BOOK SUMMARY
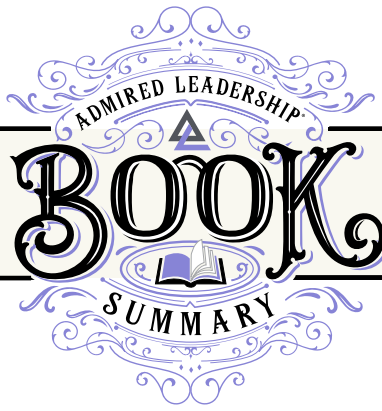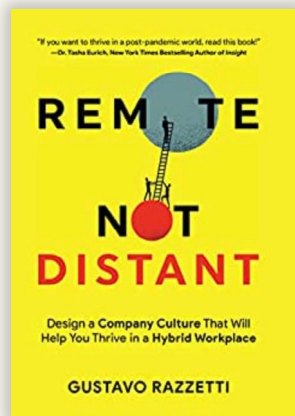
Remote, Not Distant

Design a Company Culture That Will Help You Thrive in a Hybrid Workplace

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As CEO of Fearless Culture, a workplace culture consulting firm, Gustavo Razzetti has facilitated his Culture Design Masterclass for organizations across the globe. With decades of experience in the marketing and innovation world, Razzetti has advised Fortune 500 companies, start-ups, and everything in between. When the pandemic hit, he dove into research, learned from his workshop participants, and began creating tools for remote collaboration to advise leaders on how to adapt their organizational culture to an asynchronous workplace. His book *Remote, Not Distant* outlines top companies' best practices for generating culture in the hybrid environment.

Key Quote

"You can work remotely and still feel connected. You don't need an office to feel like you're part of a team" (p. 3). **— Gustavo Razzetti**

KEY POINTS

Step 1: Reset Your Culture. "Successful remote-first organizations design their culture intensively and obsessively" (p. 52).

Step 2: Reimagine a Shared Future. A leader "creates alignment" among all of the employees, no matter where they are working. "Clear purpose helps steer your team, especially in times of crisis. Culture is what you reward and punish – behaviors matter more than words" (p. 96).

Step 3: Reignite Belonging. "A solid sense of belonging is vital for building a strong remote culture" "Psychological safety" and healthy feedback help grow a strong culture. "Team rituals strengthen bonds" (p. 179).

Step 4: Rethink Collaboration. Too much collaboration ("hyper-collaboration") is counterproductive. And good collaboration is often not "synchronous" – that is, everyone interacting together at once on the same things. "Asynchronous" collaboration is flexible, relieves pressure, and works well in remote or hybrid workplaces (pp. 196-197).

Step 5: Release Agility. Leaders in hybrid workplaces should work to create a culture of both "freedom and accountability." "Company rules should enable people, not limit them," and, for decision-making to be competitive and speedy, authority must be "distributed across the team" (p. 282).

KEY CONCEPTS:

Culture and Culture Design

Culture should be designed deliberately, and built with purpose and intent. While company culture is organic, "in a hybrid environment, you need to be more intentional" (p. 28).

"One of the most critical roles of workplace culture is the process of sense-making. It creates a shared identity that generates both attraction and rejection. Culture is the glue that brings people together, protecting the system from 'wrong people' and 'wrong behaviors'" (p. 14).

Leaders can use the Culture Design Canvas to map, assess, and understand the design of their culture. It is a visual framework to codify the three areas of culture:

"You can work remotely and still feel connected. You don't need an office to feel like you're part of a team."

"Successful remote-first organizations design their culture intensively and obsessively."

- *The Core* includes purpose, values, priorities, and outlines which behaviors are rewarded

- *Emotional Culture* includes psychological safety, feedback, and rituals

- *Functional Culture* includes decision-making, meetings, norms, and rituals (p. 17).

Culture design is about five principles:

- *Human-centric* – based on people's needs and feedback to continually improve it

- *Systemic* – shaped by consistent behavior

- *Co-created* – derived from leaders who model expected behavior and employees who follow their lead

- *Experimental and iterative* – adaptive, especially in a hybrid environment

- *Evolving* – built on what has worked in the past while improving or eliminating what's not (pp. 19-20).

Declared Culture and Observed Culture

"Culture is the behavior you reward and punish" (p. 81).

There is an observable disconnect between declared culture and real culture when corporate behaviors don't match words.

"Almost one-third of employees in the UK feel their organization's vision or values have too much corporate jargon, and 49% can't recite their organization's values. In the US, more than 30% of employees believe business leaders don't behave in ways that are consistent with the company's stated values" (p. 82).

Behavioral cues provide concrete guidance on how to translate values into actions. Leaders must clarify why they matter. According to a study by MIT, less than one-fourth of companies connect values with behaviors, and a significant majority fail to link beliefs with business success (p. 86).

"To change your company's culture, seek to change which behaviors you celebrate or call out" (p. 86).

MEASURES OF CULTURE

"Research by Professor James L. Heskett shows that a strong culture can increase performance by 20- 30% compared to 'culturally unremarkable' competitors. According to the Organizational Health Index, companies with the strongest culture can perform **200% higher** than those in the bottom quartile" (p. 14).

"Automattic, best known for its WordPress product, considers communication 'the oxygen of a distributed company.' Its employees are encouraged to communicate as much as possible, not only about work, but also about personal things" (p. 29).

Organizations can benefit enormously by shifting their focus away from traditional input measures (for example, visibility, being present, and so on) and focusing on impact, goals, and results. "Google has been using OKRs (objectives and key results) at both an organizational and team level since long before the pandemic. OKRs helped divide roles and responsibilities, encouraging people to think in terms of contribution, not input" (p. 30).

Companies Gruner + Jahr and Future Forum both conducted research and could not find any evidence that remote work harmed employee satisfaction, identification, culture, information exchange, or collaboration.

"Being a purpose-driven organization is not about having a feel-good culture; it's about creating alignment among your employees and teams and helping to solve complex problems. A shared future ensures that every member of the company is on the same page with regard to short-term and long-term business initiatives, workflow, and expectations" (p. 65).

Companies Gruner + Jahr and Future Forum both conducted research and could not find any evidence that remote work harmed employee satisfaction, identification, culture, information exchange, or collaboration (pp. 235-237).

BELONGING

"Strong feelings of belonging are linked to a 56% increase in job performance, better business results, and a healthier workplace culture" (p. 103).

"Belonging is a critical element for constructing high-performing teams. It's about feeling safe enough to build strong interpersonal relationships, bring your whole self to work, address well-being issues, and actively participate in meetings or conversations. This is the foundation of psychological safety" (p. 113).

"A safe culture makes it easier for quiet voices to speak up, increasing participation of introverts, women, and minority groups – the people who are interrupted or ignored the most" (p. 108).

Dr. Myrium Hadnes of Never Been Done, the largest global community for facilitators, said, "Zoom calls actually provide a safer space than in-person meetings." She explains that, "'In an office, the CEO wouldn't talk to an intern, but breakout rooms have changed that dynamic. With one click, you pair strangers, and they start random conversations" (p. 110).

"Working from home has put team culture, and especially psychological safety, to the test for remote teams. Personal life and work overlap now in ways they never did before." Razzetti says that to "address the challenges of remote work, managers and team members must engage in conversations that touch on their identities, values, and personal choices" (p. 109).

Rituals are symbolic shared experiences that strengthen connections, communication, and a sense of belonging. Through repetition, they help reinforce desired beliefs and behaviors.

For organizations transitioning to hybrid work, engaging employees in rituals that connect them to their team is important. For example, before the pandemic, Zappos's employees enjoyed a company garden in their office and shared the garden's harvest. During the pandemic, Zappos sent employees an herb garden kit and encouraged them to post photos of their gardens and the food they cooked, keeping the sense of community alive. The in-person ritual was synchronous, and the virtual version was asynchronous, but both contributed to a shared sense of community (pp. 166-178).

Reallocate resources to culture-building exercises. When GoTo went fully remote, they took the money they saved on office space and started funding community programs. They geo-mapped where employees lived and assigned local leaders in each area a corresponding budget. Each leader then ran local team rituals and volunteering events to bring colleagues together and support their local communities (p. 261).

COLLABORATION

Leaders of hybrid companies must rethink traditional modes of collaboration. The key to building a culture of collaboration is knowing when "synchronous" collaboration isn't necessary. Many types of work do not require synchronous collaboration with others (p. 190).

For teams in a hybrid, non-office-centric workplace, determine if collaboration is necessary using these two axes:

• **'Me Time' vs. 'We Time'** – activities performed at our own pace and time versus activities performed in a team setting.

• **'Deep Work' vs. 'Casual Work'** – activities that require more concentration, quality time, and focus versus activities that require less.

Work that involves We Time usually involves collaboration, and where the activity falls between Deep Work and Casual Work decides the formality and the length of time required for an effective product to come out of collaboration.

"Defaulting" to asynchronous work "makes collaboration more inclusive for people across different time zones and provides a safe space for people who need to think to talk. Most importantly, it allows people to be in control of their schedules and not the other way around."

Activities that accelerate decision-making and integrating perspectives require We Time and Deep Work, while activities that emphasize team bonding or facilitating simple issues require We Time and Casual Work (pp. 201-209).

DEFAULT TO ASYNCHRONOUS WORK

"Synchronous communication has two main benefits: speed and connection, making it ideal for one-on-one, sensitive conversations, and emergencies" (p. 211).

"Asynchronous communication is more effective for deep work as it gives us the opportunity to think things through before making a decision" (p. 211).

"Defaulting" to asynchronous work "makes collaboration more inclusive for people across different time zones and provides a safe space for people who need to think to talk. Most importantly, it allows people to be in control of their schedules and not the other way around" (p. 215).

Encourage balanced participation. At Trello, even if only one person joins a meeting remotely, everyone else joins from their desk. This creates a similar experience for all attendees, so no one feels like they're at a disadvantage. At Microsoft, all team members join via Microsoft Teams regardless of whether they are in the room or participating from home. Everyone uses the chat function to ask questions or share additional information (p. 49).

Leaders should model asynchronous behavior if that is their expectation for their employees. They should block time for focus work, respect others' calendars, and avoid responding immediately to messages that do not require an immediate response. Employees will look to their leaders to see norms and ways of collaborating (pp. 280-281).

Below are several tips to help teams "default to asynch":

- Before a meeting, predetermine what needs to be discussed in real-time and what does *not* need an immediate response.

- Prioritize asynchronous tools when gathering feedback. Use Slack or Microsoft Teams to pulse team members and ask colleagues to review work.

- Document everything. By systematically documenting decisions, research, changes to processes, etc., all team members will have access to a single source of truth, including new team members who inquire about decisions made before them joining the team.

- Keep meetings small. Bob Sutton, professor of Management Science and Engineering at Stanford believes seven people make up the ideal team size.

- Design your meetings and share the agenda, objectives, and outstanding questions with members before you meet.

- As the meeting facilitator, if there is a meeting where some colleagues are in the room and some have joined virtually, ensure equal participation. Invite those joining remotely to speak first and institute rules like hand-raising to ask questions or having everyone join from their computer (pp. 210-225).

Be clear about what "hybrid" means for your company and clarify how much flexibility teams and individuals will have (p. 245).

There are five basic types of hybrid and remote work models:

- *Remote-friendly or office-first:* employees are expected to spend most of their time in the office but managers may grant remote work requests

- *Fixed hybrid:* employees are expected to conform to being in the office, remote, or hybrid based on the category of the employee's role or team

- *Partly remote or collaboration days:* employees are expected to work in the office most days but may choose to work remotely a few days; collaboration is structured around a schedule rather than a project or mode of work

- *Flexible hybrid:* employees can choose both their working hours and their location; teams can elect when and why to get together based on collaboration needs

- *Remote-first:* remote work is the default for all employees and leaders; office space may be retained for special occasions or collaborative and team-building spaces (pp. 238-242).

Create company rules that "enable people, not limit them." Cultures made up of employees with high identification benefit when leaders give their employees more autonomy. With autonomy, people become more accountable (p. 247).

Razzetti, G. (2022). **Remote, Not Distant:** *Design a Company Culture That Will Help You Thrive in a Hybrid Workplace.* Highland Park: Liberationist Press.
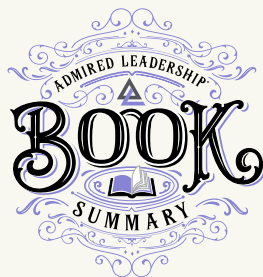
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