



Inclusion and Belonging



## **3 Tensions Leaders Need to Manage in the Hybrid Workplace**

Building an inclusive culture is a balancing act. **by Bobbi Thomason  
and Jennifer Franczak**

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Illustration by Jamiel Law

**As hybrid work transitions from a temporary** pandemic-era band-aid to the normal way of working, many leaders are wondering how they build an inclusive hybrid culture. The pandemic laid bare existing inequalities at work — around caregiving, race and even age — and while there is an opportunity to “build back better,” the path to “better” is unclear, even for leaders committed to inclusive organizations. This is in large part because not all working arrangements work the same for

all employees. A policy or “perk” that benefits some people and makes them feel included, can make others feel like they do not belong or cannot thrive.

When it comes to designing an inclusive hybrid work culture, there are three main tensions that organizations and teams need to manage:

- First, the tension between allowing employees to work when they want *and* expecting them to be available all the time;
- Second, the tension between employees feeling isolated when not working from an office *and* feeling invaded by communication technologies;
- Finally, the tension between what practices are possible in a hybrid workplace *and* what is preferred and rewarded.

The right balance for each organization will vary based on organizational priorities, and on its employees and their interests. But identifying — and naming — these tensions will offer leaders a place from which they can start strategizing.

### **Tension #1: Working Anytime vs. Working All the Time**

The first tension leaders and organizations need to manage is between giving individuals the chance to work when they choose and imposing — intentionally or not — an expectation that they be available all the time. Research has documented the “ideal worker” is expected to be available at any hour of the day, any day of the year, throughout all the years of their careers. During the pandemic, the burden of ideal worker expectations fell especially hard on the shoulders of women, who often not only did their day jobs but were also primarily caregivers for family members.

One way to counter the expectation of constant availability is to offer your team the flexibility to choose when they work, while also making clear that there should be times when they're offline. There is robust evidence that control over one's schedule helps employees maintain engagement at work and protect their well-being. However, organizations need to ensure that in offering flexibility, they're not sending the message that employees should always be on or available. Indeed, during the pandemic, average working hours increased, and people were more likely to send emails after traditional work hours. Even beyond the pandemic, when people do not have boundaries between work and home and are not able to "shut off" work, they are more likely to experience burnout.

One practice that some organizations have used to manage this tension is limiting communication during typical after-hours. Leaders can model this by scheduling calls and emails to send the next business day rather than at 10:00 pm, for example. Also, for anyone who doesn't work standard hours, they can set an email signature acknowledging "My working hours may not be your working hours. Please do not feel the need to respond outside of your working hours," which will reinforce the norm.

Another approach is to have company-wide no work times. For example, when the Boston Consulting Group implemented a formal mechanism that required employees to take pre-planned days and nights off, employees reported higher job satisfaction, greater likelihood that they could imagine a long-term career at the firm, and higher satisfaction with their work-life balance.

## **Tension #2: Isolation vs. Invasion**

The second tension organizations have to manage is between employees feeling isolated and feeling invaded. The pandemic has reminded us

that part of what brings many employees to the office is connection with others. The chance to interact with others, even briefly, fosters a sense of deep belonging to a team and organizational identity. However, as leaders seek to give employees the opportunity to connect virtually, they also have to be careful that individuals don't feel invaded. For example, many Black employees have experienced virtual work as particularly invasive. While home was once a private space for authentic cultural expression, videoconferencing transformed this formerly safe space into focal points of public gaze.

To battle feelings of isolation, organizations can reshape social connections by strengthening friendship ties. We've heard about companies instituting weekly social time, such as a 20-minute window to discuss a different, light-hearted but personal prompt, like sharing your favorite movie or best birthday memory. Even brief connections with colleagues can decrease the emotional exhaustion caused by loneliness, and help prevent burnout.

To make these prompts feel less invasive, encourage employees to use their discretion in terms of what they feel comfortable sharing, and let them know it's okay to maintain privacy when they need or prefer it. For example, leaders may invite people to attend certain meetings without video. This would have the added benefit of reducing video-conferencing fatigue. For highly interactive and conversational meetings when seeing one another matters, an organization might create team or organization-based Zoom backgrounds to level the playing field. This has the advantage of proactively embracing an organizational or team culture, and not making employees feel like they are hiding their home space.

### Tension #3: Possible vs. Preferred

A final tension that organizations have to manage is between what is possible and what is preferred. One great promise of hybrid work is that individuals will be able to work from home. Indeed, multiple studies show that flexibility allows individuals, especially mothers, to maintain their working hours after having children and even stay in relatively demanding and well-paid occupations through times of high family demand.

While the future workplace may offer flexible working hours and flexible working locations, past research shows that workers are penalized when they take advantage of flexible work arrangements or time off, because constant availability and in-person work is still a preferred way of working. This creates a flexibility bias, where employees who choose flexible work arrangements are stereotyped as less committed and not worthy of rewards. Regardless of the options available on paper, organizations have historically rewarded those individuals who work long hours.

There is already chatter that this very tension will make hybrid arrangements particularly detrimental for women. Imagine a company offers the ability to work from home on some days. Those with caregiving responsibilities take advantage of them to balance the needs of their work-life situation, while those without caregiving responsibilities do not. Given the domestic allocation of household labor is typically skewed, it is likely that women would ask for and take advantage of work-from-home policies more often than men. This could put women at a disadvantage in terms of visibility and their ability to develop strategic networks that get them promoted.

For these reasons, it will be critical that managers, high-performing individuals, and those without caretaking responsibilities use flexible

work arrangements when possible, and commend and support others who do too. Men, for example, generally hold higher status at work and are more likely to be in leadership positions. Thus, they are less likely to be punished for deviating from workplace habits and can set new norms.

Leaders that recognize that there are tensions to manage along the dimensions we have outlined, will be a step ahead in building an inclusive hybrid culture that works for their organization and their people. There will undoubtedly be trade-offs. We encourage organizations to experiment with different practices until employees appreciate one another's contributions and collaboration, even when they work virtually and asynchronously; feel connected to one another, even when they are physically apart; and believe they can thrive and succeed in their organizations, even when there are multiple ways of structuring work. The pandemic and transition to hybrid work may have exposed organizational inequalities, but the future of hybrid work can be one where more employees belong and thrive in increasingly inclusive organizations.

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