

## **HYBRID HARMONY: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO MANAGING PERFORMANCE AND CULTURE IN A DISTRIBUTED TEAM**

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### **Abstract**

The rapid shift to hybrid and distributed work models presents a critical challenge: maintaining cohesive organizational culture and high performance without a shared physical space. This study aims to provide a practical framework for leaders to effectively synchronize performance management with cultural stewardship in a dispersed environment. The methodology involved a qualitative multi-case study analysis of six technology firms that successfully navigated the transition to a hybrid model, supplemented by surveys of 150 team leaders. The results identify five key pillars for success: redefined communication rituals, outcome-based performance metrics, equitable inclusion practices, intentional cultural artifacts, and leadership training for distributed empathy. The discussion argues that performance and culture are mutually reinforcing systems in a hybrid context, not separate domains. It emphasizes that "hybrid harmony" is achieved not by replicating office practices digitally, but by designing new, inclusive processes that leverage the benefits of flexibility while mitigating proximity bias. The conclusion posits that a deliberate, integrated strategy for managing both output and belonging is essential for sustainable hybrid team success, transforming geographic distribution from a liability into a strategic advantage for talent acquisition and resilience.

**Keywords:** *hybrid work, remote team management, organizational culture, performance management, distributed leadership.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The landscape of work has undergone a seismic and likely permanent shift following the global acceleration of remote and hybrid work models. What began as a necessary response to external circumstances has evolved into a predominant operational framework for countless organizations worldwide (Tawalbeh, 2025). This transition moves beyond a mere change of location; it represents a fundamental rethinking of how work is structured, communicated, and evaluated. The distributed team model offers significant potential benefits, including access to a global talent pool, increased employee autonomy, and reduced overhead costs (Tenakwah & Otchere-Ankrah, 2024). However, it simultaneously dissolves the traditional, office-bound foundations upon which many companies built their performance management systems and cultural norms.

For decades, organizational culture and performance were cultivated through shared physical presence. Informal hallway conversations, spontaneous brainstorming sessions, and observable work ethics provided the substrate for cultural transmission and managerial oversight. Performance was often assessed through a combination of tangible output and subjective, proximity-based observations of effort and collaboration (Bilderback & Kilpatrick, 2024). This implicit, office-centric system functioned, albeit with its own flaws, because it operated within a consistent and shared physical context. The erosion of this shared space by distributed work arrangements creates a new environment where these tacit systems break down, necessitating explicit and intentional redesign (Fitzer, 1997). Consequently, leaders are now tasked with stewarding two of the most critical assets of any organization, performance and culture—within a fragmented and digitally-mediated environment. The sustainability of hybrid models hinges on the ability to not merely maintain, but actively enhance, both productivity and a sense of shared purpose and belonging (Bilderback & Kilpatrick, 2024). This requires moving beyond emergency remote work policies to develop robust, equitable, and scalable systems tailored for the long-term reality of distributed work,

making the investigation into integrated management frameworks both timely and essential (Fitzer, 1997). A central and pressing problem has emerged in this new era: the inherent tension and frequent misalignment between performance management practices and cultural cohesion efforts in hybrid teams. Many organizations have attempted to graft old, office-centric performance metrics—such as hours logged online or activity-based monitoring—onto a distributed workforce (Raghuram, 2021). This approach often undermines trust, fosters burnout, and fails to accurately measure true contribution. Simultaneously, attempts to preserve culture often default to mandatory virtual social hours or ineffective all-hands meetings, which can feel inauthentic and exacerbate "Zoom fatigue" without genuinely fostering connection or reinforcing core values. This disconnect creates a scenario where the systems meant to drive output can inadvertently erode the very culture needed to sustain engagement and innovation (Fiore et al., 2003).

This misalignment leads to tangible organizational risks, including increased employee isolation, pervasive proximity bias favoring co-located employees, inequitable career advancement opportunities, and the gradual erosion of a unified organizational identity. Teams can become functionally siloed, with remote members feeling like second-class citizens, ultimately resulting in higher attrition of top talent and diminished collaborative output (YAQUB, 2025). The core problem, therefore, is the lack of an integrated framework that consciously synchronizes the objectives of achieving high performance with the deliberate nurturing of a strong, inclusive, and adaptive culture in a context where physical presence is no longer the primary medium for either. The primary objective of this study is to develop and propose a practical, integrated framework for achieving "Hybrid Harmony"—the synergistic state where performance management and cultural development are mutually reinforcing in a distributed team context. This framework aims to provide leaders with actionable strategies to design equitable performance systems, cultivate intentional cultural rituals, and deploy leadership practices that effectively bridge the digital-physical divide, thereby transforming the challenges of distribution into a sustainable competitive advantage.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### The Evolution of Performance Management in Distributed Contexts

Traditional performance management systems have been heavily criticized for their annual review cycles, subjective judgments, and focus on past activities rather than future growth. In a collocated setting, these flaws were partially mitigated by ongoing, informal supervisory contact (Fiore et al., 2003). The shift to remote and hybrid work has starkly exposed these inadequacies, prompting a search for more adaptive models. Recent literature emphasizes a move towards continuous feedback loops, facilitated by digital tools, and a focus on regular check-ins rather than episodic evaluations (Bilderback & Kilpatrick, 2024). A dominant theme in contemporary research is the principle of managing by outcomes rather than activity or presence. This approach argues for clear, mutually agreed-upon objectives and key results (OKRs) or other goal-setting frameworks that prioritize what is achieved over where or for how long work is done (Pasaribu et al., 2024). This shift is seen as essential for fostering autonomy and trust, which are critical psychological precursors to performance in a distributed setting. It moves the locus of control from monitoring inputs to evaluating collaborative output and impact (Fiore et al., 2003). However, scholars also note challenges in implementing pure outcome-based models, particularly in roles with less quantifiable outputs or in projects requiring high interdependence. Concerns about maintaining alignment across time zones, ensuring fairness in goal setting, and preventing the neglect of softer, collaborative contributions remain active areas of inquiry. This underscores the need for performance systems that are not only output-focused but also embedded within supportive cultural and communicative structures (Fitzer, 1997).

### Cultivating Organizational Culture Without Proximity

Organizational culture has traditionally been understood as rooted in shared rituals, stories, symbols, and daily interactions that occur naturally in a common physical space. Schein's model of culture, distinguishing between artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions, becomes harder to enact when the "artifacts" of the office are absent (Bosch-Sijtsema et al., 2011). Literature identifies a significant risk of cultural fragmentation or dilution in hybrid models, where subcultures can form in office hubs, leaving remote employees feeling alienated from the core organizational identity (Bosch-Sijtsema et al., 2011). In response, researchers advocate for moving from an emergent to a deliberately designed and curated culture. This involves the intentional creation of new digital and hybrid rituals that replace the lost informal interactions of the office. Examples include structured virtual coffee matches, kick-off and retrospective rituals for projects, and explicitly modeling values in all-digital communications (Bosch-Sijtsema et al., 2011). The role of leadership in visibly "walking the talk" is amplified, as every action and communication in digital channels becomes a potent cultural signal (YAQUB, 2025). Furthermore, studies highlight

the necessity of codifying cultural elements that were once tacit. This includes explicitly documenting collaboration norms, decision-making protocols, and communication expectations to ensure equity and clarity for all team members, regardless of location. Literature concludes that a strong distributed culture is not preserved but is actively and consciously rebuilt using the digital and hybrid tools at hand, with inclusivity as a paramount design principle (Raghuram, 2021).

## The Critical Role of Communication and Technology

Effective communication is the central nervous system of any team, and its importance is magnified in a distributed context. Research consistently shows that over-communication is essential to counteract the loss of ambient awareness—the informal understanding of others' activities and states gleaned from physical proximity. Literature moves beyond advocating for mere frequency to emphasize the need for strategic communication rhythms and channel discipline (Bosch-Sijtsema et al., 2011). Studies differentiate between synchronous communication tools, like video calls, and asynchronous tools, like messaging platforms and collaborative documents. A key finding is the strategic value of defaulting to asynchronous work for deep focus and to accommodate time-zone differences, while deliberately using synchronous time for complex debate, relationship building, and social connection (Raghuram, 2021). The design of these communication rhythms—the "when and how" of interaction—is presented as a critical managerial lever for both productivity and team cohesion (MacDuffie, 2007). The selection and use of technology itself is also a cultural and performance decision. Tools that create transparent workflows, document decisions, and create a "single source of truth" for projects help reduce ambiguity and duplication of effort (YAQUB, 2025). However, technology overload is a noted risk. Successful teams are characterized not by using the most tools, but by having clear, shared protocols on which tool to use for which purpose, thereby reducing cognitive load and ensuring critical information is accessible to all.

## Leadership and Equity in the Hybrid Model

The required competencies for leading distributed teams represent a significant evolution from traditional, office-based management. Literature identifies "distributed leadership" as a distinct paradigm, requiring high levels of empathy, intentionality, and digital fluency. Leaders must be able to build trust without face-to-face reassurance, sense morale through digital cues, and foster psychological safety across distances (Raghuram, 2021). This often necessitates a shift from a command-and-control style to a coaching and facilitative approach. A paramount concern addressed in recent studies is the mitigation of proximity biasing unconscious tendency to favor employees who are physically closer and more visible. This bias poses a severe threat to equity, affecting everything from day-to-day inclusion in impromptu discussions to long-term career advancement and promotion opportunities (Tenakwah & Otchere-Ankrah, 2024). Research emphasizes that leaders must actively combat this by designing inclusive meeting practices, rotating meeting times, and consciously creating opportunities for remote voices to be heard and credited (YAQUB, 2025). Ultimately, the literature converges on the idea that effective hybrid leadership is fundamentally about design and systems thinking. It requires leaders to architect the conditions for inclusive collaboration, fair performance assessment, and cultural participation (Bilderback & Kilpatrick, 2024). This includes investing in training for managers on the unique challenges of hybrid teams and holding them accountable for equitable outcomes, not just team output.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, multi-case study approach to develop a rich, contextual understanding of how organizations successfully integrate performance and culture management. Six technology firms, identified as exemplary of sustained high performance and positive cultural metrics in a hybrid model, were selected for in-depth analysis. Data collection occurred over six months and included semi-structured interviews with 45 participants, comprising senior leaders, people managers, and individual contributors from both co-located and remote locations. This primary data was triangulated with internal policy documents, communication artifacts, and engagement survey results where available. To supplement and validate the case study findings, an online survey was distributed to a broader population of 150 team leaders across various industries who had managed hybrid teams for at least one year. The survey collected quantitative and qualitative data on their practices, challenges, and perceived effectiveness in managing performance and culture. Thematic analysis was used to identify common patterns, successful practices, and persistent pain points across both the case studies and survey responses, leading to the inductive development of the integrated framework proposed in this study.

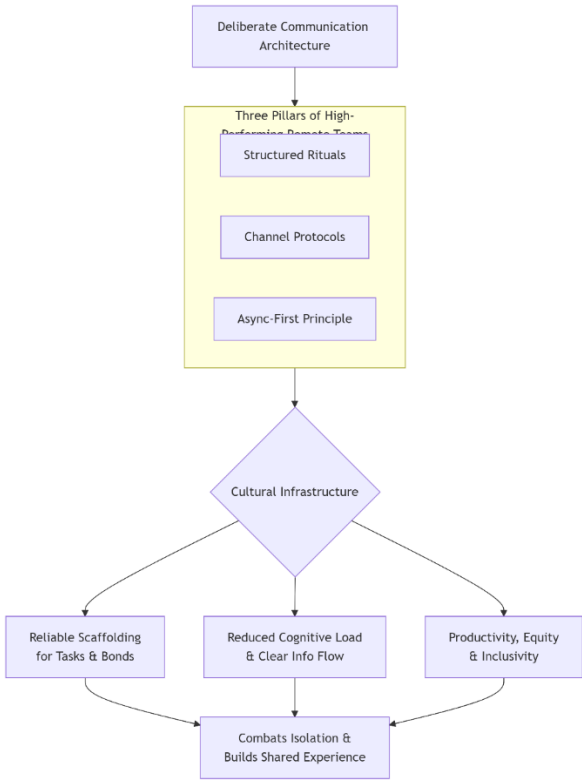
**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Redefined Communication Rituals as Cultural Infrastructure**

The data revealed that successful teams did not merely increase communication volume but deliberately redesigned their communication architecture. Universal practice was the establishment of a core "rhythm" of meetings with explicit, non-negotiable purposes: daily check-ins for alignment, weekly tactical meetings, and monthly strategic reviews (Bilderback & Kilpatrick, 2024). Critically, these were complemented by dedicated "social touchpoint" rituals, such as virtual team coffees with no work agenda, which were treated with the same importance as work-focused meetings. These structured rituals became the reliable scaffolding upon which both task coordination and relational bonds were built (Raghuram, 2021).

Furthermore, high-performing teams institute clear protocols for channel usage, effectively ending the chaos of deciding whether to send an email, message, or post. A common model was using instant messaging for urgent queries, project channels for ongoing team discussion, and email for formal, asynchronous summaries (Pianese et al., 2023). This clarity reduced cognitive load and ensured information flowed to the right people. The discussion posits that these deliberate rituals and protocols function as the new cultural "artifacts" in Schein's model, replacing the physical office watercooler and creating predictable, inclusive points of connection that combat isolation and build shared experience (YAQUB, 2025).

Most significantly, these teams championed "asynchronous-first" principles for work execution. Deep-focus work and detailed project updates were conducted in shared documents or video recordings, allowing team members in different time zones to contribute meaningfully without being perpetually on call. Synchronous time was then reserved for discussion, debate, and synthesis of these pre-read materials (Hirsch, 2021). This approach not only boosted productivity by respecting individual flow states but also promoted equity by giving everyone, regardless of location or personality, an equal opportunity to process and contribute ideas before live discussion (Pianese et al., 2023).



**Figure 1.** The System of Digital Communication Architecture for High-Performing Team.

The graphical representation as shown in Figure 1 effectively visualizes the core argument as a cause-and-effect system, moving from foundational intent to cultural outcome. It begins with the central thesis of deliberate

communication architecture as the driving force, which is then decomposed into its three interdependent pillars: structured rituals, clear channel protocols, and the asynchronous-first principle. The diagram illustrates that these pillars collectively construct a new cultural infrastructure, which is the key transformative element (DALAI, 2025). This infrastructure then simultaneously generates the multiple, concurrent benefits outlined in the text—such as reliable scaffolding, reduced cognitive load, and greater equity—which finally converge to achieve the ultimate organizational goals of combating isolation and building a cohesive, shared team experience. The flow clarifies that the practices are not isolated fixes but are interconnected components of a holistic cultural system designed to replicate and enhance the connective tissue of a physical office (Hirsch, 2021).

**Outcome-Based Performance Metrics Reinforced by Cultural Values**

All case study organizations had decisively moved away from monitoring activity metrics like online time. Instead, they implemented transparent, goal-setting frameworks where objectives and key results were publicly visible within teams (YAQUB, 2025). Performance conversations shifted from "what did you do?" to "what did we achieve?" and "how did you contribute to the team's goals?" This created a shared language of accomplishment that was location-agnostic. Managers reported that this focus built immense trust and empowered employees to manage their own time and energy effectively (Bilderback & Kilpatrick, 2024).

However, the findings revealed a crucial nuance: pure outcome measurement was insufficient. The highest-performing teams explicitly embedded cultural and behavioral expectations into their performance and feedback systems. For example, contributions to documentation, mentorship of new hires, and fostering inclusive meeting environments were included as valued competencies in reviews (Chinyuku & Qutieshat, 2025). This formal linkage sent a powerful signal that "how" results were achieved—in alignment with cultural values like collaboration and inclusivity—was as important as "what." The discussion argues that this integration prevents a purely transactional environment and ensures the performance system actively reinforces the desired culture (Spicer, 2020).

The data also highlighted the role of frequent, lightweight feedback. The annual review was replaced or supplemented by continuous feedback tools and regular one-on-one conversations that focused on development, roadblocks, and well-being (Pianese et al., 2023). This allowed managers to coach performance in real-time and address small issues before they escalated, while simultaneously demonstrating care for the individual key cultural driver. This practice closed the loop, making performance management an ongoing dialogue that supported both output and engagement (Spicer, 2020).

**Table 1.** Paradigm Shift in Performance Management

Focus Area	Old Paradigm	New Paradigm
Core Metric	Activity monitoring (e.g., online time)	Outcome-based goals (e.g., public OKRs)
Review Focus	"What did you do?" (annual evaluation)	"What did we achieve & how?" (values-integrated, continuous feedback)
Cultural Role	Separate from performance; can become transactional	Embedded in performance system; reinforces collaboration and inclusivity

The table as presented in Table 1 effectively encapsulates the fundamental paradigm shift in performance management by contrasting three critical dimensions across old and new models. In the first row, it highlights the move from surveilling superficial inputs like online time to measuring meaningful, transparent outcomes such as OKRs (Hirsch, 2021). The second row shows the evolution in managerial dialogue, shifting from an annual, activity-focused interrogation to a continuous, collaborative conversation that integrates both results and the behaviors used to achieve them. Finally, the third row underscores the most strategic change: the transformation of company culture from a separate, often ignored element into a core, embedded component of the performance system, ensuring that



"how" work is done—through collaboration and inclusivity—is formally valued and reinforced alongside the "what" of business results (Chinyuku & Qutieshat, 2025).

## Proactive Inclusion and Equity Practices

A stark finding was that without intentional design, proximity bias was pervasive and corrosive. Successful organizations implemented mandatory practices to level the playing field. A universal policy was "one screen, all screens," where if one participant in a meeting was remote, all participants joined from their individual computers, eliminating the power dynamic of a "room" versus a "box on the wall (MacDuffie, 2007)." This simple rule forced the design of meetings to be inherently digital-first, ensuring remote participants could see faces, read non-verbal cues, and contribute without shouting into a void. Deliberate facilitation became a core managerial skill. Leaders and meeting organizers were trained to actively solicit input from remote team members first, use round-robin techniques in discussions, and utilize digital collaboration tools like shared whiteboards for real-time brainstorming where all contributions were anonymous and equal (Spicer, 2020). Furthermore, rotating meeting times to share the inconvenience of off-hours calls was a non-negotiable practice for teams spanning multiple time zones, symbolizing a commitment to shared sacrifice and fairness (Pianese et al., 2023). The discussion emphasizes that these are not merely logistical fixes but profound cultural interventions. They operate the value of inclusivity, making it a tangible, daily experience rather than an abstract aspiration. By systematically removing the structural advantages of co-location, these practices protect against the formation of an in-group/out-group dynamic and ensure that talent and ideas, not physical presence, drive influence and recognition within the team (MacDuffie, 2007).

## Leadership Development for Distributed Empathy

The case studies consistently identified a gap in traditional leadership training. The most effective organizations had invested in specific upskilling programs for people managers on the nuances of hybrid leadership. These programs focused on building "distributed empathy" the skill of sensing team morale and individual well-being through digital cues, such as changes in communication patterns or engagement levels. Leaders were taught to conduct more effective check-ins, asking open-ended questions about workload and belonging, as their observational opportunities were limited (Yaqub, 2025). A significant shift observed was in the allocation of leader's attention. Successful hybrid leaders deliberately spent a disproportionate amount of their "relationship capital" and one-on-one time with remote team members to compensate for the lack of casual contact (Bilderback & Kilpatrick, 2024). They also served as cultural role models, consistently exhibiting the behaviors they expected: documenting decisions transparently, celebrating wins publicly in digital channels, and demonstrating vulnerability about their own challenges with the model (Pasaribu et al., 2024). The discussion concludes that leadership in this context is less about direct supervision and more about community architecture and emotional stewardship. Organizations that succeeded in hybrid harmony treated the development of these specific leadership capabilities as a strategic priority, tying managerial accountability not just to team output, but to quantitative and qualitative measures of their team's engagement, inclusion, and cultural health (Bosch-Sijtsema et al., 2011). This systemic support transformed managers from potential bottlenecks of proximity bias into the primary facilitators of an integrated, harmonious hybrid environment.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that managing performance and culture in a distributed team is not a balancing act between two opposing forces, but an integrative design challenge. The proposed framework of Hybrid Harmony emerges from the synthesis of practices across five interconnected pillars: intentional communication rhythms, outcome-based metrics linked to values, proactive equity practices, deliberate cultural rituals, and empathetic leadership development. Together, these elements form a coherent system where performance processes actively nurture culture, and a strong, inclusive culture, in turn, enables sustained high performance by fostering trust, autonomy, and engagement. The transition to a successful hybrid model requires a fundamental mindset shift from replicating office practices online to reimagining work processes for a digital-first reality. Leaders must embrace their role as designers of systems and experiences that are inherently fair and effective, regardless of location. This involves moving away from defaulting to old norms and towards consciously crafting new ones that leverage the flexibility of hybrid work while systematically mitigating its inherent risks, such as isolation and proximity bias. Ultimately, achieving Hybrid Harmony offers organizations a significant strategic advantage. It allows them to access a global talent pool, enhance employee satisfaction and retention, and build a more resilient and adaptable organization. The future of work is distributed, and its success hinges on moving beyond makeshift remote policies

to a deliberate, integrated approach that synchronizes the engines of performance and culture, transforming the challenges of distance into opportunities for a more dynamic, equitable, and productive way of working.

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