

Are you on mute?

Written by [Christiaan Grove](#)

Arguably the most used phrase on video calls in recent times is “you are on mute,” often accompanied by “we cannot see you” or “your video is off!” Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, many companies moved to a remote work or work from home policy. Depending on the level of Covid-19 severity, some companies have started to move certain employees back to the office, but they are fast realizing the impact of the new distributed world that we live in and whether the classic morning-and-afternoon commute and 9 – 5 workday will return or not, remains to be seen.

What is evident, is that many companies are using their learnings from the pandemic and have started to migrate from strict command-and-control routines to a more employee friendly support structure that enables new policies centered around working remotely: anytime, anywhere – as long as the agreed output performance indicators are reached. The reality is that this approach to work will be with us for the foreseeable future, if not permanent, and this begs the question, “Are you on mute?” or perhaps, “Is your team on mute?” Can you see everyone and are you aware of their existence? Perhaps this is starting to border the paranormal for some traditional leaders, but the real question is if your team is truly switched-on? Do they fully comprehend the outcomes that the team has to reach and are they aligned to the shared dream of the organization?

When teams operate in a blended environment of office work, home-office and anytime-anywhere, a negative side-effect is that certain team members could be disengaged, just going with the flow, or not actively participating in online (or physical!) sessions. We’ve already discussed the importance of Psychological Safety when leading teams in a distributed world and highlighted 5 steps and 15 work practices to enhance Psychological Safety. The question however remains – how do I reach the quiet ones? How to I ensure that all my team members are engaged and participating? Here are 10 work practices to increase team engagement:

1. BREAK DOWN SILOS

WHAT TO DO:

Remove literal and figurative barriers between workers to encourage interaction. For severe Covid-19 risk situations, transparent screens can be used in the office environment. For online work, enable the team to meet and use online software applications that works for them.

WHY DO IT?

Most work situations benefit when everyone can talk and listen to each other – facing one another and engaging in energetic conversations. When employees can connect directly with one another – not just with the team leader – it drives performance. When people can periodically go exploring outside their own team, seeking ideas from outside, bringing information back, the whole company benefits.

2. CHECK-IN, CHECK-OUT

WHAT TO DO:

Start meetings with a check in, and end them with a check-out, that is designed to make people focus on the meeting ahead.

WHY DO IT?

When people bring their full selves intentionality to the meeting, it creates focus and better the bond and trust between people. Deliberately carving out a time for checking-in and checking-out of meetings, creates a natural transition to the details of the meeting, making it an effective way to bring everyone into the meeting before getting to the brass tacks.

3. SHARE DECISIONMAKING

WHAT TO DO:

Distribute decision making power to the collective.

WHY DO IT?

Once a group of people get together to make decisions, the responsibility for the decision isn't upon the shoulders of any single person. Instead, the entire group is responsible. When a group agrees on something there's a better chance of avoiding errors and minimizing risks. You can pool the group's experience and knowledge to draw the best conclusions. People then feel less fearful about voicing their opinions and making decisions. This reduces pressure on leaders and it boosts innovation and creativity within the organization.

4. CREATE THE SPACE FOR PARTICIPATION

WHAT TO DO:

Allow everyone in the organization, across levels, to be involved in everyday decision-making processes.

WHY DO IT?

Employees need to feel empowered so that they continue to give their best to the company. This can't happen just through workshops and lectures but also by letting them feel like they're important to the company. When there is a space for them to express their opinions and be involved in the decision making process, they feel like they are partners in the business and take more interest in it. This makes sure the organization is a positive, transparent place that provides a space for everyone to be part of the important decisions. In turn, employees are motivated to become better people, to grow and achieve bigger goals.

5. LEADER ON DEMAND

WHAT TO DO:

Let team members take the lead on projects they're most passionate about.

WHY DO IT?

When companies encourage situational leadership, they create the space for new leaders to organically emerge. Teams perform with greater agility and there's an all-round increase in employee engagement and motivation. It's also a great way for managers to ease themselves into a mentoring/ facilitating role, where they offer support from the side-lines. It helps employees gain confidence in their own ability to lead team efforts and it also allows specialists the chance to take the lead and help teams solve problems in their niche. It creates a lot of empathy among managers and team members because they now understand the specific challenges of either roles. Finally, it creates a wave of new managers and leaders who, in the future, know how to identify and nurture leadership within their teams.

6. GROUPS OF 10

WHAT TO DO:

Use small groups of up to 10 members as task forces who can focus solely on solving a problem.

WHY DO IT?

Over time, in any organization, it is natural to gravitate towards people who share similar views and thought processes. But when you have different viewpoints, they must be debated and discussed before you arrive at a decision. Smaller groups, allow people to feel empowered and confident; learn to respect each other; and make shared decisions. Working in small groups, really helps people learn to take the opinions and views of others into consideration and focus on listening. It also creates a greater sense of responsibility and engagement since decisions aren't flowing top down.

7. TEAM MEMBERS SET TEAM GOALS

WHAT TO DO:

Allow employees to participate in the process of goal setting to improve engagement and motivation.

WHY DO IT?

Research has demonstrated people are more likely to achieve their goals when they consider their work to be enjoyable. When a company involves employees in the goal-setting process, they are more inclined to think of the whole exercise as "enjoyable". When people set their own goals, they are increasingly motivated to achieve those goals. They feel proud when they achieve the goals they set and continue to do more. They can see how their work impacts the company's success and health.

8. PEER STEWARDSHIP

WHAT TO DO:

Distribute the work of care across peers through a stewardship program.

WHY DO IT?

Deep relationships dissolve conflicts. Many invisible problems and struggles within teams can be solved by this ongoing care system. When people feel more confident about addressing problems in transparent and non-political ways, it strengthens the relationships in teams, dissolve conflicts, and improves the overall emotional intelligence to create a more sustainable and supportive environment.

9. STOP AND REFLECT

WHAT TO DO:

Identify moments in meetings which require stop-and-reflect sessions to create learning opportunities focused on cooperation.

WHY DO IT?

When you have a larger team, creating consensus on something that affects everyone (such as projects to prioritize) can be trying. Everyone will be expressing their opinions and it is an understatement to say this would be chaotic. Stop-and-reflect sessions engage the team in a meta-conversation about the meeting. This session focuses specifically on how the discussion is happening instead of the content of the meeting. Everyone's attention shifts to making the meeting more productive.

10. KEEP IT REAL

WHAT TO DO:

Understand how your company culture functions and concentrate on developing it rather than trying to fit into pre-existing definitions and molds.

WHY DO IT?

The whole magic of your organization is around the people who work there – and, it's not defined just by the “cool” perks that you offer. If your people are working in an engaged manner and connect with each other in a meaningful way, rest assured the magic will happen. Real self-management happens in the small details of daily life in an organization, and that is predominantly affected by the values espoused by the company, the culture it builds ground-up and the way people engage with each other meaningfully.

In our current reality and the foreseeable Future of Work, engagement of individual team members is crucial and leaders should ensuring that their team members' videos are switched on and that they are not on mute!