

# Fostering remote community: Open principles to help build a productive remote team culture

June 11, 2020 | [Avi Ghosh](#)

A year ago, many of us had no idea that we'd be mandated to work from home for the safety of others. Now, we find ourselves (and our organizations) needing to adapt quickly. We've all needed to embrace new strategies that foster business resilience and enable us to seamlessly respond to continuous change. I'd like to highlight some techniques I've adopted in this new working paradigm and share some ideas that may help others in doing the same.

An initial impulse may be to concentrate on the tools needed to empower large numbers of employees to work from home—like webcams and conferencing systems. However, although technology is essential, team leaders should not overlook the importance of fostering an effective remote culture and guiding the team in working together in a different way.

We also need to remember to focus on people first, especially at a time when people can't always put work first. Remember that people aren't just "working from home" -- that's well-covered territory. In many cases, people who never expected to work remotely are having to adapt in real-time during one of the most stressful moments in their lifetime.

I've been fortunate to have spent the last eight years of my career at Red Hat where a flexible remote working model has always been positively welcomed. I've had the privilege of supporting 60+ North American Fortune 100 customers from my home office in a variety of roles, most recently in sales but prior in delivery management (small to large teams) and technical consulting.

With this in mind, I'll outline several ways to foster that sense of "team" remotely to prevent disconnection while working with distance. Following these recommendations may require a little extra effort at first, but once the train is in motion there is no stopping resilient and inventive approaches during this historic time of disruption.

## Practice Empathy and Compassion

Let's start here. Empathy and compassion are key to building trust in your remote community, as well as sustaining team spirit. For example, you may end up needing "more" from the team at some particular time, whether it be documentation, risk writeups, or status updates. As a leader you feel compelled to point out these shortfalls, but remember to have empathy and compassion for your team members, and understand that they are being as productive and responsive as they can be. Showing your trust will strengthen the bond you have with your team and provide that necessary morale boost to keep pushing ahead.

Encourage each other. If you notice that a team member hasn't been attending meetings or has been less active, don't be afraid to reach out to offer support.

## Building a Remote Team Culture

How does a team leader foster a sense of community across a team with members all working from home? It all starts with good habits, routines, and practices. The following are ways we translate open culture principles like transparency and collaboration, to best practices in remote ways of working.

### Hold a Weekly Huddle

Using your conference system, make a weekly "huddle" a part of the team ritual (assuming time zones permit, which isn't always the case!). You can use this time at the start of every week to build trust through interpersonal engagement. Give everyone a set amount of time to talk about what is on their minds.

The weekly huddle should not be about work. There will be plenty of opportunities for work talk later. The huddle is about getting in the habit of seeing each other on a screen, and establishing a safe virtual space where people can articulate how they are feeling. This can help maintain the trust and connection necessary to get the work done.

A [blog from Atlassian](#) notes: "Loneliness is probably the biggest downside to remote work and can lead to disengagement, which, in turn, leads to poor performance on the job. Making time to form social bonds and build trust not only combats loneliness, it also helps teams work together on a tactical level. Understanding each other on a personal level means we can communicate more effectively and have an easier time distributing roles and responsibilities across the team. In fact, 94 percent of workers we surveyed say mutual respect and connection are critical to their team's success, and 19 percent say it's the number one factor in their sense of well-being at work."

## Establish an Enhanced Communication and Collaboration Strategy Early

The following are tips to create a collaborative team chat space:

- Plan how you will communicate, because clear communication is critical to establishing effective collaboration. For example, some teams prefer frequent regular check-in meetings, while others prefer asynchronous communication (e.g. messages), and have fewer synchronous communications (e.g. phone calls or web chats).
- Create a [social contract](#) or charter for the team, listing "Do's and Don'ts." For example, one of the requirements may be to be on time, pointing out that just because you are all working remotely, doesn't mean your colleague's time is any less important.
- [Define "Done"](#)—The concept of done is generally open to interpretation. Letting the team agree on what "done" looks like can increase team efficiency.
- Don't invite every team member to every meeting. Only invite stakeholders that need to be there. You can always distribute meeting notes to the rest of the team, or even a larger audience, if necessary.

## Align Tooling

To support remote work you need to select the right distributed and collaborative tooling. Video chat is not enough for collaboration. Using productivity management tools (like Trello or JIRA for IT teams) are ideal for keeping track of what is expected, how far the team has come, and what is needed for someone else to resume any outstanding work.

Tools that do not allow live collaboration are the killer of productivity—and sanity. Instead, use tools like Google Docs to allow the whole team to collaborate in real time. This enables each team member to build on ideas that colleagues have already developed, and get to the best result in a better and faster way.

Documentation also becomes a priority when working remotely. Provide enough information to allow someone in another location, or even another time zone, to pick up where you left off.

## Visibility is Everything

Selecting the right tool to visually represent the state of work in real time can help accelerate communication, review, and strategy. In 2020, traditional reporting is "out" and real-time dashboards are "in."

For example, MURAL is a digital workspace for visual collaboration. MURAL offers easy diagram creation and tools to facilitate more impactful meetings and workshops. Consider using work tracking tools such as ASANA to track progress, assign tasks, and follow up asynchronously with the larger team.

## Re-evaluate the Calendar

Don't be afraid to re-evaluate your team's calendar as you progress and learn more about how the team functions remotely. Some meetings are more necessary than others. Some meetings are more productive than others. The purpose of a meeting is not simply to have a meeting. So make time for calendar spring cleaning, to clear out any meetings that are superfluous, and make room for the more useful sessions.

## Set Advanced Agendas

Always use agendas, and send them out in advance. "Live and die" by the agenda, as that sets a precedent for meeting attendance. Teams that use agendas are more likely to stay on-topic and achieve their goals.

Also make sure to assign all critical roles—such as facilitator, time keeper, and note taker—and include them in every meeting.

## Reward, Appreciate and Acknowledge

Recognition is a vital form of appreciation, and essential to showing your team they are valued. Sometimes, it's nothing more than having a public kudos on a team channel. Other times it can be a team gift. For the top performers, consider sending out a gift card or similar token of appreciation.

## Hold Virtual Events for Your Remote Community

The "all work and no play" approach does not cultivate a happy and productive team. To keep your team excited and engaged, the following are a few suggested virtual events you can schedule weekly, monthly or quarterly— the events should be curated and tailored to the team.

I've been a party to many of these ideas below and found them all to be great ways to team build remotely. Participation should be mandatory to encourage this new way of engagement.

- Virtual Happy Hour
- Book Club
- Lunch and Learn: Host lightning talks remotely with 2-3 speakers
- Movie Night: Get some popcorn and all watch the same movie. Have a chat window open so you can all share thoughts and discuss in real time
- Game Night: Various devices allow for co-op multiplayer playing.
- Cooking Class
- Technical Workshop with an industry leading guest instructor
- Motivational Talk
- PJ Monday: Stay in your sleep attire and embrace the surreal times we're all living in
- Virtual Lunch or Coffee
- Virtual Concert: Team members can show off musical talent or standup routines.
- Group Yoga Class or Morning Meditation

## Adapting to working from home

In the previous section I delved into best practices for building a remote culture. In this section, I'll provide some tips and tricks to adapt to working remotely.

### Establish Disciplined Remote Work Routines

A routine may help you and your team members to maintain a healthy work-life balance, which in turn may improve your productivity. Practicing good habits can help you establish resilient routines. The following suggestions may help you and your team members set remote work routines:

- Wake up at the same time every day.
- Stand up and move around every hour.
- Designate time for a walk, if you need one.
- Schedule breaks to step away from your screen.
- Designate times for checking e-mail, communicating with friends, and eating lunch.
- Use the alarm or reminder features on your phone, computer, and calendar.
- Follow the 20:20:20 rule. Every 20 minutes look at something 20 feet away for 20 seconds.
- ProTip: Schedule 25 minute meetings instead of 30 minutes, and 50 minute meetings instead of 60 minutes, to allow time for thought, reflection, follow up notes, a quick break, and also a moment to context switch.

Many of us are working from home under exceptional and less than optimal circumstances. If, for example, you're suddenly homeschooling younger children, a rigid schedule may not be doable. Definitely make time for breaks and to step away from the computer, but if a set time every day for lunch isn't possible, that's OK. But I suggest trying to avoid the habit of eating lunch hunched over the keyboard.

## Set Internal, External and Personal Boundaries

The following are recommendations to help you and your team members set boundaries when working remotely from home:

- If possible, dedicate a specific work from home (WFH) space to work from, and set boundaries to designate when you are in "work mode" vs. "home mode." Be careful to avoid distractions. It's a lot easier to find yourself cleaning your kitchen table or doing laundry during designated work time, simply because this can happen so much more easily when working from home.
- Set the same boundaries with your communication tools and devices. Because you are working from home, you may feel more available to others—for example, answering every personal message and email as they come in. But this will seriously hinder your productivity. Turn off notifications on unimportant chat groups, remove desktop notifications for text messages and other personal communication tools, and filter your work emails so you only receive notifications when they are high priority.
- During a meeting, you might want to give other team members a virtual tour of your environment. Turn the camera around, show your home office and share any likely interruptions such as rambunctious children, curious pets or joint spousal workspaces. (If they consent to this, of course.) This is often a good way to bond with others in the same boat as you, reinforcing the idea that "we are all in this together."
- Recognize life happens. If you follow all the suggestions outlined above, you will be well-prepared to work from home, but it is impossible to shut home life out completely. Rather than getting caught off-guard, expect and embrace those moments when home life inadvertently collides with WFH life.

## Gain Additional Skills with Red Hat Open Innovation Labs

We've been putting our remote working tips into practice so that we can continue working with customers through [Red Hat Open Innovation Labs](#).

We have developed a virtual residency to meet the needs of customers and organizations—where the focus is to continue to deliver business value while building a culture of resilience. The [virtual Labs residency](#) extends the great work of traditional engagements to that of a virtual environment. Here are a few examples to show the virtual implications of that extension:

- Information radiation has never been more important in a virtual setting. Teams will still "walk the walls" together to ensure informational transparency and collaborate face-to-face individually and as a group, all through video conferencing tools.
- Sprint planning, daily standups, reviews, retrospectives, and many more virtual sessions can be recorded and replayed to wider audiences to increase learning and adoption of practices.
- Driving collaboration, a shared sense of alignment, and an immersive experience can build a virtually connected community focused on delivering increments as a team. Red Hat Open Innovation Labs teams are even hosting virtual movie nights and pizza parties to promote team-building and togetherness.

Leaders in open source technologies and fostering open source communities, Red Hatters are seasoned experts in building high-performing and innovative communities, remotely. For more information, join this [webinar](#) where we uncover the behaviors—enabled by tools like MURAL and practices from the Open Practice Library—that teams and leaders can use now to ensure that, despite the current working climate, teams are connected, productive, and engaged.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Avi Ghosh is an Austin Texas based Services Manager with Red Hat. An open source evangelist at his core, he brings 15+ years of hands-on customer-facing delivery experience in both implementation and leadership, with the last 8 focused on Red Hat's exhaustive emerging technology portfolio. Ghosh is dedicated to helping his talented peers surpass their career ambitions, develop innovative ideas, and achieve personal goals.