

The New Work Rules for High-Performing Teams in Hybrid Work World

An Emerging Formula That Reduces Meetings by 30%, Amplifies Business Innovation, and Expands Remote Team Collaboration



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TRANSFORMING TEAMS TO TRANSFORM THE WORLD

Executive Summary

To transform team collaboration, you need a new set of practices that fit the virtual environment rather than port tired old methods into remote working. Adopt the best practices of a greenfield way of collaborating: asynchronous collaboration to reduce meetings and achieve more inclusive, even bolder innovation. Wrong-headed research says remote work does not work based on companies who were doing it wrong.

With our partners Dell Technologies and Harvard Business school, we are going to give you a guide to do it right.

Taking Bad Habits Remote

Today's thinking about remote work and virtual teams returning to the office is full of wrong-headedness and academic research that looks at failed use cases rather than best practice.

Most of us are still locked into the idea that the best form of collaborative interaction to achieve fast and bold, transformational outcomes is an in-person meeting. It is not! Many of us feel proud of the productivity we gained in the virtual world in 2020. In truth the opportunities and tools of remote work were significantly underutilized.



Do we even need a meeting to solve this problem?

Barely anyone maximized remote working as a unique medium. What we did this past year is throw virtual meetings at every collaborative problem we had. We exported every meeting of 15 people into a room of 15 virtual tiles and followed the same old rules. Who stopped to think: do we even need a meeting to solve this problem?

We brought our old baggage into the virtual environment. Just as before, not everyone felt they were being heard in meetings, and we used the same sub-optimal solutions: calling another meeting to give people another chance to be heard, crowding out our already overloaded schedules.

Two solutions for this:

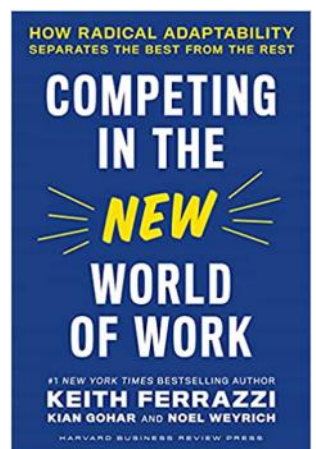
- Optimize virtual meetings
- Make asynchronous collaboration the first mode of business communication

2,000 Executives Help Crack the Collaboration Code

Meetings have become our \$283 billion habit of wasted time a year.¹ In a virtual environment, we can crack the collaborative code in an asynchronous way, using shared documents via Office 365 or Google Docs and platforms like Slack.

Calling a meeting should be a signal of failure or a positive sign of those rare moments when we need decelerated intimacy and connection. By fundamentally transforming the way we think about collaboration, we can have bolder innovation and faster cycle time.

Thanks to our applied research efforts with Dell Technologies under the banner of [Go Forward to Work](#), and in conjunction with Harvard Business School, we have conducted a ground-breaking exercise with more than 2,000 executives to crowdsource best practices for the future of work. Our book, *Competing in the New Work World* is coming soon. In addition, our FG Research Institute is applying this thinking in our work with clients as a laboratory to determine the highest return of these practices toward radical transformation. We have seen that asynchronous first works as an operating principle for collaboration. **We are engineering to cut the number of meetings by 30%.**



¹ <https://blog.otter.ai/meeting-statistics/>

2020: The Great Laboratory for Remote Practice

The Ferrazzi Greenlight Research Institute is dedicated to applied science: designing interventions and High-Return Practices that draw together primary research from the likes of Oxford, MIT, and Harvard Business School, and real-world observations from our 20 years experience of coaching the world's top teams. Data we have tracked since 2000 on the performance of high versus low performing teams shows that meetings have always been a broken forum for collaboration:



In 2012, we began research on remote work and designed a new suite of interventions around the core attributes of high-performing hybrid teams:

1. Collaborative problem solving in a real business context
2. Eliminating conflict avoidance and increasing candor
3. Building mutual commitment and support
4. Establishing peer-to-peer accountability — “winning together”
5. Realizing the team’s potential to deliver transformational results — it takes as much time to be 10x as 10%

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We shared our findings and the interventions for hybrid teams in Harvard Business Review under the banner “New People Rules in a Virtual World” (see virtualteamswin.com). The 2020 pandemic was the Great Laboratory for remote work — an opportunity to see the impact of our interventions. We tracked a three-to-four-fold lift in the key indicators of team performance. Companies like NI, formerly known as National Instruments, saw a dynamic shift in a short matter of months:

↑ **79%**

increase in
candor

↑ **75%**

increase in
development

↑ **46%**

increase in
collaboration

↑ **44%**

increase in
accountability

”

The tangible change has been the ability to escalate and make critical business decisions faster, and ones that stick, because the process is collaborative and therefore the buy-in is higher. In the past, we thought collaborative decision-making and fast decision-making were at tension ... There's no way we would have been able to react with the sort of speed and get the sort of buy-in we see today. It was a breakthrough and realization that there are ways to run a remote forum that are motivating, create energy, and accomplishment.



Eric Starkloff
CEO
National Instruments



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Interventions for High-Impact Hybrid Teams

Our benchmark is the optimal relational dynamics for high performance: The Co-Elevating® team. Co-Elevation® is a pattern of highly collaborative behaviors I defined in a book I released at the peak of the pandemic called, *Leading Without Authority*.

Old notions that do not serve the world we live in today need to be left behind. We need to go beyond cooperation that slips into collaboration when necessary. For high-performing teams, the objective is to create a dynamic of constant and unbounded co-creation, one in which interdependent team members share responsibility for crossing the finish line together. They must share accountability for each other's results and pick each other up when they need help.

Our suite of High-Return Practices for this includes:

Candor Breaks

Candor breaks are the best way to discover what is being held back. Pause the meeting during brainstorming sessions to ask the team, "What's not being said?" Ask for a candor break, then go into breakout rooms to ask that same question. Open a Google Doc in each breakout room, then share them with the whole group when you meet back in the forum.

Collaborative Problem Solving

Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) takes a single business-critical question and makes it the focus of a 60- to 90-minute meeting depending on the complexity of the discussion and how much time in the breakout room. Craft the question carefully.

For example:

- Prioritizing: *What are the most important hills we need to take in the coming year?*
- Finding bold innovation: *What innovations could we bring to our retail experience?*
- Mitigating downside risk: *What will derail us in the next six months?*

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Everyone preps by drawing in data or insight from their wider teams. Everyone is also clear on who will make the final decision, on who “owns the question.” The aim is not consensus; it is robust dialogue. If that is the set-up, there can be no resentment if one idea is picked ahead of another.

The most powerful element of CPS is the breakout room. For half of the session, the team breaks into small groups of three or four people [less time fewer people to assure everyone is heard] to discuss the question and report back. In these small groups people have more courage. They will self-critique and weed out weaker ideas.

When groups return to report back, our research institute has found little evidence of dilution of

courage or candor; we estimate **no more than 15% dilution at most**. The temporary tribes that have formed in the breakout rooms form a bond which would make them lose face if they watered down their discussion too much.

The question-owner gives instant feedback. A clear yes, we will do that, no and here is why not, or maybe we will look at this with more research. The collaboration must be action-oriented.

Sweet and Sour

Some people think that trust is something that can only happen organically or accidentally or chemically. No, it can be engineered purposefully. It must be authentic, but part of Ferrazzi Greenlight’s magic over 20 years has been opening teams that have been broken between each other, that have had resentments between each other, and move them from there to a deep commitment.

Once we have done that, we’ve unleashed the collaboration, we’ve unleashed the candor, we’ve unleashed the peer-to-peer accountability. It’s systematic and it’s iterative, but it is critical to remote work because this can be the first thing that’s eroded when people don’t see each other.



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In *Leading Without Authority*, I explain how to solve breakdowns between professional trust built on reputation, personal trust built on values, and structural trust built on organizations, positions, and hierarchies. The critical components are openness and empathy, and the bridge is vulnerability and sharing. The methodology we use is called **Serve, Share, and Care**.



Serve

Serving is a team agreeing to be committed and to be of service to each other. Leaders have to open generosity among the team —being generous to others is the fastest way to accelerate your own success.



Share

Sharing taps into one another's humanity. We work so much better as tribes, a tribe of people that are truly committed to each other. I may not be exactly like you, but if I walk in your shoes through sharing, I can be empathetic. Empathy is what builds that relationship. The last one is care. What's most important is that you tell your team that to care about each other is really a choice. And it's something that if everybody says that they will grow to care about each other, that means that they will grow to ask questions and be curious.



Care

Caring is a choice people make.

But you can make this method systematic with a practice called Sweet and Sour. Ask everyone before the meeting begins to share something sweet and something sour in their lives. The sweet you share could be something simple, like an achievement by a child or anticipating a friend's visit from out of town. [The more shallow the less effective — go deep as a facilitator or leader] The sour could push for greater vulnerability, however, like a loved one in the hospital, or a challenge with a child or spouse.

During the pandemic, we saw vulnerability and authenticity being shared in virtual environments from leaders in so many companies that bonded us and opened trust and acceptance that did not exist at these levels before.



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Personal-Professional Check-In (PPC)

You cannot really operate at the full potential of your team relationships if you do not know what is on your teammates' minds. Whether you are starting a meeting or just having a phone call with someone you have not spoken to for a few days, be sure to do a quick personal-professional check-in (PPC) at the start. Ask these two questions:

1 What is going on personally with you?

2 What is going on professionally?

Miracles of service and commitment happen out of such conversations once teammates feel invited to share their lives with each other. In a physical meeting, the PPC is a powerful practice for building the bonds of commitment.

Teaming Out

Teams should be fluid and set up based on the problems that need to be solved rather than grouped around who reports to whom. Using this as our guiding principle, we've coached virtual teams to invite in the right expertise — what we call Teaming Out.

They don't stop at organizational boundaries or silos but draw in talent from across their organization and guests from outside to collaborate in real-time. Teaming Out starts with the awakening I described in [Leading Without Authority](#): who is on my team? Which simply means, who do I need to solve this problem? It's thinking beyond the tight inner circle of a team for bold innovations.

Teaming Out then moves to crowdsourcing collaboration internally, to developing co-elevating partnerships with suppliers and customers, to coaching collaborations with trusted counsellors in your executive and entrepreneurial network. As I suggested in my piece for [Harvard Business Review](#) on [The Upside of Virtual Boards](#), "Why not bring in leading experts from around the globe for five or 10 minutes to deliver bite-sized insights and expertise?" In a remote environment, all of this happens online where everything can be recorded, documented, captured, and shared, in real-time allowing for true peer-to-peer transparency and accountability. No more than now we can go big, bold, and global.

Make Asynchronous Collaboration the First Mode of Business Communication

The end of year realization

We used the great inflection point of 2020—this historic shift in working culture—as a laboratory to test the hypothesis that physical meetings are not better than virtual meetings. Our research institute's newest project, [Go Forward To Work](#), convened virtual discussion groups with business leaders to share their experiences and hopes for the future of work.



We heard examples of bold thinking from companies like Unilever which adopted this policy for its hybrid teams: if one member is working remotely, everyone must switch to a virtual environment. But as the year ended, we came to the realization that there are simply too many meetings in either environment.

Even with coaching to the virtual high-return practices, we realized that we need to leverage asynchronous collaboration first: that is the solution for transformative collaboration and bolder outcomes.

Engineer for asynchronous as the first and primary collaborative 'meeting'

Why is calling a meeting the universal solution to whatever needs to be accomplished? If you break down the specific problem that needs to be solved, what is uniquely valuable about gathering people together at the same time to solve it? Could a bolder outcome, a better decision — and, ironically, a faster path to get there — be taken by the same team without having to meet?

Here are two practices and behavioral golden rules to move collaborative projects forward asynchronously.

A. The decision-board

Create a Google Sheet at the start of any collaboration, or phase of a project and set it up in this format:

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	What proposed decisions do we have to make/problems need to be resolved?	What bold ideas might we explore to truly break through, and that could incite others to think bolder and bigger about each decision or problem?	What are the challenge groups might have with this?	Who needs to participate in these discussions for both insights and innovation?	Who will be impacted and needs to alter strategy or behavior?	What information is needed for these decisions?	What are the proposed timelines and sequences for each?
2							
3							

The shift is that this list is not intended to be perfect or fully complete but intended to invite asynchronous co-creation from the start, in lining up what needs to be accomplished by whom. The intention is to invite all those on the list to add or comment to each of these columns before the first meeting.

Traditional meetings would uncover these items along the way and some not until execution was being hampered. This forces everyone to weigh in transparently and up front and for meetings to then be designed from the start for collaborative engagement and chewing on something together. Creating a shared "decision board" document upfront allows the project owner to crowdsource input on who needs to contribute to what decision, what information will be essential at each stage, and identify if issues and decisions have been overlooked. The process is open, transparent and documented.

From then on, shared documents will become the focal point for sharing and consolidating feedback around each decision-point for the relevant team members in the project. The project owner, or specific decision-owner, can make the call in the light of the feedback whether a meeting would be a uniquely valuable step. The question is, what value would a meeting really add?

B. Five Golden Rules for Asynchronous Collaboration

RULE 1

Proactive simplification

This is about UX-thinking at a leadership level. Teams must make the user experience of asynchronous collaboration as simple as possible. That means, being deliberate about the team's choice of platforms, format, how information is presented, and contextualized, and linked (hyperlinked) to other sources.

A team must agree on a taxonomy for each project, so they speak a common virtual language, and make each communication searchable and indexable with tags. Group and sort communications by type into channels. Don't make it a struggle to understand what you want for someone who cannot query in real-time.

RULE 2

Clarity over who is responsible for each decision

Create a Google Sheet that makes decision making responsibility clear. Include the

1	Who are the collaborative decision makers (CDs) and who is the ultimate decision maker (UD)?	Who has authority?	Innovators invited?	Associates for execution?
2				
3				
4				

RULE 3

Default to transparency

Every team interaction should be in the open; no one works in isolation—team members must know they see all sides of the communication in a collaboration. As per Rule #1: protocols apply to make it easy for team members to understand who is meant to act and who is meant to be informed.

RULE 4

Nothing is worse than virtual silence.

Teams must commit to giving a Yes, No, Maybe response to every idea, suggestion, and comment.

RULE 5

Time matters

Give appropriate time for the team to review material you are sharing—and block regular time in your own schedule for review.

C. Video Bulletproofing

For many years, I have railed against report-outs in meetings as the greatest waste of valuable real estate; a collective team of bright minds sitting around reading to each other and not really listening because the social contract was to not get too critical of each other, stay in our swim lanes. Most teams coexist and only collaborate when they need to get something from one another and slip back into co-existence. In response, I introduced a High-Return Practice called Bulletproofing which made the team commit to a new social contract: everyone had to sit up and listen intently because they would all have to break into smaller groups to challenge and point out risks, offer innovations, offer help.

Bulletproofing is when one team member presents a business strategy they've come up with to the team for feedback and constructive criticism. In a virtual world, it is simple and easy to do this.



The sprint report on video.

At a push of a button, teams can be sent into groups of 3 for 5-8 minutes where they open a Google document (form if you want individual feedback credited and logged for follow up). We've worked with many companies that use agile teams and we bolted Bulletproofing on the end of each sprint as a way to assure the stand-up or sprint report was thoroughly roughed up and discussed by the team.

Companies who had done Agile for many years saw this as a huge innovation. But there was still one problem for global teams doing global meetings: finding a time for the daily stand-up or sprint report that accommodated both Los Angeles and Shanghai.

We incubated an asynchronous adaptation that was even better. The sprint report on video.

- No more than 5-10 minutes: *What we did, where we are struggling, where we are going*
- Posted for everyone on the team to see and weigh in: *Challenges & Risks/Innovations and suggestions/offers of help support*
- Everyone has 12 hours to add their comments and see each other's comments

Why do we default to calling a meeting when we need candor-rich feedback on a project or idea? We do so in the hope and expectation that team members will bring their full insight and expertise to meetings, but candor is one of the vital ingredients that is all-too-often missing.

Working asynchronously and taking full advantage of collaborative tools, gives time for strategic thought and open exchange of views.

If you think this is a hypothesis rather than hard practice, check out pioneers like GitLab and DropBox. DropBox announced in October 2020 it was going [“Virtual First and Async by Default.”](#) DropBox even published a language guide to advise its team how to politely decline meeting invites and suggest an asynchronous alternative.

Co-creating transformation

One of the biggest problems that needs to be solved in collaboration is the time that is wasted lobbying for decision authority. That energy should be put into co-creation.

When opposing parties have a disagreement around a collaborative item that falls between their authority, too often they spend time lobbying for authority over the other or lobbying the boss for her winning vote on their side. The two parties should be forced to get together and transparently understand all the inputs and impact of the decision so they can come up with a solution — not a watered-down consensus solution, but a bold one.

If that cannot be done transparently, it needs to be taken up the hierarchy for a decision at a higher level where someone can decide on going the bold route that may ruffle feathers in one constituency or another.

This often does not happen because the lobbying at the lower levels stalls and is geared towards sustaining the momentum of old ways. That is why organizations get disrupted by new entrants. They are too slow and not bold enough because of the politics and protection that gets in the way of decisions. Shadow working — the old act of working behind the scenes — is acceptable instead of transparent clarity about where the trade-offs are so that someone who has transformation as their objective (most likely the boss) can make the clear decision and take the risk and heat for it.

Virtual team size: the Ferrazzi Number

We have been carefully observing the impact of team size on collaboration, candor, and psychological safety in virtual environments for more than a decade. We first counseled against letting virtual breakouts exceed five members in a piece in [Harvard Business Review in 2014](#).

Today, for many of the High-Return Practices we coach, we advocate teams break out into smaller groups of three or four — practices such as Collaborative Problem Solving or Bullet Proofing, when teams tackle strategic business issues or stress-test bold new ideas. Smaller groups are ideal to create the psychological safety needed for complete and fluid conversation and extraction of everyone's point of view. You need to be sure there is time for each voice to be heard, particularly given the propensity of introverts to allow extroverts to dominate.

With each additional member you add to the virtual room, productivity and communication will be challenged with each additional team member.

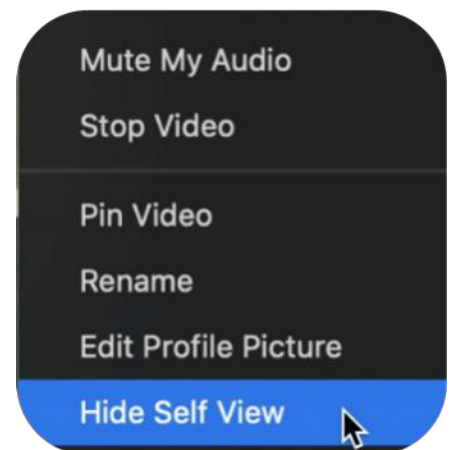


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Turning off the mirror effect

In a virtual environment, the “mirror effect” poses an additional challenge — because we spend more than 30% of our time looking at ourselves on screen it diminishes our connection to others and creates an increased sense of fatigue. Hiding self-view in a short break-out session with three people can be a powerful forum for ideas.

How do you do it? It's simple. When you're in a Zoom meeting move your cursor to the three dots that appear to the right of your tile. Click those dots and you will get a navigation menu with an option to hide self-view. When you click that option, your tile disappears from your view. Everyone else sees you but you don't have to look at yourself. Now you can focus more deeply on the conversation and the people speaking. We have found that this simple shift is a gamechanger for most people. But as an upper limit, five is the Ferrazzi Number for virtual discussions.



Now, compare this to the body of research on the optimal size of physical teams, for example [work by Robert Sutton, professor of organizational behavior at Stanford University](#), and the answer is seven. It is certainly the case that in a physical meeting there is an increased intimacy created by the “social chemical connection” or “physical chemical connection.” But it is also true to say that intimacy can be engineered in a virtual environment through our High-Return Practices. Empathy and close team bonds can be forged in vulnerability through practices like Personal Professional Check-in and Sweet and Sour. Using virtual breakout rooms and Candor Breaks helps introverts speak up in a way that they may not in physical settings. In short, we do not believe that for the sake of collaborating on bold decisions that physical meetings are innately better.

To date, our evidence suggests that physical meetings may only be better suited for social connections. Even traditional physical creative interactions like whiteboard and brainstorming sessions are being rendered in virtual environments in ways that offer advantages to office spaces. The social-chemical advantage of physical proximity may not be as large as we tend to believe. Our research is ongoing.

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Optimizing for remote, hybrid, and co-located transformation with Ferrazzi Greenlight

Adapting to remote collaboration should not have been a shock to the system. Today, as we move into a new hybrid world of blended teams — a mix of remote and co-located team members — there is an opportunity to learn from the experience of Ferrazzi Greenlight to optimize for each form of collaboration synchronous and asynchronous, virtual, hybrid, and physical. Go here now to become part of the tribe of better outcome seekers by answering a few short questions: [Hybrid Team Success](#)



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