5 Strategies to Boost Innovation in
REMOTE TEAMS

BY SHIELA MIE LEGASPI

Innovation—the lifeblood of progress—is essential for remote teams to not only survive but thrive in the workforce.

Remote work is nothing new, but according to the Pew Research Center's February 2022 Social & Demographic Trends Project ("Covid-19 Pandemic Continues to Reshape Work in America"), remote work became a common reality for many organizations with the 2020 pandemic. Three years later, it is still a hot topic for both employers and employees.

As the world adapted to new challenges, businesses embraced the flexibility and global talent pool that remote teams offer. However, along with the benefits come unique hurdles that can hinder the creativity and innovative spirit that fuel progress. Gallup noted in a January 25, 2023 report ("U.S. Employee Engagement Needs a Rebound in 2023") that only 32% of workers are engaged with their work. That compared with 36% in 2020, according to NPR ("America, We Have a Problem. People Aren't Feeling Engaged with Their Work," January 27, 2023).

While trying to increase engagement may seem difficult, there's one lens that could help: innovative behaviors. Recent findings show that innovation may be the key, as engagement closely correlates with innovative behaviors in all organizations. To implement strategies that foster a culture of innovation, leaders must transcend physical boundaries and instead embrace collective creativity in a way that surpasses the digital barrier.

FOSTER A CULTURE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Before any good work can begin, people need to feel safe. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, safety is just as important as basic physiological needs. Nothing can be improved or built upon unless this need is met.

In remote work, where physical interactions are limited, the need for psychological safety in particular becomes even more pronounced. Psychological safety refers to the belief that team members can express their ideas, opinions, and concerns without fear of retribution or judgment. Creating an environment where individuals feel comfortable taking risks and sharing their thoughts freely is essential for fostering innovation.

A psychologically safe workspace promotes open and transparent communication, enabling remote team members to voice their perspectives, offer creative solutions, and challenge the status quo. It empowers employees to take calculated risks, knowing that their efforts will be met with understanding and support, regardless of the outcome.

Leaders must lead by example to foster psychological safety, meaning they must actively listen to their team members,

ask questions that encourage constructive feedback, and demonstrate receptiveness to diverse viewpoints. Acknowledging the value of every team member's input fosters a sense of trust and belonging.

Leaders can also establish clear communication channels and protocols to ensure that team members have avenues to express their ideas and concerns without reservations. For example, they can implement an anonymous form on their internal communication drive for people who have complaints about something. And organizations can send monthly surveys to employees about how well the company is doing on different aspects of their culture.

Psychological safety not only boosts individual confidence but also enhances team collaboration. When team members feel safe to speak up, they are more likely to engage in beneficial discussions, share knowledge, and collaborate on innovative projects.

Remote workers who are provided with the opportunity for ownership will want to perform better. When companies allow them the space to speak freely, remote teams can tap into their collective intelligence, unleashing a plethora of creative ideas that drive innovation and propel the organization forward.

CREATE A VIRTUAL INNOVATION CORNER

One of the biggest benefits of having a physical workplace is "water cooler conversations."

These conversations not only allow team members to bond and create relationships, but also allow leaders to informally speak with employees to either congratulate them on a job well done or address something quickly that needs improvement. They also give people a way to think aloud and brainstorm ideas that they then can work on individually or collaboratively.
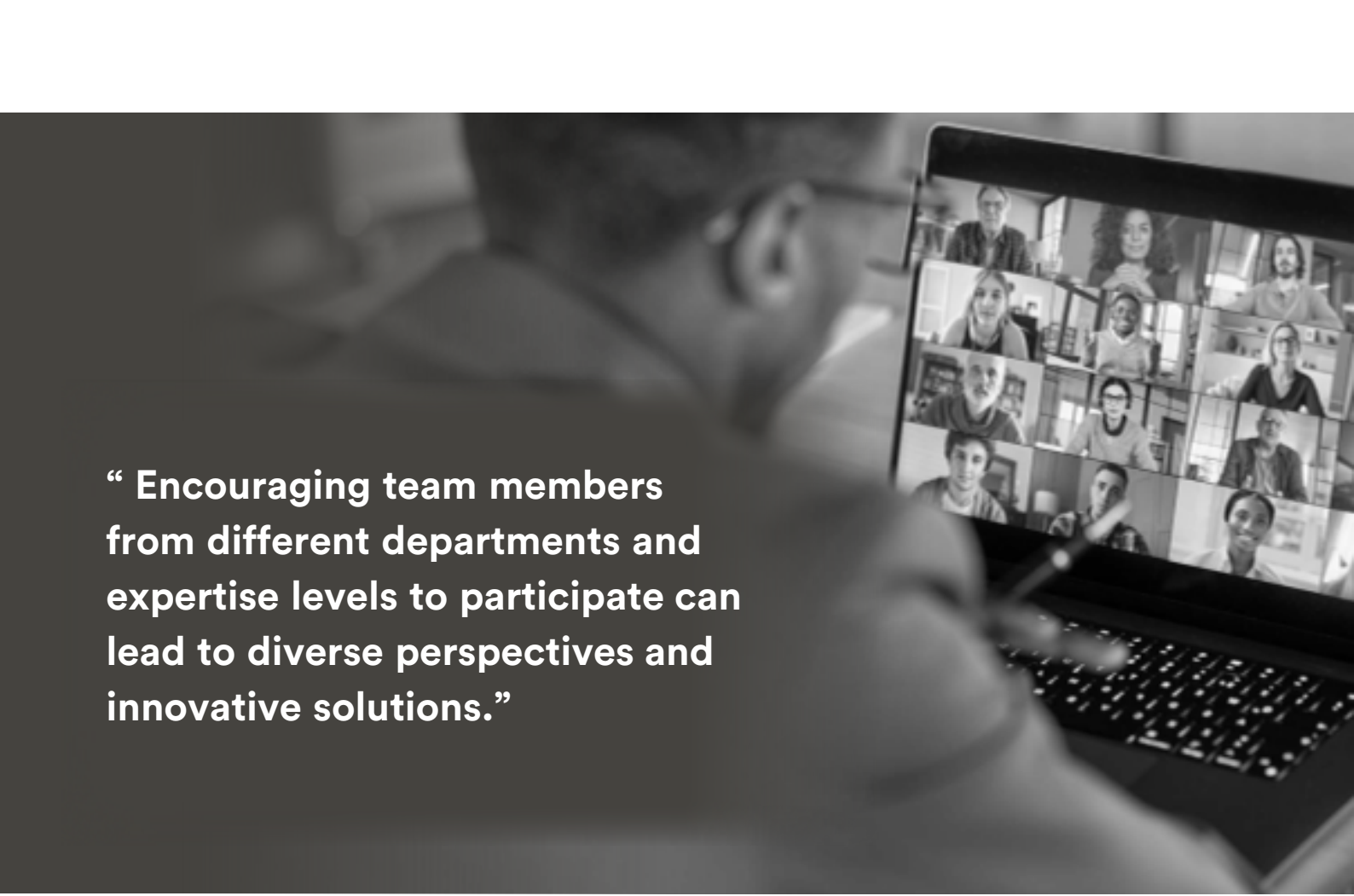
Creating a virtual innovation corner will provide people a space to foster those "water cooler conversations" and encourage spontaneous interactions and creative conversations.

The first step in creating a virtual innovation corner is to identify the right collaboration tools and platforms that suit the team's needs. The platforms should allow real-time communication, file sharing, and interactive brainstorming features. Popular tools such as virtual whiteboards, collaborative documents, and messaging apps can prove invaluable in simulating the spontaneity of face-to-face interactions.

For example, a company that uses an instant messaging tool can incorporate a thread titled "general" or "brainstorming." When you create these designated threads, employees are more likely to collectively use them and have spontaneous conversations that increase engagement.

It's important to note that text messaging should not be one of the official ways that employees have these conversations. This approach often blurs the line of work-life balance and could become a stressor for employees.

To ensure engagement in the virtual innovation corner, leaders need to set the example and use it to throw ideas around. They can ask employees for their thoughts on different ideas and ask them to explain why something may or may not work. This thread must be kept open for continuous contributions and

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discussions to ensure that innovation is not confined to specific time frames or only when a leader initiates a conversation in an existing thread or starts a new one.

An inclusive and cross-functional approach to the innovation corner can further enhance its impact. Encouraging team members from different departments and expertise levels to participate can lead to diverse perspectives and innovative solutions, as this diversity of thought often proves to be a potent catalyst for creativity and problem solving.

Moreover, team leaders can take on the role of facilitators, guiding discussions and providing support where needed. Recognizing and celebrating the efforts and contributions of team members within the innovation corner can also reinforce a culture of innovation and motivate continued participation.

CONDUCT (BETTER) VIRTUAL TEAM-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

Virtual team-building activities provide a valuable opportunity to strengthen relationships, boost morale, and nurture a collaborative spirit among team members who may be geographically dispersed. Building a strong sense of camaraderie and cohesion within remote teams is essential for fostering innovation and maintaining high-performance standards.

To ensure the success of virtual team-building activities, leaders must go beyond the typical icebreakers and rethink the approach. Here are some key principles to consider when conducting better virtual team-building activities:

Purposeful planning. Each virtual team-building activity should have a clear objective tied to enhancing teamwork, trust, or problem-solving skills. Align the activities with specific organizational goals to ensure that they contribute meaningfully to the team's overall performance.

Engaging and interactive format. Opt for activities that encourage active participation and create a dynamic atmosphere. Virtual escape rooms, interactive quizzes, and collaborative online games are excellent options that promote engagement and fun while fostering teamwork.

Inclusivity and diversity. Consider the diverse backgrounds, interests, and preferences of remote team members when selecting team-building activities. Ensure that the activities are inclusive and accessible to everyone, regardless of their location or time zone.

Hybrid approach. For organizations with both remote and onsite employees, adopting a hybrid approach to team-building activities can help bridge the gap between the two groups. Integrating virtual and in-person elements allows everyone to participate, fostering a sense of unity across the entire workforce.

Consistency. Team-building should be an ongoing process, not a one-time event. Establish a regular schedule for these activities to maintain team connections and continually strengthen the bonds among remote team members.

Feedback and adaptation. Gather feedback from team

members after each virtual team-building activity to gauge its effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. Use this feedback to tailor future activities and ensure they align with the team's evolving needs.

These team-building activities help team members to bond with each other and with leaders, allowing for spontaneous interactions outside of the workplace and encouraging psychological safety because there's no risk involved. They also encourage team members from different departments to communicate when they wouldn't otherwise have a reason to. These activities lay the groundwork for a cohesive and motivated team, fostering an environment in which innovation can thrive and propel the organization toward its goals.

CELEBRATE AND RECOGNIZE INNOVATIVE ACHIEVEMENTS

Recognizing and celebrating innovative achievements within remote teams is a powerful driver of motivation and engagement. Timely acknowledgment of creative contributions reinforces their significance and communicates the organization's appreciation of the efforts of remote team members. Leaders who make recognition visible to the entire team through transparent communication channels will inspire others to follow suit and strive for excellence.

There are different ways to celebrate and recognize innovative achievements. Leaders can provide tangible incentives, such as gift cards or professional development opportunities, to showcase their appreciation. It can even be something as simple as recognizing "wins" in the company's weekly meetings to ensure that everyone shares their achievement.

Encouraging a culture of peer recognition is equally important. When leaders establish an environment where team members acknowledge and celebrate each other's innovative efforts, they foster a sense of camaraderie and create a supportive ecosystem for continuous innovation.

Celebrating and recognizing innovative achievements within remote teams plays a pivotal role in driving motivation and fostering a collective pursuit of excellence. By nurturing a culture that values innovation and encourages creativity, organizations empower remote teams to push boundaries, explore new ideas, and drive transformative innovations that propel the organization toward its goals.

ESTABLISH VIRTUAL MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS

A final strategy to boost innovation in remote teams—and therefore increase employee engagement—is virtual mentorship programs. These programs offer a unique opportunity for knowledge sharing and guidance, transcending physical distance and enabling remote team members to access invaluable mentorship relationships.

A virtual mentorship program pairs seasoned mentors with aspirational mentees seeking to develop their skills and excel in their roles. Through these digital connections, mentees gain access to a wealth of experience and valuable insights, empowering them to navigate challenges and seize new opportunities with confidence.

To establish virtual mentorship programs, organizations must be purposeful with their mentor-mentee pairings and have a clear objective for the program. Aligning mentees with mentors who possess relevant expertise and shared interests will create meaningful and productive relationships.

An interesting approach to virtual mentor programs can be to include a few reverse mentorships, in which younger generations share insights and knowledge on topics they are experts on with older generations.

However, once the virtual mentorship programs are created, it's important to consider time zones and schedules and make sure the mentors and mentees meet at consistent times to ensure success.

Ultimately, virtual mentorship programs serve as catalysts for remote team members, empowering them to connect with experienced mentors and allowing them to continue to learn and encourage brainstorming for innovation.

The implementation of strategies that foster innovation plays a pivotal role not only in improving remote team performance but also in cultivating employee engagement. Embracing a culture of creativity, driven by these five strategies, empowers remote team members to thrive in their roles and enhances their sense of belonging and fulfillment.

Collectively, these strategies drive innovation within remote teams and contribute to a deeper sense of engagement among employees. As team members feel inspired to contribute their ideas and skills, they develop a stronger sense of purpose and ownership, aligning their individual goals with the organization's broader vision.

Ultimately, by prioritizing innovation and encouraging remote team members to actively participate in the creative process, organizations unlock the full potential of their workforce. A culture that values innovation boosts remote team performance and fosters a cohesive and engaged workforce, paving the way for continued success and growth in the rapidly evolving landscape of remote work. As organizations embrace these strategies, they lay a strong foundation for a thriving remote workforce that is prepared to navigate future challenges and embrace new opportunities with resilience and ingenuity. AQ

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