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These employees could make or break your company's hybrid workplace

By [Ty West](#) – Senior Editor, The Business Journals,
Jun 25, 2021

While prominent CEOs have drawn their share of praise and scorn for their public takes on work-from-home policies, experts say it's actually another group of individuals that hold the key to the success of post-pandemic workplaces: front-line managers.

For companies that are newly [embracing a hybrid model with work-from-home options](#), experts say front-line managers will play several pivotal roles — [particularly when it comes to the all-important trust factor](#).

C-suite executives may set the tone for post-pandemic workplace policies, but experts say they would be wise to heavily involve front-line, [operational managers in the discussions from the outset](#).

[Ilona Davis](#), a principal at accounting and advisory firm Baker Newman Noyes, said front-line managers need to be directly involved in both the conversation about hybrid workplace models and the governance structure once a strategy is implemented.

She said those managers have insights about the realities of how things operate on the front lines of a company, and that can mitigate potential problems with a hybrid model before they bubble up to the top levels of the business.

“All of this comes by way of a proper governance and communication plan where all of those layers are speaking and interacting and managers are given an opportunity to have that responsibility,” she said.

[Cali Williams Yost](#), founder and CEO of Flex+Strategy Group, said her advice to businesses is to set broad remote and onsite guidelines for the overall company and then let managers further down in the organization decide the best choice for their respective departments or operating groups.

She said those managers will have the best knowledge about the actual work their direct reports do, where it can be done most effectively, and how things worked before and during the pandemic. Yost said they will have the best feel for which jobs and tasks need to be remote and which need to be done in-person.

Yost also said hybrid workplaces will evolve over time, so it's important for businesses to train managers to give both them and their employees the skills they need to evolve with the model. That includes having [successful onboarding strategies tailored to remote workers](#).

Davis said it would be wise for a company's top executives to meet with a group of front-line managers every couple of weeks following the launch of a hybrid model to discuss how the strategy is working, how they are monitoring the strategy and what they are hearing from their direct reports.

Those conversations can help companies avoid a potentially costly disconnect between the C-suite and managers that could hurt morale, retention and productivity.

Aside from regular communication, Davis said front-line managers need to be empowered about workplace flexibility in their departments, as one-size-fits-all approaches rarely work — particularly across large organizations. Just as hybrid workplace models won't be successful if employees don't feel their managers actually trust them to work from home, they also won't succeed if managers don't feel their bosses at higher levels of the organization actually trust their ability to make decisions on workplace flexibility.

“Managers need to be awarded the flexibility to provide those decisions,” Davis said. “That’s the key.”

That includes ensuring managers are truly able to follow through on the workplace flexibility promises companies are making. For example, a company announcing employees can work from home three days a week but then subtly pressuring managers to encourage their workers to be in the office every day could breed distrust at multiple levels of the organization.

Davis said companies should instead let managers be the ones to find the optimal mix of remote and onsite work that maximizes productivity and flexibility for employers.

“When I’m working with C-level executives, I actually have to have those conversations once in a while and say, 'You guys can’t say something then not act on it, because not only does it have a negative effect, it has the opposite effect of what you want and employees don’t trust you,’” Davis said. “The key, in my opinion, is leading by example.”