No Boundaries Leadership

How do leaders respect their team's work–life balance when the boundary between work and life gets increasingly blurry?

By Barbara Kay, LPC, RCC, TIPC

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I CAN'T BELIEVE we're still talking about the impact of COVID-19 on the workplace. It's been almost four years! Nearly every day there's a new article about ongoing challenges. If you're not feeling it, you're extremely fortunate. If you are feeling it, you're not alone. I'm routinely having coaching conversations with leaders about team concerns. Here's a small sampling:

"I have a team member who works remotely and is normally excellent. However, occasionally he ghosts the team in the middle of the day. His role is critical and time-sensitive. I've spoken to him, yet it continues to happen. I need to revive his commitment to the team."

"I have a combination team. Some people are fully in person and some hybrid. In 2022, I hired an in-office team member and paid a premium specifically for an in-office commitment. After a year, the employee asked for a hybrid schedule. I was stunned. My human resources consultant says I'm overly generous with compensation and PTO. Yet, no matter how much I give, people keep asking for more."

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"I had a talented junior associate with great potential. Our large firm has a strict policy about limiting remote work for associates. He requested some flexibility, which was denied. He left the firm and we lost the talent. He saw no reason to commute when he could work on a computer at home."

"I'm the senior partner and have a three-hour commute. Remote work made me vastly more productive. I had a chance to relocate, but my team lives close to our legacy office. I didn't want to risk losing team members by asking them to commute to me. I'm back to a long commute, so I can lead the team."

The most recent trends in the workforce are revealed in the 2023 Q2 Flex Report[1] and the Q3 Flex Report.[2] These national surveys by Scoop Technologies reveal workplace patterns for over 4,000 companies with more than 100 million workers, across 30,000 offices. The Q1 Flex Report–Financial Services[3] includes the most recent data on the financial services sector.

The Flex Reports Reveal Important Take-Aways:

1. The boundaries between work and home are gone.
2. People love flexibility and don't want to give it up.
3. The marketplace offers talented people choices.

Given all of that, how do you lead a productive, cohesive, and loyal team? I recommend three leadership approaches.

Focus on Purpose over Position

The leader in the large firm who lost a great talent was frustrated by the young professional's refusal to commute. When I inquired if there was a purpose for in person work, the answer was, "Yes, when I am in the office, we need to be together." Unfortunately, the firm gives junior professionals less flexibility than senior professionals. The associate was commuting to work alone. There's the rub. Young professionals expect a better reason than "associates have to be in the office." It made no sense to waste time commuting for no purpose. When I asked if the junior colleague was productive at home, the leader said, "Yes! He only needed to be in person when I was in the office too." The firm lost a bright talent because the leadership focused on position over purpose.

On the other hand, one of my clients leads a growing firm with new inexperienced staff. In this case, location matters. The new remote staff is

Back to the Office Trends in 2023

Work management software startup Scoop partnered with People Data Labs to publish real-time information on how organizations are managing work locale. The Financial Services Deep Dive Flex Report, published in March 2023, focuses solely on financial services firms. Before I review the trends, let's clarify the three categories of work location highlighted in the report:

Fully Flexible (FF): All employees are fully remote or may freely choose their work location.

Structured Hybrid (SH): The organization sets specific expectations on when employees will work in the office. This may include a minimum number of days, specific days, or a minimum percentage of time in the office.

Full in Office (FIO): Employees sit in the office full time, every work day.

- Structured Hybrid is most common for investment and advisory wealth management firms, with 54 percent of the workforce in that model. Thirty-three percent are Fully Flexible and only 13 percent are Full in Office.
- Insurance firms and banks are similar to advisory firms, with banks having the most fully on-site workforce. Fintech is the outlier with 78 percent offering a Fully Flexible work model.
- Company size makes a difference. Large firm employees are half Structured Hybrid (49 percent) with the remaining staff split evenly between Fully Flexible and Full in Office.
- Firms with fewer than 250 employees offer considerable flexibility. Two-thirds of smaller advisory, insurance, or bank employees are Fully Flexible. The remaining staff is split evenly between FIO and defined SH.

struggling to achieve basic competency, and remote training has been much more difficult. In addition, some take flexibility too far. They check out mid-day, clock out early, and their output is very low. In this case, the new staff must be in person because remote work undermines their performance. Their junior status has nothing to do with it.

Assess work location by purpose. Ask yourself, "How much does the employee need to work in person?" Legitimate in-person needs include training and assessing new talent, in-person client service, and live team collaboration. Many team purposes cannot be accomplished in front of a computer at home.

Focus on Ownership over Hours

As the boundary between work and home melted away, the value of measuring performance by hours did too. The most recent Microsoft Work Trend Index[4] reports that 87 percent of employees feel more productive working remotely, but only 12 percent of leaders are confident that's true. The loss of seeing work happen undermined leaders' trust. In response, organizations instituted monitoring software, which inspired fruitless activity to inflate work hours. Time is not a reliable predictor of results.

Instead of managing hours, focus on building an ownership culture. Psychologically shift ownership onto team members. Set clear outcome goals with a support and accountability schedule built into the process. Then expect the team to show up as sched-uled. When they struggle with a task, facilitate, but don't take ownership. It's a subtle, but powerful difference. Coaching questions facilitate owner-ship. Pose brief questions that begin with "what" or "how." Examples include:

- How are you doing on your workflow?
- What are the challenges?

- What guidance do you need from me?
- What will you complete by the next progress update?

This sounds easy but is emotionally difficult. It takes great discipline to nurture ownership, rather than manage activities. On the upside, the team will become less reliant on external prompts. Failing team members will be revealed more quickly, and good team members will become more proactive.

> **"Leaders and firms continue to evolve. Wherever your team is now, focus on purpose over position, ownership over hours, and camaraderie over convenience."**

Focus on Camaraderie over Convenience

The recent *Harvard Business Review* article "Why Hybrid Work Can Become Toxic"[5] outlines how team relationships deteriorate when people no longer work in the same location. This highlights what we know intuitively. Remote work reduces cohesion, distorts perceptions, and puts the team out of sync. The work may get done, but team relationships suffer.

Sadly, it can be hard to persuade people to invest in team togetherness. Remote work has compelling benefits. Add up the extra time and expense of in-office work. It's huge. My client with the long commute added hours of productivity and flex-ibility working remotely. She had to give these up to build team relationships. It's not convenient, but it's worth it. To overcome the pull of convenience, focus the team on the benefits of investing in camaraderie.

A fabulous tool for this is meta-communication. Meta-communication intentionally highlights perspectives that are not obvious, and not part of daily tasks. It's a great way to shift the team's focus to the losses of remote work. You can meta-communicate with questions. You might ask:

• How is our team cohesion?
• What do we miss when we don't work together?
• How can we make in-person work meaningful?

You can highlight team dynamics with observations, as well. You might start a conversation with:

• I used to be able to see when teammates were having a rough day. I have a harder time seeing that now.
• I miss the impromptu fun we had. I'd like to find a way to enjoy time together again.
• I wonder how we will keep our relationships strong going forward.

For a more specific example, let's consider the employee who is "ghosting" his team and confounding his leader. I don't believe he's intentionally harming his peers. He's just lost perspective on the impact of his absence. Since he can't see their distress remotely, convenience easily wins.

A typical performance conversation would focus on the individual and their behavior. The leader might say, "Completing your work is too critical for you to be offline for hours. You need to respond quickly." Although appropriate, this approach allows the employee to remain focused on himself. In isolation, when the choice is between doing work now or later, convenience easily wins.

Alternatively, the leader can shift the employee's self-centeredness by focusing on what the employee is *not* seeing. He might say, "I don't think you realize the stress your absence causes. It's distressing when people who count on you can't reach you. You didn't walk out on the team when we worked in the office. I'm concerned for you and for the team."

The meta-communication approach provides a more powerful incentive for the absent employee to stay engaged. The decision is more than a convenient choice of work now or later. It's a choice to help or hurt his peers. In addition, the risk to his reputation and his relationships is revealed. Convenience is far less compelling when the full impact is exposed. If you're concerned about something that is not being openly addressed, it's time to meta-communicate.

Leaders and firms continue to evolve. Wherever your team is now, focus on purpose over position, ownership over hours, and camaraderie over convenience. This will help engage your team, wherever they sit. In addition, the employee motivation research is crystal clear. Employees are motivated to excel when they feel ownership, understand the purpose, and feel strongly connected to the team. Nothing you do to enhance purpose, ownership, and camaraderie will be wasted. Your team is likely to excel even more. ■

Endnotes

1. See www.canva.com/design/DAFhIO54xwc/view?utm_content=DAFhIO54xwc.
2. See www.canva.com/design/DAFqZdjZWWo/44d_W-Eq8DaO4TxImKLGjg/view?utm_content=DAFqZdjZWWo.
3. See www.canva.com/design/DAFbUySu2Ps/CojuGrFH4KasHIy1GyQuZg/view?utm_content=DAFbUySu2Ps.
4. See www.microsoft.com/en-us/worklab/work-trend-index/hybrid-work-is-just-work.
5. Mortensen, Mark. 2023, July 28. "Why Hybrid Work Can Become Toxic." *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2023/07/why-hybrid-work-can-become-toxic.