FOND

5 WAYS TO BUILD CULTURE WHEN MANAGING A VIRTUAL TEAM

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INTRODUCTION

On a team connected primarily through computer screens and email threads, cultivating culture can be … challenging. To start, the idea of purposefully shaping something as seemingly organic as culture[1] is counterintuitive. To complicate the problem, leaders managing a virtual team have to think through how to unify people who share neither an office, nor a timezone or background. "Challenging" may be putting it lightly.

The undertaking is as pressing as it is tricky. Company culture and opportunities for remote work[2] are both some of the most highly sought criteria for competitive job-seekers. A staggering 99%[3] of employees report that they'd like to work remotely at least some of the time, and a similarly impressive 88%[4] weigh company culture as a notably important factor in the job search. Clearly, both these things make an impact. The strongest candidates will gravitate towards companies that are able to harmoniously support both.

This white paper is a resource for anyone managing a virtual team determined to build company culture that's just as strong (if not stronger) than the culture shared by traditional teams.

THE VALUE OF COMPANY CULTURE

Building a strong company culture requires a sizable investment of both time and money. Like any smart business leader, you're probably skeptical of investments that can't prove their payoff. So, before unpacking the more complicated question of how to build company culture when managing a virtual team, let's talk about why.

There's a strong correlation[5] between company culture (as judged by employees) and profit — in the long-term and the short-term. This fact alone is enough to make a compelling argument for the importance of company culture. Pair it with the fact that amazing cultures attract more competitive talent[6] and reduce turnover[7] (simply by never inspiring it in the first place) and the question of whether building company culture is "worth it" answers itself.

Your employees' behavior defines your company culture[8], and your company culture defines your employees' behavior. In this ever-active cycle containing both proactive and reactive elements, the nuances of company culture are bound to ebb and flow. To some degree, every employee that joins and leaves your organization has an influence.

Nonetheless, the strongest cultures hold fast to the same core values[9] throughout this inevitable microevolution. The consistency in exemplary company cultures is no accident.

Regardless of whether they are managing a virtual team or a co-located one, leaders who have successfully shaped value-driven cultures understand that:

1. Culture is intentionally built and requires active reinforcement.

2. There is massive payoff for putting in the effort to build it.
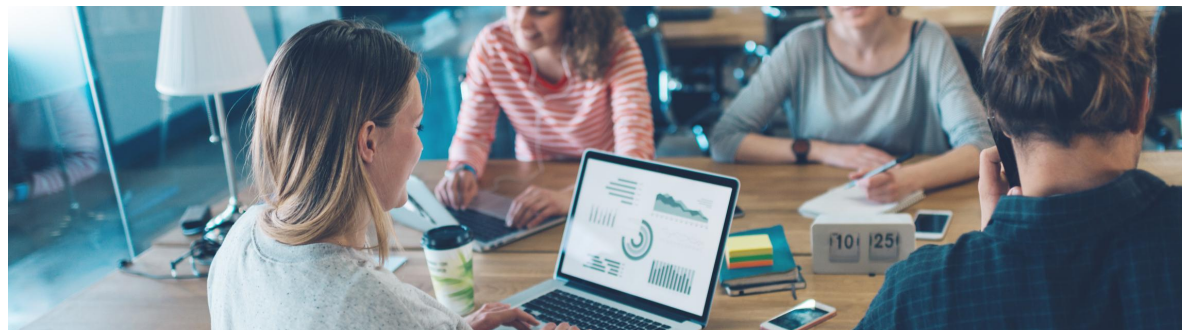
CREATING CULTURE WHEN MANAGING A VIRTUAL TEAM

Many believe that great culture emerges organically in teams that share the same office space, but this is a misconception. Co-located[10] or not, amazing culture is planned strategically and built with effort.

That said, the fallacy does tie back to an intuitive truth: while great culture doesn't exactly emerge spontaneously for co-located teams, it certainly arises with a little more ease. Small culture-building moments like sharing a new idea with the person sitting next to you or casual conversation over lunch happen naturally for teams that work in the same office.

Leaders managing virtual teams can cultivate their own versions of these culture-building moments but should think outside the box. Off-topic Slack channels[11] replace water cooler banter, and pre-meeting chatter happens over Zoom[12] instead of during the walk to the boardroom. Modern problems demand modern solutions, and when it comes to building culture virtually, technology can be a manager's best friend.

Below we share five creative ideas for building culture on a virtual team. Especially when applied in combination, these tactics can help energize your virtual workforce with the same sense of shared culture that unites more traditional workforces.

1. Get Onboarding Right

It's true when they say you never get a second chance to make a first impression, and when it comes to the virtual work experience, first impressions matter more than ever.

Employees who have an excellent onboarding experience are more likely to last at least three years[13] at a company compared to those who experienced standard or subpar onboarding.

Onboarding is even more impactful for virtual teams, as it can be hard to get an intuitive grasp on company culture when you work remotely. The onboarding process is a chance to culturally initiate your new hire. There are two key focuses leaders managing a virtual team should keep in mind when designing the onboarding experience:

Build Relationships

Best case scenario, onboarding takes place in person.[14] If you're managing a completely virtual team[15] where all employees are remote, this might mean you and the new hire meet in person. If your team is mixed, with a combination of members sharing the same physical office space and other satellite employees, you should have your new remote hire spend their first week in the office shared by co-located members.

If you can't make onboarding[16] happen face-to-face, you can still seize onboarding as an opportunity to introduce your new hire to as many team members as possible. This person won't be passing by their colleagues day-to-day in the office, so in some cases an introduction at onboarding is a rare opportunity to meet members of other teams.

Emphasize Culture

The virtual onboarding process should also place a heavy emphasis on the culture that defines your organization including the systems, traditions, and behaviors employees use to uphold it.

Especially in organizations where all or a significant part of the team works remotely, core values[17] become the vital force driving company culture. Actually, they are so important that the entire subsequent section is devoted to discussing how to live by core values[18] when working remotely. But to exercise maximum impact when managing a virtual team, you need to set the stage at onboarding with a thorough discussion of what your core values are and the behaviors you see as exemplifying them.

In addition to core values, great onboarding should include a discussion of all traditions that make your company culture unique. Maybe you do a weekly photo share on Fridays. Maybe you nominate an employee of the month. Whether quirky or serious, small-scale or high-honor, the little touches that make your company culture what it is should be addressed during onboarding.

2. Live by Your Values

The process of building a team that truly embodies your company core values[19] starts at onboarding. From there, it never ends. After sharing your core values at onboarding comes the process of creating a virtual work environment[20] where those ideals *actually* define the way employees behave.

For all leaders, but especially those managing a virtual team, having a strategic system in place to do this is essential. Without a way to reinforce company core values, they remain inaccessible concepts that employees (at best) think of as vague behavioral ideals or (at worst) don't remember at all.

Arguably the most effective way for large virtual teams[21] to take on the challenge of reinforcing company core values from afar is through an employee recognition program.[22] Employee recognition programs allow you to set custom recognition occasions — some or all of which you can align with your core values — and then call out team members who embody those ideals through their behavior.

By reinforcing the values you want to define your company, you transform core values into active (rather than passive) goals. Employee recognition[23] programs are a reliable way for leaders managing a virtual team to reward their most value-driven employees and include the whole team in celebrating what living by core values looks like in practice.

3. Make Employees Feel Like Teammates

When you're managing a virtual team, the most important word of your group's descriptor might not be 'virtual,' but 'team.'

Expectedly, it's harder to feel like part of a team when members don't physically convene at the same location. Your virtual employees[24] aren't greeted by a chorus of "good mornings" upon entering the office. They probably don't see your company logo plastered on the wall when they glance up from their laptops, and they can't reach across the table to high-five a colleague after solving a complicated challenge.

Over time, shared moments like these accumulate and contribute to a strong sense of shared identity. It's important to cultivate that same sense of belonging when managing a virtual team, but leaders have to go about it a little more creatively. Here are two key recommendations for doing so:

Emphasize Shared Goals

Nothing builds team spirit like a shared sense of purpose.[25] Although this is a best practice of all effective workplace leaders, leaders managing a virtual team should be especially transparent with their team about what the group's high-level goals are and how each member plays a role.

Whether this happens through quarterly meetings or is reinforced during weekly company updates, you should broadcast your virtual teams' most important initiatives loud and clear. Once you're confident that everyone is well acquainted with these goals, shift your focus to calling people out for the individual contributions[26] they make towards them.

More visibility into how employees' contributions drive team progress and how their colleagues' work aligns with the same goals increases team collaboration.

Spread Spirit Through Branded Gifts

It might seem like a shallow way to build culture, but company swag can actually work as a great reinforcer once remote employees have bonded over their shared sense of purpose.

Even something as simple as a branded coffee mug or sweatshirt can function as the same kind of reminder of team-belonging as an enthusiastic high-five would for team members in the same office.

These little shows of team spirit, coupled with a shared sense of purpose, can be a powerful way to build culture when managing a virtual team.

4. Communicate Thoughtfully

Everything from experience to emotional intelligence[27] to the unique dynamics of individual relationships dictate the quality of communication[28] that takes place at work, and we won't attempt to unpack all of that in the span of a few paragraphs. Having that discussion could (and has) filled multiple books.

What we will do is highlight two key communication practices that are especially imperative for virtual teams:

Take 'Considerate' to the Extreme

If the usual rule is to always think one step ahead, virtual teams need to think three to five steps ahead.

When you're managing a virtual team, be conscious of the fact that last minute requests and changes can be a lot harder to respond to when people don't work physically side-by-side. The moment a team member in New York steps out for lunch could be the same second a West Coast colleague realizes they urgently need a report pulled before a call with a prospect — and that seemingly minor delay could be the difference between a happy customer and a lost opportunity.

Taking extra care to plan ahead and communicate clearly about timelines can help prevent these kinds of incidents and minimize stress.

Create Casual Communication Channels

This second suggestion does more to build culture when managing a virtual team than the first, but it also will be disastrous if the first isn't firmly in place.

Provided that your virtual team practices ultra-considerate[29] communication for work related projects, a place for colleagues to discuss more than work can do a lot to build culture. It lets team members get to know one another better which creates chances for them to connect over more than just work. Whether you support this through unstructured banter at the beginning of virtual meetings or chat channels[30] devoted to anything-but-work, the best company cultures have strong social bonds[31] running through them. One study even indicated that colleagues who had 15 minutes a day for unstructured socializing[32] showed 20% higher performance than those who did not. Virtual or not, it's important to ensure your team has the chance to form social bonds with one another.

5. Meet Face-to-Face

At last, the fifth and final rule of managing a virtual team: take it non-virtual.

Humans have been building camaraderie and culture in-person for thousands of years. No matter how well you execute the four recommendations above, nothing can ever quite replace real-life interactions.

Depending on your company's resources, the extent to which you can take this recommendation will vary. For some companies, quarterly rendezvous are the right real-life meeting cadence. For others, the facetime teammates get at your annual party will have to last the whole year.

At the very least, you should aim to meet virtual team members in person either at onboarding or within three months[34] of them starting their jobs — most new hires decide whether to stay or go within this time frame, and the opportunity to meet in person can make all the difference in swaying their decision towards the former.

Although technology might be ready to take your team completely virtual, a little real-life relationship building still goes a long way in its appeal to basic human social needs.
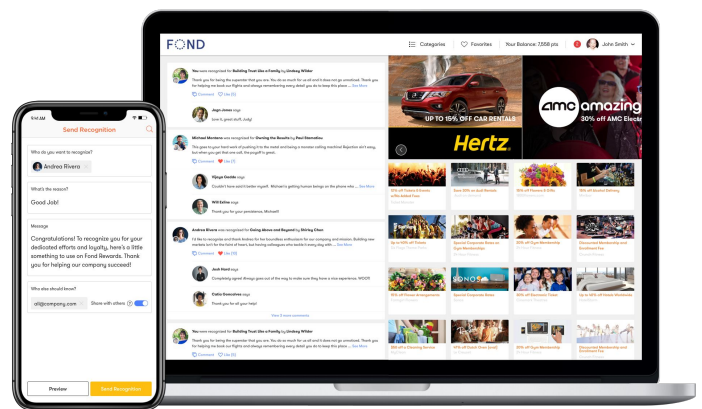
FINAL THOUGHTS

By implementing these suggestions while managing a virtual team, you can transform a group of remote employees into an organizational powerhouse that runs on company culture. Although perhaps counterintuitive, virtual teams and rich company culture are not necessarily at odds with one another. While many leaders still find it difficult to reconcile the modern workforces' demand for both, the solutions we've outlined above demonstrate that it's well within a strong leaders' capabilities.

About Fond

Fond is a global SaaS platform that seamlessly consolidates employee rewards and recognition processes into one easy-to-use solution. With Fond, employees and managers around the world can recognize each other, redeem rewards, access exclusive corporate discounts, and measure success so HR departments spend less time managing programs and more time driving results.

Fond is headquartered in San Francisco, California and Portland, Oregon. Learn more at www.fond.co.

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