

managing a distributed team

toolkit and resources for people leaders



The Remote Communication Cheat Sheet For Respecting @All Team Members

Credit the awesome : Ryan Sorenson, Engineering Manager @ Trello



Turning on chat is how I go to the office, even though it is a very short commute.

I've been working remotely for five years. Chat holds the same shape in my head as physical work spaces do. It's a place, and it's got its own norms and feel. It has its regulars and its own social "water cooler" web.

Chat is the workplace for distributed teams. Whether you wear the "remote work" label or not, your work is distributed. Modern knowledge work is nearly 100% digital, and communication often spans time zones and continents. Asynchronous communication has already entered your workplace via email and chat will follow soon, if it hasn't already.

When done well, remote communication over chat can be at least as good as sharing an office. There are some cons that can't be overcome, but they're paired with benefits of things like better focus, easier access to conversations and topics, and asynchronicity.

Doing remote communication well is possible when we all approach it intentionally. When it's good it works amazingly and feels like home, where everyone comes together and you see the people around you.

It can also be hard to do. This is some of my advice for work chat tools and beyond.

Make Noise, Be Yourself, Ask Questions

One of the hardest parts of working with a distributed team is getting to know people. Not their names or faces or what they do, but the things they care about, their sense of humor, and all those non-work aspects that humanize that otherwise sterile stream of text coming across your screen.

You can't make other people share that with you, but you can do it yourself and help other people learn who you are. Very often at distributed companies, both the entirely-remote kind as well as the multiple-office-location kind, you don't know which folks you're going to work with next. But you'll probably spend some time in the same channels as them before you work together.

Talk About All Kinds Of Stuff In Chat

Find a venue, tell people about it, and talk about what's on your mind. #catfancy is an example of an absurdly active channel in Trello Slack, and any number of other channels that cover a bunch of silly and wonderful things (travel, kids, fashion, social justice, and of course, dogs too).

Talk about your latest home-reno project in an offtopic channel. Share the latest thing you pushed to prod. Mention the fascinating franchise model of huge former aircraft hangars being used for impressive collections of bounce houses of various shapes and sizes.

Try to engage in small talk. Ask folks how they're doing. Give updates on topics you've previously talked about. Keep your chat status updated with details about your life: mood, weather, links to music you're listening to, pictures of where you are on vacation.

These are all things you'd get more of a sense of if you were in the same office, and a status can give a little window into your world.

Be Real

One of the failure modes of chat is treating it like Formal Communications, since it's editable, its record persists (up to Mandated Retention Policy Period™) effectively forever, and it can be copied and pasted or grabbed as a screenshot. As far as I can tell this ends up in folks not having real conversations, or not giving the same amount of themselves they'd otherwise give in person.

Make it easy for others to be real and remember kindness and acceptance. Put yourself in chat.

The concept of "psychological safety," is effectively the idea that your work environment is conducive to people bringing their whole self to work. This translates to people feeling comfortable sharing wacky ideas in brainstorming without fear of judgment, it replaces blame with curiosity, and it encourages more diversity of thought, which makes any end result stronger. Being real in chat, and giving your colleagues an idea of who you are, helps foster that safety.

Ask All The Questions

And then ask some more, especially when you're part of a team that's growing. Those questions that you have? Other people probably have them too, even if they don't know it yet. Maybe someone knows the answer, maybe you end up with more people trying to figure out it. And it's persistent! Everyone else can see the answers.

Respect The People On The Other End

Text as a communication mechanism is hard. You can't see body language, you don't know what's going on in someone's life on the other side of the chat window. You have much less insight into someone than when you're around them in an office all day, plus you don't even know if they are even physically there. Intentional empathy should always be present.

Here are some actionable tips to put in place in order to be a good chat citizen:

Don't @all or @here

...unless your message is important enough to wake everyone up, break their flows, or interrupt their family dinner.

For stuff that's important and urgent for the majority of people in a room? Sure! But the intent of these keywords is to generate notifications, and you'll be doing it for everyone, regardless of what they're up to at the time.

My heuristic is, "Are the vast majority of people who get a notification for this going to want to take an action in response to it in the next half hour?" There are a bunch of roles that need to be available for ad-hoc notifications, and turning them off isn't a solution available to them.

If you:

- Have people who report to you, or
- You're the most knowledgeable person about a service that just went down, or
- You just launched a campaign and are working on the next one,

Then being available to be interrupted on those topics is the responsible thing.

For things that are important to most people, but not urgent, consider sending an email, making a Trello card, or creating a Confluence page. In other words, use a medium that doesn't demand that "read me now" attention. Following up over chat on whether someone has seen that email or PR you sent is reasonable. The timeline for when depends on your local team culture.

Assume positive intent

Chat lacks a lot of the cues, context, and situational embedding we rely on to determine intent. Filling the gap with a default assumption that the person on the other end of the wire doesn't have a hidden agenda smooths this out a lot. This doesn't necessarily mean their agenda is the same as yours, but they really are probably trying to make the world better, just like you are. And if you feel like someone might be trying to communicate they are unhappy, spend the effort to clear it up.

Give context

The folks you're talking to now haven't been talking to you about the idea that's been bouncing around in your head for the past two weeks, or seen the folks you're talking to about it, or understand what it is you're on about. Give them more.

Jumping abruptly into chat and asking, "What are the numbers for Q4 Sprocket project?" can make people worried you think their Sprocket project isn't going well. Rather, "I'm trying to figure out where the best place to put more advertising dollars, and I'm wondering whether the Sprocket project is a good place to land them. What are our results on that so far?" shares your end goal, why you're asking about the process, and gives everyone more surface area to help solve your problem.

Don't let crickets chirp

Silence is the worst thing to experience when you're trying to connect with your team. Thinking, "I sent a message three hours ago and no one's responded to it. Was it just too stupid to respond to?" is a good way to start a negative spiral.

Help your coworkers avoid that by answering with your best knowledge, even if you can't solve their problem immediately. Reference people who might be the best ones to move things forward, or give your take. Share your thoughts on what they brought up.

Prioritize public chat

For distributed companies in particular, digital knowledge sharing is *imperative*. The work you're doing right now is probably heavily impacted by people you haven't met:

- If all your work is behind meetings happening in your physical office, everyone else around the world who cares about said work is locked out.
- If it's only in video calls, only the people who were a part of that call are going to see it.
- If it's in a private channel or a direct message in chat, no one else has the full scope.

The more that's easily accessible and visible to everyone, the better context we can all share. Who knows? That person with the answer you're looking for might just be around the corner of your conversation.

Don't rely on chat decision-making

Chat's a really great medium for generating discussion, pretty okay at generating consensus, but really bad at capturing consensus. Chat is best for engaging with things in the moment, but other tools are more useful if things should last beyond that.

If you've come to a conclusion or made a plan that other people are going to care about (or need to reference in the future), capture it somewhere else. Trello and Confluence are both good places for this, and their chat integrations make working across multiple tools easy. **Expecting that anyone is going to see a thing in chat is a losing proposition.**

If you want a face-to-face conversation, go to video. If the conversation's been happening in chat, make sure to put the link in there so other folks who might be around and care about the topic can join in. It's a great gift to other chatters to summarize the results of a video call back in chat if it was started there.

As one of the benefits of chat is to create a written resource for others who weren't involved at the time (or have forgotten the details), there's real value in 'curating' the chat like this, to help future chat archeologists.

Making Video Work

The reliance and frequency of video calls with Trello was also a major adjustment for me. Bouncing between caring only about the work in front of me and caring about how I look and sound and present to someone is a particular pain that happens for remote work. But nothing can beat real-time communication where you can see body language. Both scheduled and ad hoc video calls are an incredibly important facet of working with a distributed team.

One-on-one conversations are mostly okay for me, but group video calls are harder.

Don't keep your emotions in chat

If you're having difficulty understanding each other on chat, or there's a big difference in understandings between people, go to video. If it's an emotionally charged conversation, go to video. "Shoot me a Zoom" is a phrase I use a lot. Don't dig deeper into misunderstanding each other in chat. Say hi over video from time to time.

Embrace the latency

Video has latency (an occasional delay from speaking to the transmission of said thought) and we can't get around that. Be proactive about it. Try harder to avoid interrupting people. If you and someone else start talking at the same time, defer to letting them speak first. (And then do the slightly awkward slightly fun dance of seeing which of you is going to be the more polite one.) If you're on office Wifi, consider plugging in.

Make visible gestures

Faces are smaller on computer screens than in person. A small nod in person needs to be translated to a bigger movement when you're on video. Hold a smile for longer to make sure it's seen. Give thumbs up gestures to the camera if you're in strong agreement with something, clap in view of it if it's a bigger call and y'all are congratulating someone. Unmute yourself when you want to talk so other folks see the muted icon go away, or lower your mic boom.

Use a grid view

Make sure you can see everyone's face at a resolution on which you can see facial expressions. Make sure everyone else can see yours. Unless it's a presentation that a single person is giving, avoid speaker view. You want to be able to see how everyone is engaging with what's being said. It's easier to tell when someone is about to say something or would like a chance to speak. Grid view democratizes the meeting, and puts everyone's input on equal footing.

Use individual cameras

If you're in a meeting in an office with a room system, don't use it, or use it only for audio. Use your laptop for video. Avoid putting up remote folks on a big screen. This lets everyone see your face, and puts everyone involved on an equal footing. **One of the worst things is being up on a big room screen, seeing myself reflected 3 feet high on a glass wall, and not being able to see the faces of everyone in the room.**

Give good audio

Use a headset with a good mic. Put yourself in a place that doesn't have a lot of background noise. Mute yourself when you're not talking, even when those things are true.

Prioritize the speaker, not the material, in video

When giving a presentation over video, screen space is limited. Give folks the choice of viewing your face or the materials. I think most video software will let you change relative sizing of shared screen and faces these days, which can be a good compromise. If you're not giving a presentation, consider not sharing your screen to the group. Tools like Trello that mirror real time updates to all viewers let everyone share the same perspective and still see the speaker.

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What'd I Miss?

This got long enough. What works for you? How do you manage staying connected to people? Any tips for how you handle notifications?

Oh, and remember: The crux of good remote communication is making sure everyone has an equal chance at getting across and receiving their truest, most important, and team-forward messages. Establishing remote communication best practices (and sticking to them!) is a foundation to a healthy remote team.