

# AS TECHNICAL LEADERS

## DOES WHAT YOU SAY MATCH WHAT YOU DO?



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# Introduction

**As technical leaders, does what you say match what you do? Are you setting a good example for your team in terms of advocating for a healthy work-life balance?**

For many technical leaders, overtime is just an expected part of their job, but it's not something they want to advertise to their teams as a positive notion. Straddling the line between completing workload and advocating for work-life balance suddenly becomes difficult. A leader can't encourage and instruct their teams to switch off at the end of the day, when they are still sending emails at 11pm.

Director of Tech and Digital at Maxwell Bond, Manny, sat down with a number of Technical Leaders from around the UK to discuss steps that leaders can take in order to set a great example without compromising their own workloads.



## Contents

2. Meeting Overload
4. Work Life Balance
5. What is Culture
6. Blame Culture & Psychological Safety
7. Changing Culture
8. Accountability & Ownership

## Meeting Overload

### The Problem

Businesses were thrown suddenly into a nationwide lockdown in March 2020 and working from home became mandatory for all non-essential businesses. Many leaders and managers were left wondering how best to support and communicate with their team members, to ensure the same level of support and guidance was available to them, and to also continue to drive productivity.

Online meetings through Zoom or Microsoft Teams became a lifeline for many leaders to maintain team bonds and relationships, monitor wellbeing and team health, and to continue to manage workload amongst a number of people. However, this quickly filled up calendars, and left many people with little time to actually execute any action points.

Some businesses found themselves churning through functional requirements tactically and lost sight of where to go strategically when in this 'survival mode' and period of uncertainty. However, this often meant that businesses lost sight of their overall strategic plan and began losing important aspects of their culture. Business leaders tried many ways with varying levels of success, to try and increase team cohesiveness and increase social time, albeit remotely. This was naturally more difficult with everyone being physically apart.

What seemed to happen is that people were taking part in increased amounts of meetings, but with decreasing levels of value. The struggle became keeping people connected without eating into their working time too much.





## Solutions

On the social side, many businesses set time aside on a weekly basis to take part in online gaming sessions, Friday afternoon drinks, quizzes, and virtual coffee breaks to enable non-work-related conversation. Some people decided to engage with third parties to provide virtual team building activities, but many businesses reported that enthusiasm and engagement around this dropped off quite quickly.

Additionally, many decided to open up Slack channels that were purely for social chit-chat rather than work. One business had even set up a specific channel, where there would be an open call all day, free for anyone to join whilst working, just to have background noise and to dip in and out of conversation as you would in the office. Another business also used Slack to generate random conversation between two different people at a time. This brought new people together to chat, which was especially useful for new starters during lockdown to get to know the team.

To reduce the amount of time people are in meetings, it's important to review who is in each meeting to evaluate who really needs to be there. Many leaders also started to shorten meeting times. This would help meetings become more succinct and relevant, and would push people into communicating important points more effectively, whilst also giving people a bit of buffer time around meetings so that they could get tasks done, or take short breaks to avoid burnout. Back to back meetings are bad for stress and mental wellbeing, so reducing this when possible is important.

Most importantly, business leaders need to avoid micromanagement. Trust your teams and be comfortable with taking a step back, whilst remaining available to offer support and guidance when required.



## Work Life Balance

### The Problem

Many leaders verbally promote work-life balance and are strong advocates of people switching off from work on time to avoid burnout. But they also find themselves saying one thing and doing another. Many understand that visibly working late sets a bad example for their staff. Leaders should actively sell the culture of having a work life balance, but many find this difficult due to their workload.

If leaders, directors, and senior employees are all seen working late, and are rewarded for this, this sets a precedent that everyone should be doing the same, and that overworking is something positive. Many want to avoid setting the expectation for people to work late to progress and can't tell people to prioritise a work life culture if they are visibly still working late into the nights. But how can leaders truly become work-life balance advocates?

### Solutions

Managers too can get other people to hold them accountable and to effectively tell them to "get offline". Although it can be difficult to find someone with the authority or confidence to do this, who doesn't also have the same struggle.

Some leaders have started to introduce more slack into their delivery. Effectively this means making sure there is a 'buffer' week between projects which will allow teams to wind down from one project and refresh ready to start a new one. You can use this period of time for learning and training, to pick up low priority tasks, or to finish spill over from projects. This lessens pressure on teams, reduces the occasions during which they have to work overtime (or at least rewards them for this), and reduces burnout.

Whilst rewarding overtime is important, it's also important not to create a culture where overworking is met with so much positive reinforcement that it becomes expected. Overworking should not be seen as a pathway to progression. It's important for team members to know this and to have flexible work options, where appropriate, to take overtime in lieu or get paid for it. If someone is working a lot of overtime, it can be appropriate to challenge this and see if they need more support with workload.

As a leader, visibly set an example. Take time back, even if you're leaving the office early and then doing work from home (which isn't visible to the team). If team members see leaders actively prioritising work life balance, they are much more likely to feel comfortable doing the same. If you are working late, ensure you are appearing offline on social channels, and make sure you schedule emails to send during working hours.

## Cultivating Culture

### The Problem

We've all seen job ads that advertise culture as office pets, pool tables, and free beers, but culture really isn't about those things, and it's quickly become apparent that culture, to some businesses, is no more than a branding exercise to attract candidates to work for them. But culture is so much more and should be about foremostly supporting current employees in a safe, inclusive, driven, and exciting environment that inspires passion and loyalty. So what aspects really determine a healthy work culture, and how should businesses maintain a great culture without forcing it.

### Solutions

A culture cannot be determined by one C suite or senior executive. It needs to be cultivated and embodied by everybody in that business. One great way to bring everybody together and start to define a culture that works for everyone is to collectively come up with values. And not just generic words on a board. Instead choose real, meaningful and defined values that help your company stand out and flourish. Make sure that these values are represented in onboarding and interviews, so that you are subtly advertising what your company stands for.

Ensuring that you stick to your values is imperative. A culture is not just having values, it's standing by them. Culture is about continued and sustainable action, not just prescribed behaviour. This might mean having a value of "enabling autonomy, growth, and success" which might mean that you employ a new developer and then immediately get them involved by giving them a ticket to solve or a launch to deploy. Immediately giving them that sense of reward, achievement and accomplishment will show them that your values are something you truly believe in.

Culture is supporting staff in an inclusive, adaptable, and responsive environment. It's about actions, not prescribed behaviours, and shouldn't be seen as a tick box exercise. In 2020, particularly with mandatory remote working, building and maintaining a culture of trust suddenly became a priority. COVID-19 has certainly realigned the importance of culture. Suddenly office perks and free drinks pail in comparison to having trust, flexibility, a learning culture, adaptability, collaboration, communication, and empathy.



## Blame Culture &

## Psychological Safety

### The Problem

Blame is not productive, and it is a blocker to learning, improvement, and innovation. It deters people from trying new things and experimenting, which means new and more efficient processes might be missed due to fear of being blamed for failure. As big mistakes happen, people naturally want to rid their hands of it and push responsibility onto someone else. But this connects failure to shame, which is something that tech leaders absolutely want to avoid.

Blame is a natural human instinct, so how do you transition from a blame culture to a culture of enquiry, and create a safe space for learning, growth, and experimentation.

### Solutions

Things naturally go wrong. Mistakes happen. Things don't always work out how you expect them to. That's why it's important, when big mistakes happen, leaders should make a point of holding a blameless autopsy of the processes that caused the error. A leader should communicate repeatedly that the purpose of this autopsy is not to figure out who went wrong, but rather what went wrong, why it happened, and how to improve going forwards. The purpose is to discover, learn, and improve. Nothing more.

This cultivates a space of psychological safety, where people are more open to learning, giving ideas, and trying new things, fearless in the face of failure and uncertainty. What also help create this, is owning up to your own mistakes, as this breaks down the image of leaders as perfectionists and makes them more relatable and approachable with issues and errors. A team who has people who are open about their mistakes and are willing to learn from them as a team, are much more likely to be successful in fixing them quickly and preventing them from happening again.

With small mistakes, most teams should simply stay so busy and focussed on continuous improvement that blame just doesn't manifest because there isn't time. As a team, people just accept mistakes, come up with solution and move on, to drive progress.

## Encouraging Cultural Change

### The Problem

When changing culture and delivery style, new leaders may struggle implementing new processes and working practices with teams that are at different levels of maturity. Different people received changes differently, so how do you bring people onboard when making changes, if everyone needs different levels of guidance?



### Solutions

Leaders often want to refrain from oversimplifying and over-explaining things in fear of looking patronising. However, when starting with a new team, it's important to be specific and avoid making assumptions when implementing new processes. This ensures that everyone is on the same page and at the same level of understanding about processes, structures, and information. If something does need executing in a specific way, be transparent and honest and make issues visible to everyone, so they can understand why you have implemented a specific way of working.

Naturally, some processes won't work, or they will be accidentally undermined, so it is also important to allow for flexibility and adaptation within your processes. Allowing these changes might actually be better for the team at hand and they will feel valued knowing that their input has been acknowledged. Another way to make team members feel valued, is by getting everyone involved in a controlled way, e.g. allow teams to pick their own squad names from your own preselected list of names. This gives the sense of freedom and choice, whilst you still maintain overall control.



# Accountability & Ownership

## The Problem

Deployment should be a pleasure not a panic and developers should feel excited and driven to take ownership of the full process of a project. Some businesses are pushing towards delivery driven processes in which team members are responsible and accountable for all aspects of the delivery process. However, this can be difficult, so what can leaders do to encourage more accountability and ownership?

## Solutions

Those that are lucky to be in teams that have a set product or set of products under their responsibility are naturally in a more advantageous place in this respect, because they are already aligned to that product completely. They are always part of that product. What becomes fundamental in encouraging ownership and accountability is reinforcing the team structure. Define roles, define responsibilities and work on people's attitudes and mindsets. If you want to own it, you have to be responsible for it, and team members should be able to be comfortable accepting this responsibility and seeing the bigger picture or outcome.

Finding the sweet spot between allowing freedom (i.e. choosing toolsets) and instructing is important, as is making collective decisions and analysing mistakes as a team. This could include setting collective and meaningful KPIs that span personal and professional progress to drive people to want to take responsibility for their own work.



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