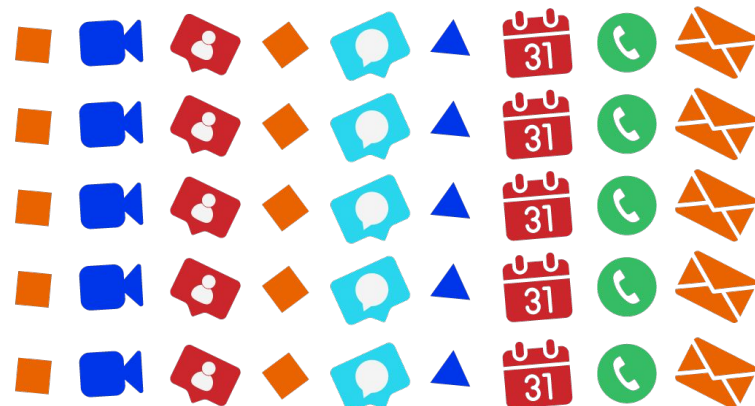
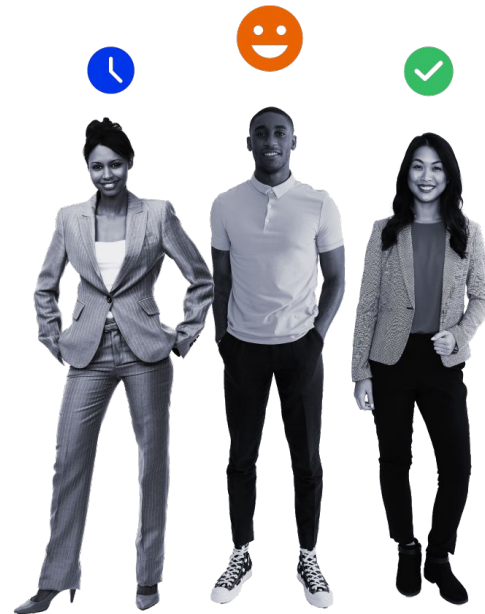


# 5 Comms Strategies for Stronger Workplace Culture

*Insight from leaders at Salesforce, UPS, Gallup and more*

**AXIOS** HQ



# Welcome to Hybrid 2.0

**Every employee experienced the last few years** in a different way — solo in an apartment, caring for parents at home, at work while homeschooling children — while many executives struggled to support them.

- **It's a time we call Hybrid 1.0** — when offices quickly went digital with no time to rethink systems or workflows. Gapless calendars, endless Zooms and ineffective staff comms all contributed to record burnout. The Great Resignation followed.

**But 2022 brought on Hybrid 2.0** — the year we all accepted remote and hybrid work are here to stay and we'd need a new strategy to create culture in a modern workforce.

**That sent us on a search** to understand how innovative organizations, big and small, were rethinking staff engagement, connection and productivity.

**After dozens of conversations** with leaders around the world — at Salesforce and Lyft, UPS and Gallup, and more — three shared experiences kept coming up:

- **It's hard to keep culture alive** with team retreats and 1:1 coffees off the table.
- **It's harder to preserve trust** and transparency as hybrid teams scale.
- **Both have gotten easier** when executives shift staff communication to the center of their business strategy — and prioritize its execution.

**This report digs into five tips** for modern internal communications, from execs who've helped teams survive and culture thrive in Hybrid 2.0.

## TIP 1

# Communication must start at the top

**Less than a year into the pandemic**, employee preparedness had dropped nine percentage points, [according to Gallup](#), shining light on the vital need for clearer and more effective internal communication.

- **The big picture:** Staff were more inundated with details than ever before — emails, DMs and documents, all shared async or ad hoc for the first time — but missing the context they needed to understand it.

**“Our research has shown...** employees want to hear directly from the C-suite,” says Deisha Barnett, president of communications and content at UPS. “They are charging us with being clearer and more direct... but they want it to come from the people they trust inside of our organization.”

## Where to start

“Go back to the basics” is what almost every leader we talked to said about helping individual teams or whole organizations navigate massive change.

- “The CEO, or whoever plays that role, needs to drive the internal comms strategy,” says Chuck Cohen, managing director of Benco Dental.
- That means resetting and reinforcing the team’s mission, vision, values and realigning the leaders around you to clearly cascade each message.

**The big picture:** “Communication can be the most efficient, muscular use of your time,” Axios Co-founder Mike Allen says. “If people aren’t on the same page, they’re not going to do the right work.”

- That is the unfortunate disconnect for so many teams — and also one of the fastest ways to burn out your most ambitious folks.

👉 **The culture connect:** Comms that start at the top can be a force multiplier. So even when you’re stressed, make the time to communicate. It will keep staff focused on what’s important and engaged with the work you do.

According to studies...

67%

of employees would go “above and beyond” in duties if they felt more valued and engaged.

58%

is the amount burnout drops if leaders can connect individuals’ work to organizational purpose.



## A leadership lesson from Benco Dental

**At the start of the pandemic**, Chuck had to furlough a third of his 1,500-person staff. The hope: It would all be temporary.

- **“Communicating regularly** was part of our strategy to keep them on the hook so that when jobs opened, they were willing to come back.”

**Once or twice a week**, he’d carve out time to write an email about what was going on at Benco, why it was important, and what his hopes — as the company’s top leader — were for the future.

- **“At the end of the day**, partly because of our communication strategy, we got every single person back that we wanted to.”

**The strategy stuck long-term, too.** From monthly sales to updates on their \$15 million IT infrastructure overhaul, that weekly email is still the update that keeps their company on the same page.

*“The thing I like is... everybody gets the same message with the same words, at the same time. They can interact with it in less than 10 minutes, and we can answer questions.”*

— **Chuck Cohen**, managing director of Benco Dental

## TIP 2

# Transparency & trust are critical values

**Whether you're a two-person shop** or a Fortune 500, trust, transparency and empathy have become every leader's most powerful currency and the beginning and end of their credibility with a hybrid workforce.

- **Yes, but:** Nothing kills a message like too much text and hard-to-parse language. Modern teams expect real communication, human empathy and an open door for discourse.

“There's been a study among 40 countries,” says [Jon Clifton, global managing partner at Gallup](#), that looked into employee satisfaction. “The single biggest driver: interpersonal relationships at work.”

## Where to start

**Preparation is key.** You could be rolling out a new benefit or shifting your business strategy — but teams still want to hear from a person they respect about the way this news impacts them.

- **“Tone is really critical, too”** says Denise Bertuccelli, senior director of internal communication at Lyft. “It’s about showing authenticity in a way executives haven’t historically felt comfortable.”

**Creating predictability is step two** in sustaining team trust. That might be hearing from leaders in a weekly all-hands, or letting staff submit questions execs promise to answer. Whatever the premise, the critical promise is that this access is ongoing.

**“I’ve given up meetings,** as much as I can, on Fridays,” says [Laura Neville, chief product officer at Everfi](#), “so I have space to think about the upcoming week and make sure I’ve got my communications locked and loaded.”

- 🙌 **The culture connect:** Empathy, humility and reliability help remote teams feel a rhythm with leaders, no matter how far away they are.

According to studies...

7%

**of U.S. employees** strongly agree communication is accurate, timely and open where they work.

Yes, but:

**when strong communication** is present, it builds strong internal relationships and spurs success.



## A leadership lesson from Lyft

**Right before the pandemic**, Lyft had a massive growth spurt — and today about a quarter of its staff has never actually been inside the office.

- **“Leadership visibility was a must,”** Denise says, as they thought about ways to help everyone feel more connected. “We introduced a virtual Ask Me Anything on Slack with our co-founders every Friday.”

### The rules:

- **Nothing anonymous.** Everybody had to put their name to a question, and “responses were documented for people to go back to.”
- **It had to be fun.** “We talked about our mission in action. We shared personal anecdotes, like what’s the best router for the internet.”
- **It needed to stay fresh.** “We did ‘Flip it Friday’ where our founders asked people questions instead of just answering.”

**“It’s been a really big win”** for staff and leadership alike. Since then, Lyft has invited more executives into their AMAs to give them the same opportunity.

*“We saw 90% favorability” on employee surveys that explored if company communication was helpful, “and it directly correlated to the time we launched” our co-founder AMAs.*

— **Denise Bertuccelli**, senior director of internal comms at Lyft



## TIP 3

# Managers must play a bigger role

**“I love the concept of repetition,”** says Axios CEO Jim VandeHei. “I always tell our leaders, ‘By the time you’ve totally annoyed yourself, only then are others starting to listen.’”

- **The big picture:** Executives can’t be the only ones beating the drum. Managers have a powerful role to play in reinforcing staff goals and cascading new or evolving company priorities.

**The upside on that idea is strong.** “We’ve done research at Salesforce that shows 75% of our employees trust the information their manager shares with them the most,” [says Brad Burns, CCO at Salesforce.](#)

## Where to start

**Every organization must invest in its managers.** If you were office-based or a co-located company even 18 months ago, most of your leaders might have never seen — let alone steered — a remote team.

- **Task one:** Teach leaders how to inspire, engage and communicate with remote workers, connecting the dots between executives' big-picture messaging and the unique work each team delivers.
- **Task two:** Help leaders learn to measure productivity in modern ways — moving away from attendance-driven models to outcome-driven ideas — so the updates they send to execs are clear and useful, too.

**Both will require hands-on training** and support from an HR team, and a lot of patient empathy, [says Lars Schmidt, founder of Amplify](#), but it will help “managers to be able to do their jobs better in this new world.”

👉 **The culture connect:** With skilled communicators across the company, information starts to move up, down and around the team with greater ease. Managers learn a new skill. Teams stay more engaged. Executives are better informed. A culture of clear, effective communication takes hold.

According to studies...

1 of 7

**qualities high-performers** say they need to succeed is clear, concise communication.

4x

**is how much** engagement goes up when employees feel properly informed at work.



## A leadership lesson from UPS

UPS has more than 300,000 frontline workers “who are inundated with communicated, but starved for direct information from their managers,” says Deisha Barnett.

- **“We are relying on a local approach** to driving culture... It is the responsibility of managers in local facilities to be reinforcing purpose and culture for us, which go hand in hand.”

Messages may still start at the top, but UPS executives empower local leaders — with a “mix of heavy video and some old-school tactics” — to continue the conversation in their own facilities.

- “You want to hear from your boss, and you want to be able to, even if it is on Zoom, come together and have courageous conversations with your bosses, your managers, your peers,” Deisha says.

**All of those things are core** to how UPS reinforces culture in its company and helps its managers learn to do the same.

*“We're working hard to make sure that cascade is right — that we're leveraging our frontline managers more and more every single day.”*

— **Deisha Barnett**, president of communications and content at UPS

## TIP 4

# Email is the heart of your channel mix

**Once you've nailed** who is communicating and how at your organization, the next-level strategy should focus on where.

- **“When you have many,** many people working for your company, you want to make sure you have information available to employees and you meet them where they are,” says Deisha.

**The big picture:** Email is still the dominant internal communication channel for teams large and small — even when their organization has invested in a suite of other tools, like IMs and intranets. The strategic way you use it can have a big impact on alignment, understanding and overall team morale.

## Where to start

**Data is your most important input.** If you can track when and where your staffers are searching for specific details, the task becomes a lot easier — you follow the trail of breadcrumbs and meet them where they are.

**Many leaders admit** they don't have it, though, so structured thinking can become your first stop. Most teams can start with three channels that each have a unique purpose and identity:

- **Knowledge hubs.** This is Notion or your intranet, long-standing systems that document how teams work and what processes are.
- **Recurring email updates.** They synthesize progress, issues and opportunities so staff stays informed, executives keep a pulse on performance, and everyone has transparent access to information.
- **“In the moment” messages:** These are Slack and Teams, the DMs you'd tap someone on the shoulder to say if you were in-person.

👉 **The culture connect:** Use each well, and staff understand where they'll find the information they need. That creates a comms culture where email is focused on quality over quantity — and being the front door to other channels.

*“We have FYI vs. Action. Anything that sits as a task or to-do comes as an email, and anything that's just great to know sits in Slack channels we've designed that have different topics.”*

— **Denise Bertucelli**, senior director of internal comms at Lyft



## A leadership lesson from Trade Coffee

In 2020, Trade Coffee was a three-year-old company with fewer than 50 employees, and the team was scaling fast. Its leaders needed a channel to keep staff informed that wouldn't get lost or go unnoticed.

Their CEO, Mike Lackman, [launched a weekly all-staff newsletter](#), packed with industry news, product launches, marketing bets and more. It's one of many comms channels the leadership team collaborates on, but it's become the core and most critical one across their organization.

### A look inside their multi-channel mix:

- **Thursdays:** a live all-hands meeting.
- **Fridays:** a clear, focused email recaps the most important news.
- **Bi-weekly:** an anonymous town hall makes space for staff questions.

“There’s a ceremony to it,” Mike says. Our weekly email “is a chance for the management team to go on the record, simplify our news, and reiterate what it means. It’s a way to communicate efficiently, to let people digest it asynchronously — which is a big deal — and measure if it’s getting traction.”

*“In our employee NPS, ‘Communication’ and ‘Being in the Loop’ were things people wanted. Now, when we do a ‘Stop, Start, Continue,’ our Friday email is always in ‘Continue.’”*

— Mike Lackman, CEO of Trade Coffee

## TIP 5

# Embrace a test & learn mentality

**The last bit of insight** so many leaders say has helped them in Hybrid 2.0: taking the agile way they approach business and applying it to the work of communications.

- **The big picture:** That's a strong signal, especially when — less than one year ago — [more than half of leaders admitted](#) their organization doesn't measure, let alone test, how effective their internal comms are.

**“One of the best things organizations can do** is listen to employees,” says Gallup's Jon Clifton, “Not only do we do surveys at a national level, but we do that within our organization to make decision-making as participatory as possible. Some of the best organizations do that. “

## Where to start

**There's no data or white paper** that shows what “perfect” hybrid comms strategies look like — we're all co-creating them in real time — but AJ Thomas, head of people products at X, Google's Moonshot Factory, says most teams and leaders can start by asking themselves three questions:

**1. Process** — Are you clear on what you're solving for?

- Get curious about each part of your employee lifecycle. Ask if it is supercharging your employee experience or getting in the way.

**2. Tools** — Is your tech stack supporting the ultimate employee experience?

- Create a way to evaluate it against your goals, and champion adding tech that can solve any gaps by working with your People team.

**3. Values** — Are your talent, comp and performance management in need of re-imagining or revisiting?

- Check to see if your values withstand the organizational and global changes happening around you. It's not only smart — it's intentional.

**👉 The culture connect:** Be sure you aren't just going through the motions so that you can fully unleash the potential of your organization.

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*“Innovation gets this big flashy marquee... It's really about seeking better ways of doing things — going back to basics”*

— **AJ Thomas**, head of people products at X

Go deeper: [The new way of communicating and engaging employees](#)




## WHAT'S NEXT

# The 5 tips to remember

**Hybrid 2.0 has forever changed the way we work**, and smart teams are looking for two things: what's vital to their organization and what insight they need to know to understand it.

**While the tips to put your hybrid team** on the path to clearer, more productive communication may be simple, holding one another accountable to them is what's tough. Our five tips to remember:

1. **Communications must start at the top** — led by leaders who prioritize it.
2. **Transparency & trust are vital** — and the entire team must value that.
3. **Managers must step up** — learning to lead and cascade communication.
4. **Email anchors your multi-channel mix** — to meet readers where they are.
5. **Test & learn** — as an always-on initiative to better serve your teams.

 **The culture connect:** No leader can afford to press pause on clear, frequent team communication. It creates alignment, sustains engagement and makes it possible for staff to go above and beyond for your business.

# About us

**Axios HQ is an easy-to-use platform** helping organizations — big and small — write with more clarity and efficiency. The tool, its templates and AI-powered tips are all built on Smart Brevity®, Axios' distinct communication methodology, to help any leader learn the craft.

Innovative companies like Delta, Edelman, and Everfi know communication is the key to culture, productivity, and growth, and they use HQ's intuitive platform to elevate company updates that get their teams smarter, faster.

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