



# How to Build a Team-Oriented Culture Among Remote Employees

*by Dennis Hammer*

Culture is an important part of every successful business.

A healthy, positive, and inclusive workplace culture leads to [higher productivity](#), [lower stress](#), [lower turnover](#), and leads to [higher employee engagement](#). Plus, hiring remote workers means you have access to a bigger talent pool.

But founders and leaders who lead remote teams often struggle establishing the right culture in their company. How do you create a culture for people who never meet face-to-face?

This is a serious concern for founders who want to build modern, highly competitive companies, especially those in the startup scene. [Remote work is more popular than ever](#) and the trend is growing.

If you want a high-performing remote team, you need a culture that fosters good work, keeps your team engaged, and attracts exceptional talent.

In this article, we explain some practical ways to build a positive culture in your company.

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## Culture Doesn't Happen Organically - It's Designed

Workplace culture isn't something that just happens on its own. It's something you actively create.

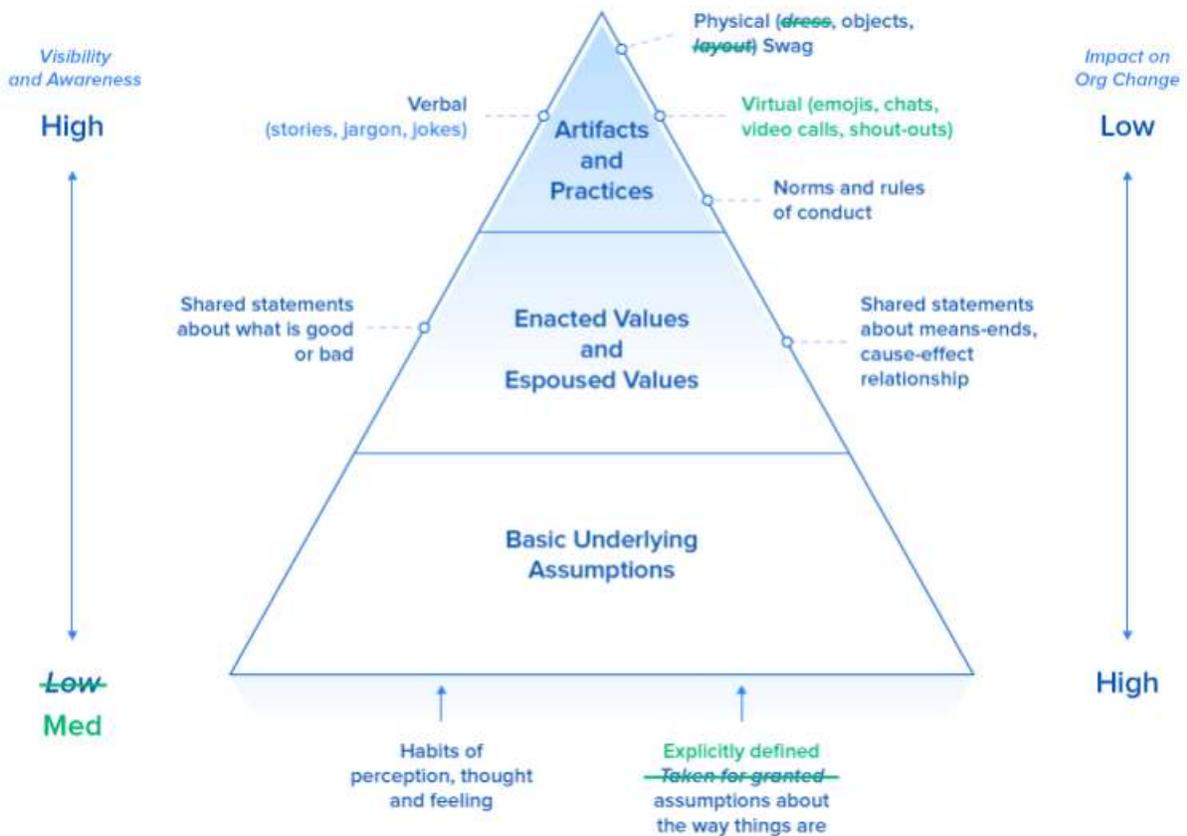
To create a healthy culture for your remote workers, you have to embrace it wholeheartedly. You can't have one culture for your remote team and one for your in-office staff. It's *far* easier to fit office workers into a culture for remote employees than trying to squeeze remote workers into a location-based culture.

"If you want remote company culture to be all or part of your culture mix, you have to be 'remote first,'" [says Nick Francis](#), co-founder and CEO of Help Scout, a company with more than 75 remote employees. "Remote culture has to be an inalterable part of your company's DNA, which is why it's hard for companies to change once they've chosen a way of working."

So what is culture?

Culture is a collection of values, assumptions, and behaviors exhibited by a group. It includes physical objects, tools, language, stories, preferences, and even vague concepts like mental frameworks and shared understanding of concepts.

# Organizational Culture for Remote Teams



Source: Schein, 2003



Image: [toptal.com](https://toptal.com)

*Everything* impacts your culture, so in order to design a good culture for your company, you have to consider *everything*.

For instance, permitting GIFs and emojis in the team Slack channel implies that you permit casual, light-hearted conversation. If, for some reason, you needed your team to be prim and proper in Slack, you would instruct employees that you don't appreciate their use.

## 7 Steps to Create a Team-Oriented Culture

Creating a strong culture in a remote company is harder with a remote team than a location-based one, but certainly not impossible. Follow these seven steps.

## 1. Create Strong Values

Your first step to building a team-oriented culture for your remote employees is to build a [value statement](#). Your value statement is a document that informs everyone (customers and your team) about the company's priorities and how you intend to do business.

It's important to draft values that reflect your personal ideals, but you should also make special considerations to your team's remote nature. For instance, teams deal with natural communication barriers when they don't meet in an office every day, so you might list *open communication* as one of your values.

Your company values should always be a work-in-progress. Expect them to shift over time as your company grows (in size and maturity) and you add more people to your team. Set aside some time every year to revisit your values and determine whether they need changes.

## 2. Build Your Values into Your Work

Telling your team what to value isn't enough. Your next step is to design a work environment that exhibits those values. Consider your values when you write procedures for your team.

For instance, if you value getting to know your team on a personal level, set aside time to learn about one another and enjoy shared experiences. Friendships generally don't form through emails and Slack messages.

In an office setting, relationships form in break rooms, the parking lot, bars, and restaurants after work, and even near the water cooler. But in a remote setting, you would have to prepare activities (virtual or in-person) to foster those relationships.

Instead of sending your usual weekly update email, you could switch to a video conference meeting to create opportunities for people to connect. This is just one method to build your values (in this case, relationship building) into your work.

Help Scout, a customer service app with more than 75 remote employees, [takes deliberate steps to foster team relationships](#) with a monthly Fika. A Fika is a Swedish-inspired practice of bringing people together who don't usually interact. It's a 15-30 minute meeting with a randomly chosen member of the team where they talk about prepared topics or anything they like.

## 3. Hire People who Share Your Values

People are hard to change. In most cases, they're *impossible* to change.

It's a waste of your time to try and force someone to share your values. If you have people on your team who don't approve of your culture or don't want to participate in it, they'll erode the experience for everyone.

This means the *best* way to foster your culture is to hire people who appreciate it. You'll have to design your interview process to determine whether job candidates fit into your culture.

This is harder than it sounds. It's not as simple as asking a question like, "Do you believe in speaking casually but professionally to your coworkers and our customers?" Of course an applicant will say yes; it's obviously what you want to hear. But that doesn't mean they really value it.

A better question would be, "What's your philosophy on communication?" You could also put them in situations where they're forced to communicate and observe their behavior.

#### 4. Bring the Team Together

It will cost some money, but you can take great strides toward fostering a healthy culture by putting your team in the same room at least once a year.

If you take your team on a retreat, *don't* fill every moment with work-related activities. You'll want to discuss big ideas like yearly goals, new projects, and your value statement. These topics have value, but it's also important to give your team free, unstructured time to get to know one another.

[Zapier brings their team together](#) twice a year for a company retreat. They build their team by cooking together, taking hikes, and learning about one another.

#### 5. Invest in Open Communication

As a remote team, one of your values *must* be communication. It's *very easy* to make costly mistakes (including losing customers) due to communication errors.

Like any of your other values, make sure candidates have strong communication skills and a willingness to communicate before you hire them. Then, foster an environment where everyone is encouraged to speak openly about their experiences and problems. You may have to take the lead by instigating conversation until the group does it on their own.

"You want to encourage an environment where everybody is contributing, not just the loud extroverts amongst your team," [says Miles Burke](#), founder of 6Q. "Reduce any red tape or formality associated with communication, to avoid employees just keeping quiet, which isn't healthy for employees or for your team as a whole."

Good communication also means using the right tools. Project management tools like [Trello](#), [Asana](#), or [Wrike](#) are helpful ways to keep projects organized when your team can't pop over the cubicle wall and ask for an update. [Slack](#) is the undisputed best tool for fast, casual communication. You'll also want to make use of a video conferencing tool like [Zoom](#), [GoToMeeting](#), or [Skype](#).

Yes, these tools cost money, but they're *far* cheaper than paying for office space and they're proven ways to make your remote workers a stronger team.

## 6. Make Team-Building Part of Your Culture

If you want your remote workers to behave like a team, offer opportunities to work as one. Assign projects to groups, rather than individuals. Let them work out the details between them (with your oversight to make sure the work actually gets done). Wherever possible, stick people together who don't work with each other often.

[Pinterest pairs their team members](#) together in a unique way. They examine their employee's Pinterest boards and groups people together based on shared interests.

## 7. Give Lots of Feedback

We give off body-language cues to the people around us that help them understand our feelings and mood. When you smile at a recent project, your team knows they have your approval, even if you don't give it outright.

But remote teams don't have that type of information. They rely entirely on the words you type or your voice over the phone. So it's important to compensate for this loss of communication by expressing yourself clearly with lots of praise and feedback. Whether you're pleased or displeased, put your feelings into words so your team understands.

## Find the Right Culture for Your Team

The last thing you should remember about creating a culture for your remote employees is that there's no playbook for it. There's no right way to do it.

You can follow the footsteps of other companies with remote employees or create something totally unique. Just make sure to start with your values.

Remote work arrangements aren't going away anytime soon. In fact, as our economy and the startup scene evolve, remote work will become more prevalent. If you design a healthy, team-focused remote work culture, you'll set yourself up for success.