Leadership & Managing People

Making the Hybrid Workplace Fair

by Mark Mortensen and Martine Haas

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Illustration by Jason Schneider

The pandemic has upended much about how we work, and what comes next is neither the death of the office nor a return to the way things were. Instead, our new reality will be hybridity: working with employees who are co-located in the same physical space as well as employees working remotely.

Hybridity promises organizations the benefits of remote working (increased flexibility, reduced carbon footprint, labor-cost optimization, and increased employee satisfaction) alongside the critical strengths of traditional, co-located work (smoother coordination, informal networking,

stronger cultural socialization, greater creativity, and face-to-face collaboration). But hybridity is also inextricably tied to power — it creates power differentials within teams that can damage relationships, impede effective collaboration, and ultimately reduce performance. To lead effectively in a hybrid environment, managers must recognize and actively manage the two distinct sources of power that can impede — or facilitate — hybrid work: *hybridity positioning* and *hybridity competence.*

How Hybridity Positioning Affects Power

First, hybridity means that, due to where they're positioned, employees have different access to resources and different levels of visibility — both key sources of power and influence.

Resource access differs depending on whether the employee is located in the office or outside of it. Employees in the office have ready and quick access to technology and infrastructure to support their work. They tend to have faster and easier access to information, and that information tends to be more current and broad (including informal water-cooler conversations), which provides them with an edge when it comes to the rapid changes of today's environment. Being in the office also provides access to the emotional and task-based social support provided by peers.

In contrast, employees who work remotely often find their weaker technological setup and infrastructure (slow connections, inability to access certain resources from home, a less sophisticated home office setup) makes it more difficult to demonstrate their competence. Not being present for informal interactions leaves remote workers feeling out of the loop and last to know. Being remote may also lead employees to feel more isolated and lacking the relationships and connections that provide social support.

Visibility level, or being seen by those in power, is also shaped by an employee's location — especially their location relative to their boss and senior managers. Working in the same space as the boss increases the

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likelihood that employees' efforts and actions will be recognized and top of mind. Employees who are seen in the hallways are likely to come to mind when it's time to staff an important new project, and their actions on that project are likely to be recognized, resulting in credit for a job well done. Even if the boss is working remotely, when an employee is based in the office, it increases the likelihood that their actions will be seen by others and reported to the boss indirectly. When working remotely, no one sees the late nights or early mornings or how hard employees are working to deliver on their obligations. Credit for a collective output is likely to be unevenly attributed most to those who are there in the office and more visible.

Taking these two dimensions of hybridity positioning together, we can understand how hybridity affects each employee in a team or work group by thinking in terms of where the employee and manager are situated.

How Hybridity Competence Affects Power

Not all individuals are equally skilled at operating within a hybrid environment. The ability to effectively navigate in a hybrid environment is itself a skill and therefore a source of power. Hybridity requires employees to be ambidextrous — able to balance between and navigate across both worlds — in a way that fully co-located or fully remote working don't.

Employees who are strong at relationship building, both face-to-face and virtually, have an advantage in hybrid environments, as do those who are willing to ask for, find, and claim the resources they may not have easy access to. Employees with good network and political awareness are able to recognize advantageous positions and situations, and those who establish strong relationships that can transcend the gap between face-to-face and remote working can use informal connections to replace missing information. Hybrid environments reward employees who think and act adaptably and flexibly, who are able to organize and coordinate across a complex and dynamic environment, and who are able to establish and

provide evidence of their own trustworthiness when working in a context of low visibility.

On the other hand, employees who are less effective at building relationships in either in-person or remote environments may find themselves struggling to work with collaborators who do work that way. Those who are less skilled at coordinating work within such a complex system may find they're constantly out of sync with colleagues and managers.

Hybridity competence is a separate source of power from hybridity positioning. Someone in a disadvantaged position may still be able to work very effectively if they have high hybridity competence, while someone in an advantaged position may still be ineffective if they have low hybridity competence.

The Managerial Challenge

While employees need to ensure that they're visible to their managers and can access the resources they need for their work, managers similarly need to make sure they stay informed about what their employees are doing and facilitate their access to those resources.

Managers who are co-located with their employees have more information about what and how those employees are doing. Managers who are remote from their employees may feel like they're operating in the dark. Incomplete information is nothing new, but hybridity's real threat is to fairness. Here are four ways managers can actively manage the structurally inevitable differences in power that arise in a hybrid environment and their effects.

Track and communicate. Create an accurate map of your team's "hybridity configuration": who is working where, and when. Once you've mapped this out, you need to have a conversation with them to surface the challenges they and you face and discuss what you can do to overcome

them. Always bear in mind that your employees' resource access depends on their location, and their visibility depends on their location relative to you.

Making this task more complex is that hybridity is itself dynamic — a result of variations both across employees ("Martine works in the office, Mark works from home") and for individual employees ("I work in the office MWF and at home TT"). This makes hybridity a moving target. It requires ongoing systematic tracking, codifying, and visualizing to help both managers and employees stay aware of the configuration of hybridity in a given work group and manage the resulting power dynamics.

Design. While some level of power imbalance is structurally inevitable in a hybrid team or work group, when necessary and possible, managers should intervene to redistribute power through shifting access to resources and/or visibility levels.

At the same time, policies and procedures should be revisited regularly to ensure they don't provide an unfair advantage based on hybridity — for example, KPIs that don't align with resource accessibility, or evaluations that don't account for differences in visibility levels.

Educate. Many of these issues arise not solely from hybridity itself, but from a lack of awareness of the power imbalances it creates. To effectively manage in hybrid environments, managers must promote awareness of the issues and educate employees (and themselves) on how to avoid bias.

Particularly important is establishing a culture of psychological safety and (individual/collective) trust. This will increase the likelihood of employees speaking up and asking for resources when they need them, as well as their confidence that their efforts will be recognized.

Monitor. With this understanding in mind, it's important that managers keep an eye out for key intervention moments. Through our discussions

with executives, we've identified a number of key opportunities to address the potential challenges of hybridity for power dynamics within their teams:

- **Performance reviews and evaluations.** Managers must remain acutely aware of how hybridity creates an imbalance in their teams with respect to employees' access to resources and visibility levels, as well as the information that they hold about their employees. Reviews present an opportunity for managers and employees to review and discuss imbalances and how to address them going forward.
- **Team launches.** Hybrid teams start with team members who are not on the same footing. Team launches are an opportunity for managers and team members to recognize, acknowledge, and discuss power differences and to decide how collectively to manage them.
- **Onboarding.** How can managers bring people into the organization when not everyone can physically come to the office? How can they put their new remote hires on a comparable footing to those who are brought into a face-to-face office environment? Hybridity's impacts on group dynamics need to be incorporated into onboarding sessions and discussions in order to ensure new employees recognize the importance of consciously managing hybridity-based sources of power.

For companies to reap the many benefits of hybrid working, managers must be aware of the power dynamics at play. It's critical that they develop an understanding of hybridity positioning and hybridity competence and take steps to level the playing field for their teams.

Mark Mortensen is an associate professor of Organizational Behaviour at INSEAD. He researches, teaches, and consults on issues of collaboration, organizational design and new ways of working, and leadership.

Martine Haas is the Lauder Chair Professor of Management at the Wharton School and Director of the Lauder Institute for Management & International Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on collaboration and teamwork in global organizations.