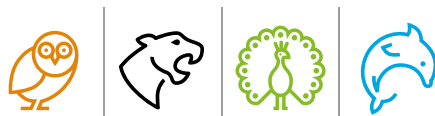# Better Together and Better Apart

What managers and teams need to do to get the best out of the hybrid world

service animals™
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Better together and better apart: what managers and teams need to do to get the best out of the hybrid world

Hybrid working looks like it's here to stay. True, it's not new, but the pace has accelerated in response to the pandemic, when overnight entire workforces became remote workers. There have been benefits for both organisations in the form of productivity gains, and for individuals in the form of flexibility, as well as challenges. Whilst few organisations will continue to be fully remote (the "Work from Anywhere" model) the majority are looking at continuing and expanding the hybrid model.

Recent research from McKinsey suggests that:

90% **of organisations will combine remote and on-site working**

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Whilst the jury is out on the optimal balance of days in/out of the office, and indeed it's likely to vary by industry, McKinsey stats suggest that:

Up to 26% of the workforce could work remotely for 3-5 days per week without losing effectiveness.

That's 3-4 times as many as pre-Covid

Which means we're going to be spending more time apart and less time together, so we need to get better at doing both. There's plenty of research and opinion out there, but very little concrete thought as to what "permanent hybrid" looks like, and this is causing anxiety for employees. Those organisations who can work out fast how best to make it work will have competitive advantage. What's clear is that

it's not simply a case of back to normal plus a few more people working from home. It's also different from lockdown when 100% of many workforces were remote, so we can't assume that what worked then will work for hybrid.

Hybrid: (dictionary definition) **a mix of two very different things**

If hybrid is a mix of two very different environments, then one of the critical shifts from pre-Covid remote working is that there needs to be a level playing field. In pre-Covid days, those working from home were sometimes the 'poor relation' especially in meetings with on-site colleagues. Dialled in and visible, but frequently ignored or forgotten. Now the new norm seems to be that everyone connects online for meetings when there is a mix of on-site and remote participants. Managers will need to work hard to create a feeling of fairness in the way they interact with their teams. Those on site may have more access to their time and this could lead to accusations of favouritism.
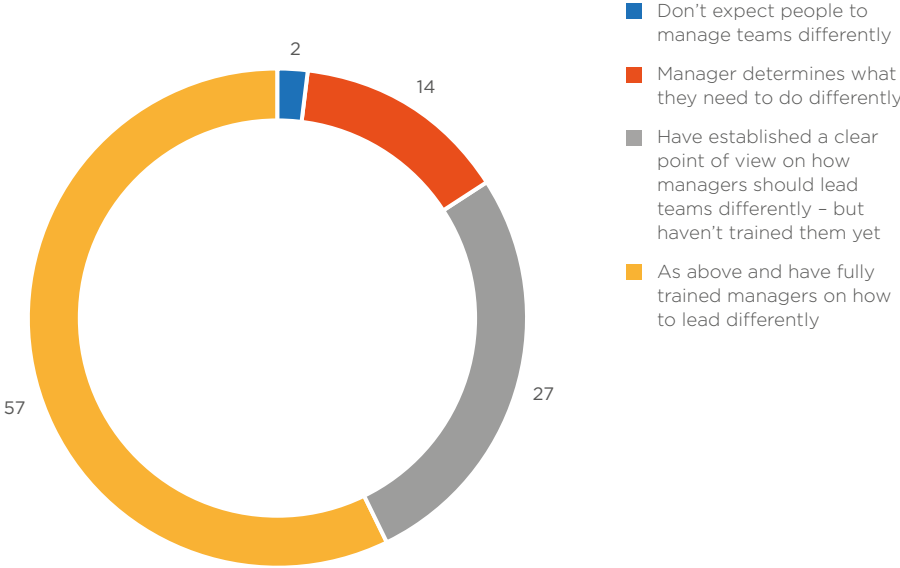
IBM conducted research amongst their own workforce about working remotely, and interestingly there was a gap between how people felt at an individual level (more engaged); and at a team level (less engaged); and many reported feelings of isolation.

This raises interesting questions for managers and leaders. Figuring out how to lead hybrid teams effectively will be critical to keeping teams engaged and connected to each other and to the organisation even as they become more distant.

Back to McKinsey. Their research indicates that leading organisations are helping managers to lead differently.

In terms of what leaders need to do differently, everything and nothing, has changed! The same best practices around communication, managing and developing performance, aligning people to the right goals still apply – but some things need to be dialled up and more nuanced to succeed in a hybrid environment.

LEADING ORGANISATIONS HELP MANAGERS TO LEAD DIFFERENTLY

- Don't expect people to manage teams differently
- Manager determines what they need to do differently
- Have established a clear point of view on how managers should lead teams differently – but haven't trained them yet
- As above and have fully trained managers on how to lead differently

More is more: some things to dial up

1. Communication

As far as **communication** is concerned, more has always been more, but never more so than in times of uncertainty, and especially when not everyone is together. In particular, connecting people to the big picture, what's going on, even rumours, and creating a shared sense of purpose which, for many, has been missing since remote working started in earnest. Makes sense, especially when we consider IBM research which highlights a communication gap between managers and their employees. More really is more.

Managers provide clear guidelines and expectations for how our organisation will work

86%
of managers agree

51%
of employees agree

Little and often is the way to go here, rather than bombarding people with lots of information at a quarterly meeting. And this replicates the way we naturally communicate when we're all together – the passing conversation, the quick chat over a coffee. This means that we need to be far more intentional about establishing communication touchpoints with remote employees, formal and informal. Some unexpected challenges with this approach have been that some senior managers find it harder to be themselves on camera, whereas younger generations live their lives on Instagram and Tik Tok. And creating online social experiences can be tiring if you've spent a day on Zoom, especially for introverts. The need to be 'on' all day can be exhausting.

Critically, we need to remember that communication is not all one way! **We need to be far better at really listening to what people say** – or don't say; we need to listen for feelings as well as facts, and be adept at getting under the skin of what's really going on. If it's hard for people to tell us they're struggling in the real world, it's even harder in the virtual – and far easier to hide. Whilst this may be obvious, it's not so easy to do; it relies on a deep understanding of the way that we communicate and how we need to adapt to build trust and rapport with each individual. And guess what! Each individual will be subtly or not-so-subtly different, which means we need to be super-adaptable in our response. What we're aiming for is that **our teams feel seen, heard, understood and included.**

2. Managing performance: feedback, coaching, mentoring

Some of us are naturally great at this, others less so. But we all need to be far more intentional about feedback, coaching and development so that working remotely doesn't (and isn't perceived to) get in the way of engagement, productivity and personal development.

McKinsey research found that there was a direct correlation between those organisations who reported the biggest productivity increases during the pandemic and those whose managers created what they call "small moments of engagement" with their teams. These were based around coaching, mentoring, idea-sharing and collaboration. But this approach would also lend itself well to feedback.

We all know the importance of giving regular feedback. Gallup research points to two things that we need to dial up with remote employees.

They say that **frequency of feedback (recognition)** is key to engaging remote employees. When we give someone feedback it taps into one of our deepest subconscious desires: to be appreciated and validated. It's easy to feel that we're out of sight, out of mind, when we're remote so feedback will have a

disproportionately positive impact. Again, little and often is the way to go here. It's the equivalent of that quick 'thank you' or 'nice work' that you might get in the office environment. There are a couple of things to be very aware of here.

Starting with self-awareness. If we ourselves don't see value in this type of recognition, we may well not do it – although it may be desperately important to someone else. Secondly, at the risk of stating the obvious, everyone is different! Whilst this may be really powerful for some team members, it may have less meaning for others. It comes back to knowing yourself and really knowing your team.

If frequency of feedback drives engagement, then **meaningful feedback** elevates performance. Meaningful feedback is based on behaviour – and that means that we need to spend time observing someone's performance. It's the combination of spending time on someone and pinpointing something they've done that will help them improve or maintain performance that's so powerful and motivational. Especially when we probably have less time for people than we did before.

2. Enhancing proximity

The law of proximity suggests we are closer to the people that we see or interact with most; this happens naturally in the office but is more challenging remotely. How do we as managers let others know when we are **available**, especially when we are not **visible**? And how do we (and team members) know when individuals are **available**? The visible-available matrix needs a hybrid update. This could then inform the creation of remote and on-site communication touchpoints.
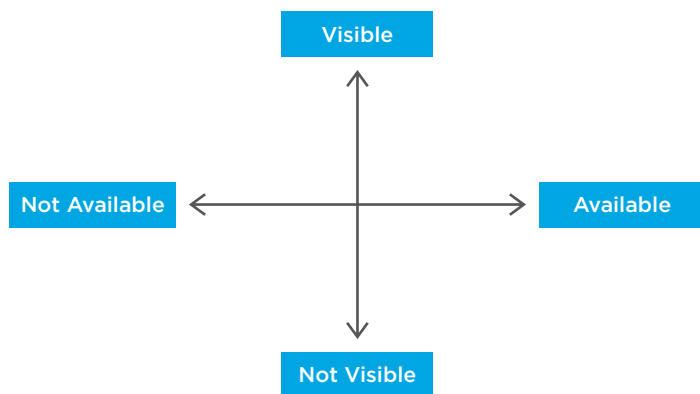
Whilst the manager has the biggest influence in engaging and motivating the team, it's **everyone's responsibility to build the team**. The law of proximity has had a negative impact on team connection as teams became more distant from one another during lockdown – as this research from the HOW Institute for Society shows.

44% of us feel less connected to our co-workers since the start of the pandemic

It does however raise the question of how we connect when we are in different places.

When we're in an office this tends to happen naturally – we tap someone on the shoulder to ask for a quick bit of advice; or a 5-minute coffee catch-up or the much-talked about quick chat at the water fountain (do people really do this?!). It's those small encounters that are part-social, part-work that we need to try and consciously replicate. Maybe it's a quick text to

someone to wish them luck with a presentation, or an impromptu 5-minute phone call to ask for advice. We've almost come to expect that we can only speak to someone if we've scheduled it in advance. But didn't we use to just pick up the phone? **We need to get back into the habit of spontaneous communication.**

What's more, in the good old days, we got to know our colleagues naturally... back to the law of proximity. You sat opposite Gemma and knew that she didn't like to be interrupted when she was concentrating on something; everyone knew when Paul arrived because he had a quick chat with everyone before settling at his desk; you knew that Jamie was always happy to talk something through, and you knew to look out for Anna because she's new. With hybrid, out-of-sight can mean out-of-mind, with the unwanted consequence that we stop looking out for one another, lose sight of each other's strengths and how we can work together, and ultimately lose touch with each other.

One obvious way of maximising the law of proximity is for individuals to co-ordinate and plan to be in the office at the same time when that's possible. The most compelling reasons given for coming into the office are collaborating with others, brainstorming, relationship building, whilst admin, report writing, etc. are generally better done at home. Being together in one place is a great start – but teams need to consciously re-learn how to be together in a way that works for everyone, based on the different make-up of individuals in the team. Just because we're all in together doesn't mean that everyone sees it as an opportunity for non-stop chat. Re-learning (or learning, if lots of team members are new) what's important to everyone and how a team can maximise its strengths as well as its differences is critical and everyone has a part to play in this.

87% say that the office is important for collaboration and relationship building

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Hybrid leadership style

The HOW Institute for Society talks about what they call 'moral leadership' being the best style for our times. They describe moral leadership as being authentic, open and honest, empathetic, letting people see the real you. There's nothing particularly new here – except that it's easy to see how this style works for 'right here, right now'. If we're distant from people, giving them access to the real 'us' will help to create that feeling of proximity, and very importantly – trust. The BBC claim that we trust our colleagues less now than at the start of the pandemic, in part because when we're not getting to know people face-to-face then it's easy to make negative and unfounded assumptions about other's behaviour. Another benefit of this style is that in effect, the leader is role modelling behaviours that, if everyone in the team were to adopt, could help everyone work together better.

At SignalCX, we regularly help managers and their teams work through the behavioural challenges discussed, using our Service Animals™ tool. Not only does it help a manager understand their team's dynamics and the impact of their own style on the team, it also helps them understand how to maximise the team's strengths and improve effectiveness. It helps teams understand each other and their differences;

what does virtual working mean for different people, and what does being in the office mean? How can teams best support each other in both environments? An added benefit for hybrid teams is that it provides a common experience that's bonding and a common language that enables open discussion. All of this tends to have a profound impact on how individuals and teams understand each other, value each other's differences and support each other.

In summary, making the new hybrid team work starts with a deep understanding of the people in the team. By the manager and by team members, so everyone knows how best to support each other, and feels emotionally connected to each other – as we do when we feel understood. Manager and team need to know when and how to flex and adapt their own styles to get the best out of each other. This will build rapport and trust – and when trust is established, then everything else (re-thinking processes, designing "small moments of engagement", upskilling managers in soft skills) will fall into place more easily. However, developing the hybrid team needs to be deliberately planned and created, or at best the team will evolve in ways that are sub-optimal.

So, take your first step today by finding out more about Service Animals.

Service Animals™ is brought to you by **SignalCX**, a consultancy focusing on customer experience. For nearly 4 decades, we have worked with some of the world's best brands to design and enable great customer experiences. The SignalCX customer experience journey will help you develop a culture that has the customer at its heart, with employees who are energised and excited and a growing body of customers who love the way that your organisation makes them feel. Apart from this lovely warm glow, you will achieve tangible, measurable and bottom-line driven results.

To find out how Service Animals can help you and your teams deliver better results, visit us at: www.serviceanimals.com

Service Animals has been developed and refined for the past 30 years, and has been used by almost a million people around the world. Its roots lie in the psychological theories of Carl Jung, but this model has been honed through years of work with psychologists, clients and our own team members. Service Animals is the only tool that focuses on how we all use our individual communication styles to form the service experience we deliver to customers and colleagues.