



**OFFICE
OPTIONAL**

**HOW TO BUILD
A CONNECTED
CULTURE WITH
VIRTUAL TEAMS**

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How to Build a
Connected Culture
with Virtual Teams

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Remote Work 101: It's All about Trust

The company was up and running with remote workers, and it was going well. And then we ran into the issue that is the biggest initial worry of anyone who is starting to manage remote workers: An employee “went dark.”

Countless emails, phone calls, and voicemails—no response. No information was available from family or friends. As days passed, our concerns heightened. Should we file a missing person report? Check the hospitals?

When we exhausted all other ideas, I decided to go to the employee’s house, hoping it would not be uncomfortable for the employee, or worse,

that I would find something had happened to her. I knocked on the front door but got no answer. Did I have the right house? Maybe she just stepped out for food? Should I wait in my car until she returned?

As I settled back into my car with nothing to do, it hit me—this was my first official stake-out! I'd seen them on TV but underestimated the complexity. Based on the awkward glances from passersby, I was clearly lacking the skills to look inconspicuous. Pretend phone calls and searching for imaginary objects in my car clearly wasn't cutting it.

Minutes turned to hours. So I did what any good consultant would do and established my own stakeout best practices—things like periodically moving the car, getting out and checking the tires, opening the hood, checking the oil, making more fake phone calls—basically looking like a cat burglar casing the entire neighborhood.

The good news was nobody called the cops, our employee eventually returned home and was okay, and my stakeout skills have since atrophied. But we did learn that not everyone is able to work in a virtual company!

—Jeff L., Cincinnati, Ohio

Don't Try This at Home

When business leaders consider a remote workforce, their immediate worry is that virtual employees will simply not work as hard as they would under in-person supervision. The reality is that situations like the story above are *incredibly* rare. We have worked with thousands of people over the last 20 years and can count on our hands how many times we've had an issue where someone was intentionally not working.

Most everyone can work from home. Many people actually find that their productivity increases, and nearly a third say they are able to work more efficiently without the distractions of an office.¹

Research aside, lack of trust in remote workers remains a common mistake companies make when they start building a remote work force. They waste money on tools that monitor when the employee is sitting at their desk, what apps they are using, and what sites they are visiting. If you want to build a great culture and are going to take this approach, there is no need to read the rest of this book. No one is happy when they are not trusted. You will have a culture, but it won't be good and certainly not great.

Many companies also mistakenly assume their management and measurement structures need to be revamped for virtual workers. This is simply not true, but you may want to baseline productivity before launching a virtual team and compare the results afterward.

Based on my experience, you can completely trust your team when you aren't directly observing them. Research backs this up: Organizations with high-trust cultures have been found to have 50 percent lower turnover rates; greater stock market returns; and increased innovation, engagement, and organizational agility.² Employees with high-trust organizations also feel 74 percent less stressed, 50 percent more productive, 106 percent more energetic, and 29 percent more satisfied with their lives.³

In the rare case that someone isn't getting their work done, we've been able to tell quickly. Just like a brick-and-mortar company, if you have a good management structure in place and are reviewing work product at an appropriate pace, when someone isn't performing, it shows up immediately.

The biggest issue we face is usually the exact opposite: Employees end up working *too* much because they do not have the natural break of going into and leaving the office (more on this in chapter 10). Also, if someone hasn't worked remotely before, there's usually an adjustment period as they figure out how to make it work for their home environment and schedule. Those who are initially reluctant to make the switch usually love it once they get their new routine down.

When we do encounter a problem, it is an extreme rarity that it has anything to do with the person working virtually. Instead, the issues tend to be normal employee development snags that should be addressed the same as if they were working in an office. If we need

to deliver a hard message, we schedule a face-to-face meeting or a video call.

To start building your remote culture, establish and share some basic rules. The first and most important rule is mutual trust between the company and its workers. The rules after that? As few as possible. Tell your employees they will be treated like adults with the flexibility to get the job done however is best for them. Of course, different types of businesses have constraints on when an employee needs to be available. Depending on the job type, we try to give employees the ability to work whatever hours are best for them.

DO Try This at Home

I joined Centric in late August 2017. When I rejoined my previous organization after maternity leave, my kid was only four months old. Due to issues related to maternity, feeding, care, and the long commute in Delhi, I was unable to give proper time to my child and decided to put my career on hold. While I enjoyed my time as a full-time mother with my infant, I also found I missed my individuality and professional life. After a while, I started searching for a new job either near my home or near a nursery facility.

Fortunately, I found Centric. Working from home has been a boon for me. I have the freedom to work at any time and from anywhere

and, therefore, it's become manageable for me to take care of my child while having a professional life, too.

—Ruchika G., Gurgaon, India

This story illustrates the power of a virtual workforce: a talented woman in India is able to continue her career, collaborate with team members around the world, avoid a time-wasting commute, and have the proper work-life balance to raise her child.

But it's not just the worker who benefits. The company benefits greatly, as well. In fact, according to a Stanford study, telecommuters take fewer breaks, sick days, and time off, and they have half the attrition rate of in-office workers.⁴ A 2016 study also found that 91 percent of remote workers feel they're more productive.⁵

In other words, this research proves what we've always found true at Centric: you can work remotely with people anywhere in the world, get work done with greater productivity, *and* have a strong culture.

Translating Trust into Great Culture

Trust in your employees is essential for remote work success. It also forms the underlying foundation of a great virtual culture. Here are two stories that help explain.

One of the stories I rely upon when talking about the Centric culture is how work-life balance is a

real thing and the flexibility we employees have. I had the opportunity to coach my daughter's high school soccer team, which meant leaving work around 2:30 every afternoon during the fall season. This was possible because of the relationship my team had with my client along with the trust Centric had in me. I was able to have a great experience with my daughter's team and still fulfill my client expectations in a nontraditional manner. This flexibility continues today as I occasionally spend time during the work week teaching adaptive sports to the disabled population. I am grateful to my company for having and maintaining great cultural standards and out-of-the-box thinking that is empowered by trust and flexibility.

—Gwenn D., Columbus, Ohio

One of the primary reasons I chose to work at Centric, aside from the incredible people, was the company's "self-managed" paid time off (PTO) policy. When I first heard about this, I was amazed; never had an employer showed so much trust in my ability to manage my own time. With great joy, I balanced my time off by working extra hours with no intervention on the part of management to ask me where I had been last Tuesday at 10 o'clock.

Three years in to my employment at Centric, a friend from college began to fill my head with delusions of grandeur about hiking the Appalachian Trail, a 2,200-mile trail stretching from Georgia to Maine. I became infatuated with the idea. I recalled from my employee handbook that part of Centric's self-managed PTO policy was the ability to take a three-month leave of absence. This policy was so unbelievable to me that I had to meet with the president to confirm the company's support.

I made arrangements with my client and everyone I worked with. When I presented the idea to leadership, they had the utmost trust in the arrangements I had made, never questioning if I "needed" the time or if the plans I had made with the client were acceptable. To the contrary, every leader I spoke to seemed to share my excitement at the prospect of fulfilling a dream. The only questions I received were in regard to my survival on such a treacherous vacation.

I did survive, hiking 900 miles of Appalachian Trail with my friend over the course of my leave of absence. It was a life-changing experience. To this day, I'm filled with happiness and gratitude to have walked those miles and to have been welcomed back by both my leaders and my client.

—Kyle B., Columbus, Ohio

As you can see, by starting with trust and allowing remote employees great autonomy and flexibility to manage their time, people get to be independent and empowered while still feeling like a part of something bigger. In the two stories above, you can sense how delighted employees are to have flexibility. This leads to happy, loyal employees with a rich quality of life, which leads to an amazing culture.

Building Trust between Team Members

While trusting your employees is important, employees also need to trust each other. Many of us have been in organizations where this doesn't occur, and politics win the day instead of the best idea. Coworkers talk behind each other's backs, and you don't know who you can trust. This leads to a toxic culture, unhappy employees, and bad results.

It's on the company to prevent this by facilitating trust between coworkers. Trust is particularly critical when building culture in a remote environment because virtual workers are unable to read all the visual cues that you get face-to-face. If they trust one another, they'll give their colleagues the benefit of the doubt and have more patience to work through tough problems and any communication issues that arise.

At Centric, we've fostered trust between coworkers in a virtual environment by:

- Incorporating natural ways for employees to build deeper relationships that foster trust. This is covered in chapters 6 and 7 on building virtual relationships and maximizing face-to-face interactions when they occur.
- Teaching everyone to assume good intent. If something doesn't feel right, ask respectful questions to understand the other person's perspective. Always start with the assumption that your coworker is trying to do the right thing.
- Asking people to talk to each other one-on-one if they are having an issue, rather than going over their head to a supervisor or complaining to a coworker. Yes, this is super hard to teach. People naturally want to avoid conflict. To help, we offer employees curriculum based on the book *Crucial Conversations*.⁶ This provides a roadmap for having conversations when the stakes or emotions are high.
- Having a zero-tolerance policy for politics. If we see it, we call it out and coach that person on how to create a positive environment.

Trust is some powerful magic. When you know your coworkers have your back, you are at ease to focus on doing your best work. Everyone doing their best work leads to dynamic teams that accomplish amazing things. Being part of a high-performing team that you are excited to engage with creates a strong culture peo-

ple want to be a part of. In other words, trust fuels a cycle of happy, productive employees, great work, and an amazing culture.

Quick Read Summary

- The underlying foundation of a great virtual culture is trust in all your remote workers. Don't worry that remote employees will not work hard. This is an extremely rare situation, and, in fact, remote workers tend to work harder than their in-office counterparts!
- When you begin allowing employees to work remotely, simply allow them to work from home. Don't overcomplicate it. In the rare case that someone isn't getting their work done, we've been able to tell quickly. Just like a brick-and-mortar company, if you have a good management structure in place and are reviewing work product at an appropriate pace, when someone isn't performing, it shows up immediately.
- Starting with trust and giving employees great autonomy and flexibility allows people to feel independent and empowered while still feeling like a part of something bigger.

This leads to happy, loyal employees with a rich quality of life, which in turn leads to an amazing culture.

How to Get Started Building a Culture of Trust

- Establish as few rules for working remotely as possible—the idea is to treat people like responsible adults who can govern their own time.
- Encourage employees to trust one another, to assume good intent, and to pick up the phone if they sense an issue is brewing.

Challenges You Will Encounter

- You will have people reluctant to work from a home office. We've had many objections, but

once someone starts doing it, they never want to go back.

- Employees who work remotely tend to work too much. We discuss how to address this in chapter 10, which covers being a great virtual employee.
- You must have strong leaders to help encourage people to resolve issues themselves. This is difficult to achieve—we address this more fully in chapter 6.



Larry English is president and cofounder of Centric Consulting, a management consulting firm that guides you in the search for answers to complex digital, business, and technology problems. Before Centric Consulting, Larry worked for a large international consulting firm out of college until he got burned out at 25. He and his newlywed wife backpacked around the world as he tried to find his path in life—and he did. Shortly after returning home, he and his like-minded pals founded Centric with a focus on changing how consulting was done by building a remote company with a mission to create a culture of employee and client happiness. Today, Centric is a 1,000-plus person company with offices in 12 US cities and India. Larry is father to four boys and husband to an adventurous wife. They reside in Columbus, Ohio.

Larry is donating a portion of the royalties he receives from *Office Optional* to charity. To learn more about him and how to become an office optional company, visit LarryEnglish.net.