

The Complete Compliance and Ethics Manual 2024

Building Cultures of Integrity in Remote and Hybrid Environments

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Historically, culture was built and spread from a cultural base. These cultural bases usually had a geographic or environmental component and, more often than not, entailed groups of individuals coming together collectively to be more than just their individual contributions. As we evolved in the ways in which we communicate, collective experiences were spread more widely. Even though these cultures were more broadly disbursed, the common approaches and collective still held strong as the core of the culture.

Beginning in 2020, many people experienced the loss of a workplace environment as a regular force in our lives. At the core of this rapid shift was the question: Does a culture of integrity survive when common environments no longer exist? What we learned is that it's possible for organizations to survive—and thrive—with employees who are fully remote or have hybrid working arrangements. In fact, research shows that teleworkers are more productive, demonstrate stronger performance, call in sick less, and stay longer. Additionally, organizations save \$11,000 per year on average per part-time telecommuter.^[2]

But, despite these enticing statistics, many companies have called for return-to-office locations—whether because of the expensive real estate leases that still need to be paid or local government pressure—the estimates of percentages of remote workers have not continued on the same trajectory as during the early days of the pandemic. While there are more remote positions available, hybrid work environments seem to be more of the norm. And this trend is expected to continue. According to a recent Forbes article, in 2023 12.7% of U.S. workers are fully remote, while 28.2% are working a hybrid work model.^[3] Globally, 16% of companies are already fully remote with many more offering hybrid workplaces.^[4]

An overwhelming majority of 98% of workers expressed a preference to work remotely at least part of the time. As a result, companies continue to grapple with how best to consider remote or hybrid work environments and what impact that can have on shaping and maintaining corporate culture.

What Is Culture?

Any group's culture is built around its shared values, attributes, and characteristics. It dictates what the group prioritizes, what is and isn't acceptable in terms of behavior (both from the organization itself and its members/employees), and how people within a group (which can be a team, organization, company, etc.) interact with each other and their customers and communities. Every company has a culture, whether it's one the organization has deliberately designed and communicated or one that's developed organically. But that doesn't mean every company has a strong culture.

For our purposes, a company's culture is built around seven essential elements:

1. **Vision and values.** Key to a company's culture, its vision is linked to its purpose—essentially why it exists and what it seeks to achieve, packaged in a way that's compelling and inspiring. Similarly, a company's values outline a set of standards or guidelines that will help it achieve its vision, and they form the core of its culture. Neither a company's vision nor its values need to be complex or overproduced. In fact,

companies are well served to focus on authenticity and simplicity over being clever or “original.”

2. **Practices and foundations.** A company’s practices (or foundations) should be built around its values, bringing them to life and forming the company’s everyday operations. For instance, if a company includes integrity among its values, it must have practices in place to illustrate what integrity looks like in action.
3. **People.** For any company, its people are intrinsically linked to its culture, as culture is inherently human. That also means people can make or break culture; for good or ill, they’re the ambassadors of a company’s culture, so ensuring they’re aligned with—and passionate about—what the company is trying to create is incredibly important. The most successful workplace cultures understand this deeply and incorporate cultural fit into their recruiting efforts to ensure they have the right people on board from the start.
4. **The stories a company tells and what they reward.** There’s nothing more human than the desire to hear and relate to a good story. Everyone has a story and that extends to companies. Sometimes called a narrative, these stories are built around a company’s history, and they help people connect with the company. A company’s story can be formal or anecdotal, but every story a company tells should be tied to its culture. Similarly, organizations need to consider what kind of behaviors they want to see from their employees and reward people who demonstrate those qualities consistently, in line with what they say they value. Adherence to a company’s values should be built into its performance management activities and employee reviews.
5. **Working environment.** Different organizations have different physical environments in which their employees and customers interact. Traditionally, for many companies, this has been on-site in a building with rows of cubicles or offices or perhaps even open architecture that encourages employees to collaborate and interact, both formally and around the watercooler. The working environment has been an important element to culture in the past, and it will continue to matter as more companies move to hybrid or full-time remote operations. As more of a company’s employees begin to work from their homes, finding new and creative ways of interacting and *connecting* will be imperative. At the same time, many employees will embrace their new work environment and may find themselves more comfortable and productive working remotely. In the remote and hybrid environment, the virtual working environment and how individuals interact becomes even more important. The virtual meeting places are the watercoolers now, and maintaining cultural look and feel is just as important remotely.
6. **Leadership support.** Culture is only as important to a company’s employees as it is to its leaders. That’s why culture really isn’t just about what a company says but also, and much more importantly, what it does. Let’s return to the earlier example of integrity. If a company wants to claim that integrity is fundamental to the way it operates, its leaders must model integrity in everything they do and expect the same from their employees. If a leader expects integrity from their people but behaves in a way that’s counter to those words, employees begin to learn that a company’s values are simply lip service and aren’t authentic. It’s important that leaders feel empowered—and accountable—to be ambassadors of their company’s culture. How you live the leadership role of integrity is to declare your intent and then demonstrate through acts.
7. **Communication.** Culture isn’t something a company creates in a vacuum, and it’s not just about words on a website. It’s a living, evolving, and integral part of how a company operates. Culture is the total sum of every experience of every human within an organization. It is what is lived daily. Therefore, companies that have strong cultures talk about their culture with their employees, and they do it a lot. But this doesn’t mean a company needs to send out a weekly email about culture. While formal avenues and channels to share company culture should exist, the companies that are best at culture weave elements of their core beliefs into the conversation every time they communicate with employees—whether that’s in an email, a

training, an internal meeting, or conversations between managers and their employees. Additionally, culture training should be part of every company's onboarding process to ensure culture is embedded in each employee's experience from day one.

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