extra perks is the ability to send official e-mail invites to clients for a more professional appearance.
- 2. Google Docs.** There's a ton of document collaboration tools out there, but Google Docs remains the gold standard. It's a streamlined, no-nonsense platform which allows team members to work on a document together from anywhere on Earth. Docs also provides ample cloud space in Google Drive to share and exchange files. And did we mention it's free?
- 3. Slack.** Depending on the needs of your business, quick instant-messaging applications like Slack may be essential. Not every interaction requires a phone call, video conference, or e-mail. For all those minor exchanges of information, Slack works wonders. Users can create a group chat for the whole business, plus individual "channels" for specific departments or teams. Slack also comes with an added bonus - users can now start a Zoom meeting straight from their Slack channel with the /zoom command.
- 4. Basecamp.** Basecamp aims to be your company's virtual HQ. It's a platform that gives you a single, authoritative location to house all your projects and communications. Leaders can assign work to specific team members, and manage individual project teams and departments in an organized manner. Company-wide productivity features like automatic check-ins are also excellent ways to keep virtual teams engaged.
- 5. Dropbox.** Think of Dropbox as a giant, virtual file cabinet. Team members can upload files easily and grant access to their coworkers. As soon as a file is edited, everyone will have access to the updated copy, saving tons of time and confusion from messy e-mail chains and attachments. Dropbox also provides you with data backup, to help ward against loss. You'll get 2GB of storage space for free to start, and can expand on that for a monthly subscription as your needs grow.

There are literally hundreds of websites, platforms, and applications designed to help virtual teams connect and collaborate. Not only do these tools obviously increase productivity, they also help your virtual culture thrive. Nothing brings teams closer together than success, so give your remote employees all the tools they need to succeed.

## 6: ESSENTIAL PRACTICES FOR A SUCCESSFUL REMOTE CULTURE

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**I**t should go without saying that establishing a remote culture in a virtual setting has its challenges. But there are certain policies and practices that can help to overcome those challenges, and make your company culture thrive across any number of miles.

### **Refuse To Have Gossip In Your Company**

We have a “No-Gossip” policy in our company which states if you gossip, you’re gone. Gossip is a horrible thing to let seep into your company.

### **Treat People Like Adults**

Give your employees the expected results, not the tasks to get to the results.

### **Culture Owners**

Make sure everyone in your company understands that they are a steward of the company’s culture. They are not an innocent bystander.

### **Be An Active Participant**

When you have surveys, make sure they are not anonymous. When we solicit feedback in our company, your full name has to be on it. Part of treating people like adults is expecting them to own their words.

### **Accountability Wins**

Create a “rules of engagement” example for your employees to follow. For example, in our company, this is listed in our Employee Handbook. Our rules of engagement are based on trust when there is a gap in expectation. We choose to fill this gap with trust, then verify.

### **Accept Feedback**

When we get criticism as leaders and employees in our company, we are encouraged to sit back, listen to and absorb the words, breathe, and turn our hands palms up. This puts us in a posture to navigate the criticism without it becoming emotional.

### **Say It Once, Twice...**

The default is to over-communicate until we know we have broken the threshold of communication with our employees.

These are just some of the very high-level tips that have helped us form our virtual culture at BELAY. We are far from perfect, and we don’t get it right every day. We do, however, have a growing organization achieving fantastic results with happy employees all connected to a virtual culture. It can be done!

## 7: THE QUESTION OF THE “BLENDED WORKFORCE”

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**T**hese days, work teams increasingly represent a hodgepodge of various work arrangements. Some members work from home, while others serve in the office. In some cases, teams are so geographically dispersed that they collaborate while in different countries or continents, let alone time zones. But when traditional, office-based teams begin to spread their wings and welcome remote workers aboard, there can be some learning curves to navigate. Perhaps one of the more critical junctures occurs in the early days, when a virtual staffer first joins the group. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), quality onboarding for new employees increases the likelihood of retention three years later. Increased performance, higher productivity and elevated employee engagement also correspond with purposeful introductory experiences.

For the virtual worker, managers must be decisive and proactive in following a game plan that heightens the odds of success and satisfaction for all involved. This calls for open communication, a sense of shared purpose and a commitment to growth.

Here are four ways for leaders and HR pros to begin integrating remote workers into existing on-site teams:

### **Understanding Roles And Functions**

Working from home has its positives, but sometimes the very structure of a virtual position inadvertently triggers distance in one’s knowledge bank. The offsite worker may not get a sense of the real ins and outs of people’s roles. They may benefit from greater clarity about positions and functions at the outset.

*The fix: Coordinate times for your virtual team member to talk with onsite staff in their early days on the job. This builds rapport and fosters understanding about different roles and moving pieces within the organization. Create affinity that will help the entire team be more effective, engaged, and extended in their interactions with one another.*

### **Professional Development**

Sometimes offsite workers begin to sense that out of sight is out of mind if they miss out on professional development opportunities. This may occur in the form of casual in-person mentoring by a senior team member to more structured trainings, such as industry seminars, annual group meetings or special conferences.

*The fix: Include virtual employees in your annual professional development budgets. Invite them to travel to attend industry events or conferences, particularly if other staff attend similar occasions as well. Don’t forget about other venues for continuous learning, such as webinars and virtual events.*

### **An Atmosphere Of Inclusion**

When more people are in the office than not, those who are away miss out on daily activity that builds internal camaraderie. Office-based colleagues may unintentionally reference

events or anecdotes for which the offsite coworker has no point of reference. This can create feelings of isolation and difference.

*The fix: Share funny happenings and work highlights with virtual team members, even if they didn't witness or in any way participate in the episode. Bring them up in watercooler conversations via instant messaging apps or during ice breakers before video meetings. Ask the virtual worker about any humorous moments on their end or just highlights from their week.*

### **Being Seen And Heard**

Virtual workers need to feel entrusted and empowered to do their jobs, just as they would within an office. While work-from-homers need not feel like they're being surveilled, they can appreciate times when they get see and hear their colleagues.

*The fix: Embed visual technologies, like videoconferencing and the use of webcams, into your practices. Be careful not to create a culture where remote workers feel put "on the spot;" designate meetings for which all in attendance are expected to be "facetime ready" for their close-up.*

## **8: VIRTUAL CULTURE KRYPTONITE: THE TOXIC EMPLOYEE**

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**T**here is no single greater threat to the success of your virtual culture than toxic employees. Toxic employees can be like the black mold growing behind your walls—they fester and flourish, often without you noticing, until suddenly everyone around is sick and distressed and no one really knows why. Toxic attitudes manifest themselves in a whole host of different behaviors, ranging from passive-aggressive comments and actions to downright rudeness. These behaviors will sink not only your organization's culture and morale, but will eventually make their way to your bottom line in terms of lost productivity and the time and effort your managers have to exert in dealing with the destruction these toxic employees leave in their wake.

You know, deep down, that toxic employees are costing you. But you might not know how much. That's why this research from Harvard Business Review needs to sink in, and show you the damage the toxic employees in your midst are doing to the rest of your team:

- 80 percent of employees lost work time worrying about the offending employees' rudeness
- 78 percent said their commitment to the organization declined in the face of toxic behavior
- 66 percent said their performance declined
- 63 percent lost work time in avoiding the offender
- 48 percent decreased their work effort

You, as the leader, are the only one who can do anything about toxic behavior in your workplace. And if you don't, you're showing your team that you are sanctioning incompetence. When you let behavior like this slide, you're telling your team that this behavior is OK with you. You're also compromising your leadership by not acting, and showing your team that they can't trust you to confront this kind of behavior in your teams. And that will cost you even more.

If you've got toxic employees on your team, get rid of them. If they haven't changed by now, they're not going to. Take action to defend your team and your culture, and protect your bottom line.

**Establishing, and maintaining, a robust virtual culture isn't easy. But, there are many things that leaders can do (and not do) to help make the process easier. As more and more people begin to work in remote, virtual, and mixed settings, the more leaders will need to understand the unique complexities of virtual culture.**

Just as in a traditional business, virtual culture is both the sail that directs your company's ship, and the rock on which it can be moored in a storm. Choosing to neglect that culture is an all but guaranteed way for your company to wind up adrift at sea...

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