



# Key Strategies for Remote Work and Virtual Collaboration

Let go of the idea that visibility is the only measure of productivity — otherwise, you risk fostering a culture where appearances matter more than results.

11.29.23

More than half of all American workers report having the option to work from home at least one day a week, according to a recent **MCKINSEY & COMPANY REPORT**. If the majority of organizations provide options to work from home, then most business leaders must know how to foster cohesion and collaboration from employees who are not in the same city or even the same time zone.

Remote work doesn't have to mean being distant — but it does demand an active and intentional approach to bridge the virtual gap.

In this article, we cover practical tips for managing fully remote or hybrid teams and best practices for creating a collaborative environment, with expert insights from **MIRIAM BURGOS**. Professor Burgos is associate vice dean for teaching and innovation, professor of clinical marketing, and academic director of the USC Marshall School of Business **ONLINE MBA PROGRAM**.

The strategies we discuss center on fostering interpersonal relationships as much as leveraging technology, so leaders can immediately apply these tips to today's remote work realities and stay relevant as our definition of "workplace" evolves and expands.

## Essentials for Successful Remote Team Management

Managing remote or hybrid teams is as much about human interaction as it is about technology. Clear communication, shared expectations and a strong sense of trust are key.

### Communication

"Effective communication is paramount when leading remote teams," said Professor Burgos. "Leaders of remote teams should establish clear communication channels, use collaboration tools and platforms (beyond just email or shared documents) and set clear expectations for response times."

Strong communication needs to accompany an understanding that not every tool is appropriate for every conversation. It can be tempting to put everything into a chat, but some conversations need the nuance of video or voice call.

Similarly, those inclined to hop on a call for their questions should know that some discussions are better suited to written communication, especially when a query needs time for a thoughtful response or it'll be helpful to reference the conversation later.



BUILDING GENUINE RELATIONSHIPS WHEN TEAM MEMBERS AREN'T SHARING PHYSICAL SPACE REQUIRES INTENTIONAL EFFORT. [ILLUSTRATION / ISTOCK]

## Featured



**MIRIAM T. BURGOS**  
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*“Leaders of remote teams often have to be even more intentional than leaders of in-person/hybrid teams when offering recognition to their direct reports. Otherwise, remote team members may not feel ‘seen,’ or that their contributions are going unnoticed.”*

— MIRIAM BURGOS, PROFESSOR OF CLINICAL MARKETING

“This fosters a sense of unity, as everyone feels more connected working towards a common goal.”

Setting clear and consistent expectations ensures every team member, no matter where they are, is held to the same standards and are working towards the same goals. Expectations should be documented in writing and available for easy review. Leaders should check in with team members to make sure they understand their roles and responsibilities, and they should be transparent about any changes.

These expectations should not be limited to lower-level employees — leadership teams setting and sharing goals for themselves and for the organization benefits everyone.

### Trust

“Managers should focus on outcomes and results rather than micromanaging,” explained Professor Burgos. “Trust your team members to manage their time and tasks effectively.” If you provide clear, regular communication channels, set clear expectations and check in with your employees, you have provided an excellent foundation for success. Trust your team members to manage their time and tasks effectively.

The **HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW** directs managers toward “micro-understanding” instead of micromanagement. “Micro-understanding is about trusting, but making sure there are no unanticipated bumps; delegating, but being there to keep workers from stumbling; and being flexible, but always heeding the warning signs,” writes HBR contributor Raghu Krishnamoorthy.

## Six Steps to Boost Collaboration Among Remote Teams

Building genuine relationships when team members aren't sharing physical space requires intentional effort. Here are six practical strategies that can make a significant difference:

**Create regular opportunities for collaboration.** Hold regular team meetings to discuss work-related matters and share updates. These do not have to be time-intensive events; consider setting short, regular stand-ups where your team can take 15 minutes to check in.

Beyond regular meetings, give your employees opportunities to work together on projects. These can be within your own department or on cross-functional teams. This work can promote a broader understanding of the organization and allow employees to learn from each other.

**Give your team space to connect socially.** Without hallway hellos or grabbing lunch together, it can be easy to fall into a pattern of only talking about work. Provide open time for your team to talk about something other than their latest project. You can try setting up a social hour centered on something tangible and specific, such as a meal supported by gift cards to a delivery service. Or try an activity together, such as a virtual cooking class, bingo hour or trivia tournament. Recognize that sometimes your team will want to meet socially without their manager — that's okay!

**Make sure everyone knows how to use the technology available to them.** If you train your team members and give them access to documented best practices, you reduce moments of retraining that can interrupt brainstorming and collaborative momentum. Offer training sessions and give employees time to attend. Afterward, provide easy-to access documentation for anyone to refer to whenever they need a refresher.

Don't assume that what works now will work forever. If you have a say in what tools your team uses, conduct an annual assessment of what you're using and see if there are other options that might work better.

**Foster open communication and equitable participation.** Providing collaborative spaces is important, but connections won't form if employees don't feel they can talk openly. Create an atmosphere where team members feel comfortable expressing their ideas and concerns, and ensure that all members feel included.

Plan for regular feedback sessions, both one-on-one with individual employees and as a whole team where you discuss progress, challenges and areas for improvement. You can also use anonymous surveys to collect feedback about experiences and suggestions for improvement. Block off time in your own schedule to review any feedback you receive. Then, take action and share these updates with the team.

**Recognize and celebrate achievements.** Acknowledge individual and team accomplishments. Celebrate milestones, both big and small, to boost morale and foster a sense of achievement. If your organization uses an app like Slack or Teams, consider creating a “shout outs” or “high five” channel where you can trumpet wins to the larger company.

“Leaders of remote teams often have to be even more intentional than leaders of in-person/hybrid teams when offering recognition to their direct reports,” said Professor Burgos. “Otherwise, remote team members may not feel ‘seen,’ or that their contributions are going unnoticed.”

**Lead by example** — and help others to do so as well. Demonstrate the importance of strong connections by building relationships with each person on your team. Remember that your team members are more than just employees, they are complete people with hobbies, interests and lives outside of work. A good leader shows empathy, actively listens and prioritizes being approachable and reliable.

Support professional development opportunities that help your team members grow as leaders themselves. You can also encourage mentoring relationships within your team or company where more experienced employees can mentor newer ones. This fosters professional growth in addition to encouraging camaraderie.

## Setting and Maintaining Boundaries in a Remote Environment

“Knowing how to use digital communication tools while avoiding burnout is essential in today's work environment, where technology plays a significant role in our professional lives,” said Burgos.

Remote work and portable devices have made it possible to work from just about everywhere, but that also means it's harder than ever to disconnect. Here are some tips for setting boundaries in a remote environment.

### Setting boundaries for your team

- Is that message actually urgent? Try to use high-priority notifications sparingly. This avoids constant interruptions to your team and avoids desensitizing them to truly important messages.
- When you do need to send a non-urgent message outside work hours or while a colleague has a do-not disturb notice up, consider scheduling the message for later.
- If your team has access to your calendar, make your errands and personal time public, as much as possible. You don't need to get into details, but letting your team see that you take time for non-work responsibilities shows that work-life balance is genuinely valued and practiced.
- Whenever possible, allow flexible schedules so your team can handle personal tasks and care for kids, pets, plants or themselves. This also lets your employees choose to work at their peak productivity times.

### Setting boundaries for yourself

- Establish specific work hours and communicate them to your team. Stick to these hours as much as possible to prevent work from encroaching on your personal time.
- Instead of responding to every message as it comes in, set specific times during the day to check and respond to emails, messages and notifications.
- Block off time in your schedule for breaks and downtime. These breaks should be technology-free to recharge your mental and emotional energy.
- When you're done for the day, shut down your work devices and put them away in a drawer, bag or other storage space that's out of the way.

While your role as a manager might require a higher level of connectivity, resting and recharging when you can benefits your whole team. Make a delegation plan, set your out-of-office notification and consider deleting work apps off your device for the time that you are away.

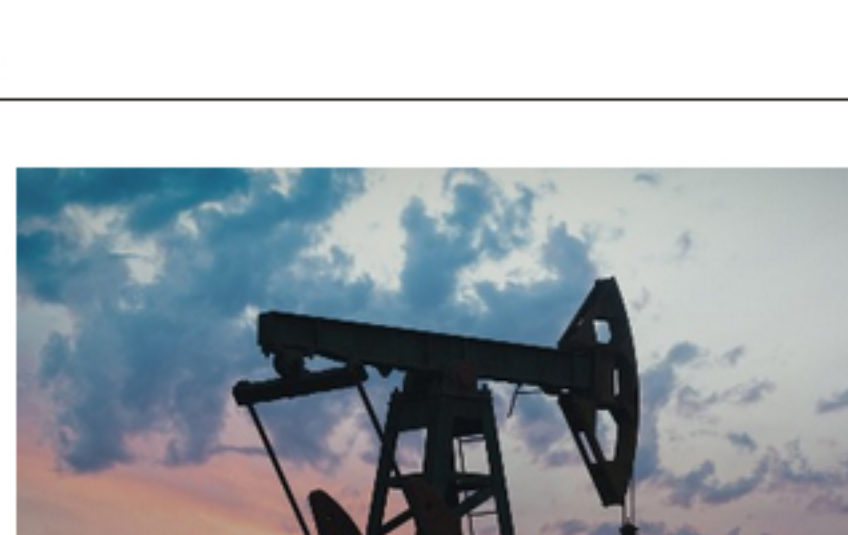
## How Remote and Hybrid Work is Changing Business Education

The ability to effectively lead and motivate hybrid and remote teams has become so critical that these principles are now integral components of business education. For example, in Professor Burgos's “Fundamentals of Business” course in the USC Marshall School of Business Online MBA program, she teaches leaders how to:

- Assess what virtual collaboration tools and platforms will work best for your team.
- Understand how work style assessments, such as SDI, Myers Briggs and similar assessments, inform decisions as a virtual team leader, or as the leader of an organization with at least partially remote collaboration.
- Navigate remote work challenges, including time zone differences, varying levels of engagement during remote meetings and inspiring everyone on your team to work toward a common goal, even when they are not located in the same office space.
- Assess when in-person teamwork may be preferable to remote work and how to make operational decisions, such as selling, general and administrative expenses (SG&A) costs associated with in-person meetings versus online work.

“Shareholders and other stakeholders expect company leaders to behave ethically, communicate successfully with their teams, and lead by example,” said Professor Burgos. “This is a unique skill that is built into the Online MBA curriculum.”

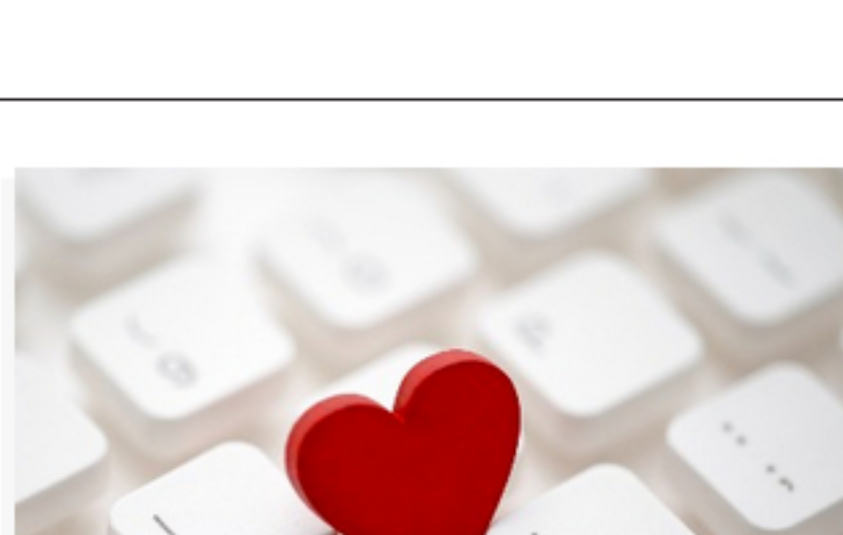
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