



# Future of Work @ ESDC: Leadership Norms and Behaviours for the Flexible Work Environment

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## Background

Our workplace continues to undergo significant change as a result of the world's response to COVID-19 and how we move toward the future. In terms of scale, this change is profound—comparable to the development of the office itself, women entering the workplace, and computerization.

We need to remain agile and nimble, as change will be part of our new normal. It is within this context that Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC) is advancing its Future of Work vision focused on having a “healthy, productive, diverse and inclusive workforce, equipped with modern and secure tools and technology, able to fully deliver on our mandate, drive improved productivity and engagement and foster a culture of service excellence.”

In support of this vision, the Department is advancing a flexible work model where some employees will work on site, some will remain predominantly remote, and others will do both (hybrid model).

To successfully adopt a flexible work model, ESDC acknowledges that workplace norms and behaviours need to adjust, and that the right types of supports need to be provided to managers to lead in this changing environment. This document defines the leadership norms and behaviours our Department is adopting and expecting its leaders to demonstrate.

## Important Considerations

- All levels of leadership in the Department are expected to adopt these norms and behaviours; this includes team leads, supervisors, managers, executives, and deputy ministers.
- The term “norms and behaviours” was a deliberate choice. **Norms** are the formal and informal sets of principles, rules or standards that guide interactions, decision-making, and problem-solving. **Behaviours** are the tangible actions and conduct demonstrated daily. The examples of expected behaviours illustrate practical ways to demonstrate the norms and help to clarify the concepts.



- This playbook will evolve as the flexible work environment evolves and is envisioned as an evergreen tool.
- These norms and behaviours require intentionality on the part of all leaders. They build on and supplement existing Government of Canada leadership competencies, performance objectives, leadership training and supports for workplace well-being.

## Norms and Behaviours

Emerging literature from around the world has identified four areas of leadership that are of particular relevance to a flexible work environment: Intentional Leadership; Psychological Safety and Growth Mindset; Trust; and Empathy-Based Management and Sense of Belonging. In this new work environment, collaboration and communication can become more challenging. There is a greater risk of a fragmented workforce, loss of “visibility” of teams and loss of sense of belonging to the organization. While some norms (such as empathy and trust) have always been considered to be part of good management practices, they have become even more important in the flexible work environment.

While the flexible work environment is evolving in real time, many organizations have been experimenting with it, studying it, and sharing best practices.

We are adopting these leadership norms and the associated behaviours after extensive consultation across the Department.

## Foundational Elements: A Commitment to Reconciliation and Inclusion

The Government of Canada is committed to achieving reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and creating an inclusive environment in which employees are encouraged and free to be themselves at work, regardless of their race, gender, country of origin, sexual orientation, mental or physical disabilities, etc. These commitments are also core principles that guide our work as public servants and, as such, are foundational to all leadership norms and behaviours.



Examples of behaviours are embedded throughout the document to address the unique needs of Indigenous and diverse employees in the flexible work environment.

## 1. Intentional Leadership

Intentional leaders are purposeful in their approaches, thoughtful in how they act, and reflect on the impact they have. In remote and hybrid work, opportunities for spontaneous interactions are less frequent, and there are fewer opportunities to see when part of the workflow is breaking down. Intentional leadership is choosing a people-centric mindset and taking actions that positively influence and motivate your team. This involves purposeful communication, providing clarity wherever possible, combating unconscious presence bias, and developing digital dexterity. Intentional leadership nurtures transformation and discovery in staff. They can learn, grow, develop, and succeed, while the organization achieves meaningful results.

### a) Communication

New and different forms of communication are required in the flexible work environment. Nonverbal communication cues and informal communication are often absent in virtual meetings, which can lead to misunderstandings, communication delays, and less contextual information being shared. These communication challenges can lower levels of group cohesion, diminish employee engagement, and reduce collaboration. To combat this, leaders need to be intentional in how they communicate.

#### Examples of Effective Behaviours

- Communicate often and be predictable.
  - Schedule bilateral meetings or regular stand-ups to provide team members with clear direction.
  - Ensure off-site employees have just as much access to you as on-site employees.
- Be responsive and approachable.
  - More responsive communication results in an increase in team member commitment to achieving performance objectives.





- Demonstrate to your employees that you are approachable by maintaining an “open door policy” and regularly asking them how they are doing. In-person, this can be easily achieved. For employees off-site, consider having virtual check-ins: a message, a post on a virtual Team channel for fun, or a quick poll.
- Collaborate with your team to identify the appropriate tools for communication.
  - Develop a “Communications Charter” that outlines: what mode of communication is best suited to the different activities your team undertakes, how and when you will meet, how to behave appropriately at meetings, and how you will respond to requests.
- Use video effectively in your virtual meetings.
  - Using video can be helpful in virtual meetings to foster connection; however, research shows that having your camera on all day can cause “zoom fatigue”. Leaders and employees should have the autonomy to keep their camera on or off, and others should not make assumptions about engagement or productivity.
- Implement intentional, meaningful, and accurate land acknowledgments at the beginning of important meetings (whether they are virtual or in-person). Be sure to acknowledge that participants may be joining from different Indigenous territories across the country for hybrid and virtual meetings.
- Remember that storytelling and silence is particularly important in Indigenous culture. Use pauses and round-table style discussions in virtual meetings to ensure that all employees feel heard.

## Examples of Ineffective Behaviours

- Expect that communication will work itself out without your intervention.
- Create inbox overload by having long email threads or using the reply-all feature when it is not required.
- Overschedule and create meeting overload.
- Host ineffective meetings by being unprepared, multi-tasking, or going off topic.



## b) Clarity

In the new flexible work environment, change is even more a constant. In the absence of certainty, we can offer clarity.

### Examples of Effective Behaviours

- Develop a team charter on what your team wants to achieve, and how you will work together to achieve it.
- Give your team clear work objectives, and both the accountability and autonomy for delivering on them.
- Focus on the things you can control and be transparent when there are things out of your control.
- Host “town-hall” type meetings to address questions and be as honest as possible with answers and be transparent about what you do not know.

### Examples of Ineffective Behaviours

- Display a false confidence in procedures and practices.
- Delay sharing important information with your team because you are uncertain.

## c) Unconscious Presence Bias

The brain tends to favour people that are physically closer to us. In a flexible work environment, employees who work in close proximity to the leader may be unconsciously valued more than those who do not. Sometimes team members can be in a different time zone, which makes communication even more difficult. It is important to be aware of this and avoid unintentionally falling victim to the bias.

### Examples of Effective Behaviours

- Consider how much you as a leader need to work on-site. If you choose to work on-site for personal reasons, signal to your team that they are not expected to come to the office just because you are there. Employees should only be asked to be on-site to meet operational needs or for specific group activities.
- Ensure fairness between remote, on-site and hybrid workers.



- Hold virtual meetings for hybrid teams to avoid excluding team members in other locations and ensure these team members and those on-site can fully participate on an equal basis.
- Give all employees the opportunity to volunteer for tasks rather than assuming certain team members would not want to participate.
- Raise quieter voices.
  - Make a space where quiet voices feel welcome to speak; for example: allowing “reactions” and maximizing the use of the chat feature during virtual meetings may give more individuals the opportunity to participate.
  - Ensure that if someone is dominating a meeting, you gently interrupt them to open the floor for others to speak.
- When possible and relevant, bring teams together in person for “meaningful moments”: connection, creation, and celebration. Research is clear that some activities are more easily accomplished and have better outcomes when people are physically together.
- To consciously avoid the “similar to me bias”, seek opportunities to expand your network to include people who are different from you in age, gender, ethnicity, education, socio-economic background, ability, and sexual orientation, so that you and your team members can gain broader perspectives.

## Examples of Ineffective Behaviours

- Give a task, special opportunities or volunteer activities to an employee because they are closest in proximity or more visible to you.
- Forgo the usual watercooler chats with employees who are off-site or working virtually.
- Promote employees because you can see their contributions more easily because you work with them more closely.
- Require your team members to come to the office just because it is your preference to work on-site, instead of basing decisions on operational/business needs.



## d) Digital Dexterity

To thrive in this technologically driven environment, leaders need to have **digital dexterity**, the ability and desire to use and apply existing and emerging technology to drive better business outcomes. Understanding how technology works at a high level enables leaders to make informed decisions. Leaders who can embrace modern technologies will be able to support their teams better in the flexible work environment.

### Examples of Effective Behaviours

- Embrace modern technologies and incorporate them into your business processes.
- Be willing to learn and adopt new ways of working to deliver better outcomes.
- Encourage innovation: provide the space for your team to try modern technologies, learn from them, adjust, and then share with the rest of the organization.
- Ensure proper information management practices are followed.

### Examples of Ineffective Behaviours

- Fear and avoid modern technologies.
- Return to previous ways of working because they are more comfortable.
- Display a fixed mindset about digital skills that indicate they are not important for leadership.

## 2. Psychological Safety and Growth Mindset

### a) Psychological Safety

**Psychological safety** is the result of organizations purposefully creating a culture in which employees feel comfortable making mistakes, speaking up, and generating innovative ideas. Psychological safety also ensures employees feel supported when they share their struggles and request workplace accommodations. It drives high-quality decision making, healthy group dynamics, and greater innovation. A psychologically safe environment is difficult to create and maintain with various work locations, hours and technologically mediated interactions, so this is an important norm for the flexible work environment.





## Examples of Effective Behaviours

- Create a culture where your team can talk about mistakes, so the whole team can learn from them and prevent similar mistakes in the future.
- Speak openly and be willing to be challenged by your team. Share your own challenges and failures to set an example.
- Create an environment that encourages all team members to share aspects of their personal situations or challenges that are relevant to their work schedule or location. Ensure that it is a culturally safe and inclusive space so diverse needs can be shared.
- Topics such as child care, health risk comfort levels, or family and community related challenges become more important to discuss in a flexible work environment.
- Ensure that all work environments and tools are accessible. Addressing accessibility from the outset ensures that everyone is included and can participate and contribute fully.
- Be an ally. Ensure team members feel comfortable identifying and sharing when they have accessibility or accommodation issues.

## Examples of Ineffective Behaviours

- Penalize team members who disclose mistakes or their needs.
- Silence or exclude team members who have differing viewpoints.

## b) Growth Mindset

A related concept is fostering a growth mindset. A **growth mindset** promotes seeing challenges as opportunities and not threats. A growth mindset fosters an environment for employees to learn and grow, which contributes to organizational success. The focus of a growth mindset is on developing skills and achieving new personal bests, not comparing yourself with those around you. A growth mindset also involves becoming comfortable taking calculated risks and learning to accept a certain amount of failure. During the pandemic, the Department became more comfortable with taking calculated risks, which resulted in positive outcomes for Canadians and organizational efficiencies.



## Examples of Effective Behaviours

- Develop your team's comfort with taking risks, as long as the risks are calculated and deliberate. Be willing to fail and see it as a learning opportunity.
- Provide constructive feedback, not just in the performance management cycle, but through regular interactions with team members to ensure they are adapting well and feeling supported in a flexible work environment.
  - Request feedback on your own performance from your team, peers and supervisors. This demonstrates your own personal commitment to growth and can reveal areas where you as a leader may need additional support or training.
- Prioritize learning by providing opportunities and time for training and development, including opportunities related to managing remote and hybrid teams.
  - Encourage and work with team members to develop and follow their learning plan in their performance agreements and work on the areas where they have received feedback.
  - Model this behaviour by taking time for your own learning and development.
- Ensure that all team members, regardless of work arrangement or location, have the same opportunities, and help them grow in ways that reflect their unique circumstances.

## Examples of Ineffective Behaviours

- Revert to the way it has “always been done” or hesitate to innovate and take risks.
- Hold and encourage a fixed mindset that believes team members only possess certain skills or talent.
- Respond with anger and aggression when mistakes are disclosed.
- Respond with a defensive attitude when constructive feedback is provided.

## 3. Trust

Trust is fundamental to the workplace. It enables teamwork and professional relationships; it can improve performance and enable collaboration. There are two types of trust:



- Cognitive trust: the belief and understanding that others are dependable and have the competencies to be able to collaborate effectively on a common task.
- Emotional trust: the belief that others have care and concern for us.

Research demonstrates humans are conditioned to build trust based on visual cues, vocal cadence, eye contact, mannerisms, and body language. In flexible work environments, we may see people less and our interactions are often mediated by technology, making it harder to build trust.

As a leader, developing both types of trust is important and requires a deliberate effort in the flexible work environment. Cognitive trust comes from knowing that someone has the qualifications to do the work and is dependable and reliable. Emotional trust takes longer to develop and requires empathy, self-disclosure, and spending time together.

## Examples of Effective Behaviours

- Make a point of sharing your personal side to humanize yourself. Encourage your team to do the same. Humans are conditioned to reciprocate. If you share, your team will too.
- Where feasible and based on job functions, give your team autonomy over their schedules, work styles, or habits; focus on results and outcomes achieved, rather than the number of hours spent “at work”.
  - When a leader provides autonomy or flexibility, research shows that team members put in more discretionary effort.
- Approach your team members with a positive and unsuspicious mindset.
  - Believing that people have the best intentions has been shown to benefit relationships. There may be disappointing moments, but you can influence your team members with a positive attitude.
- Follow through on your commitments and hold all team members to the same standard.
- Foster an environment where team members can be their authentic selves and are free to disagree.
  - Encourage the team to express differences of opinion and deal with them respectfully and openly.



- Be mindful of culturally different approaches to how employees interact with leaders; openly discuss your leadership style and how you want your team to raise concerns.

## Examples of Ineffective Behaviours

- Use Microsoft Teams, or any other digital technology, as a surveillance tool to monitor whether your employees are at their desk.
- Remove telework privileges as soon as poor performance is observed instead of working with the employee to determine the root cause of the issue.

## 4. Empathy-Based Management and Sense of Belonging

Employees and leaders have been left overwhelmed and fatigued by the pandemic. With everyone at a distance, it can be hard to feel part of the team or build meaningful connections across the Department, which leaves employees feeling disengaged and adrift.

**Empathetic leaders** recognize, understand and support the personal and emotional needs of team members, promote cultural diversity, and listen with compassion. Empathy is highly correlated with key leadership skills including coaching, engaging, and making sound decisions, as well as overall performance. The flexible work environment shifts our focus from being location based to people centric.

A related concept is a **sense of belonging**. Research shows that when we feel safe and valued for embracing what makes us different, we are happier, more productive, healthier, and better able to cope with job stress. A sense of belonging is directly related to attachment to an organization, which reduces employee turnover and makes teams more effective and productive. Creating a sense of belonging in a flexible work environment requires intentionality. Research reports that 18–25-year-old employees have stated that networking has become incredibly difficult in a virtual work environment. Without chance encounters like hallway conversations or small talk, it is hard to feel connected to immediate teams, much less build meaningful connections across the Department.





## Examples of Effective Behaviours

- Where possible, work with your team to structure some work-life boundaries, such as “no meeting” days, and no expectation to respond after work hours. In a flexible work environment, boundaries help leaders and employees disconnect.
- Listen to understand, encourage and model the taking of different perspectives, and be humble.
  - Develop skills such as active listening and dealing with difficult conversations.
  - Remember that we all experience the world differently and have different constraints.
- Hone your own emotional intelligence and learn to recognize warning signs in the flexible work environment.
  - Be sensitive to the signs of “burn-out” or stress in yourself and others.
  - Be aware of your own mental health and model appropriate behaviours for your staff. When a leader is suffering from stress, anxiety, depression or any other mental health issue, they are not able to perform at their best.
  - Show compassion for staff and their various challenges (work, personal, spiritual, cultural identity, etc.). Apply this same compassion to yourself.
- Praise your team in both formal and informal ways, such as sending “praise” in Microsoft Teams, and set up ways in which other team members can recognize their colleagues.
- Give tokens of appreciation. When most communication is digital, a physical package (such as a handwritten card or note) can make off-site employees feel welcome to the team, appreciated, and valued.
- Onboard new team members effectively via virtual and in-person methods, as appropriate.
  - Onboarding effectively has been cited as a key reason to return to the office; when possible, bring employees in for this activity.
  - Support the on-boarding process in a flexible work environment by providing virtual job-shadowing, mentoring, or opportunities to connect with senior leadership.



- Find creative methods like virtual drop-in hours for employees, set up a “buddy system” to share their implicit knowledge, or take time at meetings to share difficulties and best practices.
- Cultivate informal interactions.
  - Informal interactions and unplanned encounters foster unexpected sharing of ideas. Leave a part of the meeting agenda as free space for employees to discuss any topic or schedule virtual socialization time (perhaps an online team-building exercise, free chat, or activity).
  - Help employees meet each other by creating social events in which everyone can participate (e.g., virtual escape rooms, virtual water-cooler chats, etc.).
- Take responsibility as a leader to understand the specific needs of Indigenous and diverse employees on your team, and ask them how you can help create a culturally safe and inclusive workplace in the flexible work environment.

## Examples of Ineffective Behaviours

- Dehumanize yourself and team members by focusing only on metrics, performance, and outcomes.
- Refer or give privileges to employees based on their group (e.g., on-site workers, National Capital Region workers, etc.). This creates inequality, allows in-groups and out-groups to form, and destroys a sense of belonging to the organization.

## Conclusion

Many leaders across our Department have already embraced these norms and developed best practices for leadership. This playbook is designed to highlight elements required to demonstrate them in a flexible work environment.

To ensure that leaders are going from words to action, it is of utmost importance that these norms and behaviours are understood, accepted, and incorporated into daily leadership practices.

Some leaders may read this and feel overwhelmed, seeing it as yet another set of requirements added to their already full agendas. A shift in mindset may be what is needed. Sound leadership practices should never be a burden to a leader and will only



improve how a team operates. Embracing these norms will require an investment of time and effort and require courage and resilience. It is not an easy task, but the outcomes produced are infinitely rewarding.

Leaders will not be alone in this journey: ESDC is committed to creating conditions for success through tools, training, and coaching. Supporting leaders to adopt and implement these norms and behaviours is paramount.



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