IABC Heritage Region Webinar: Operating in your 2022 new normal: Shaping and influencing culture in a remote work environment

Presented by Leslie Krohn, Chief Communications Officer, Argonne National Laboratory

Q&A Summary

Q: Do you have any advice for mixed remote and on-site employee groups?

A: You'll need a mix of channels for mixed groups, and ways to connect them. For quarterly all-hands meetings, for instance, we have designated "watch locations" where the onsite employees can view the livestream, so they are seeing the same content as those who are remote.   We also figured out how to stream the event to all the flat screens across campus, for informal viewing locations. It's a good practice to regularly ask yourself: "what will the experience be for those on site? As well as for those remote?" and if you don't feel you've covered all the bases, look for gaps and problem solve.

Q: Why do leaders need to meet so frequently at this point of the pandemic?

A: Our senior most leaders met daily at the start of the pandemic, then dropped to 3x/week after about 6 months. We still meet that often, but other topics are now on the agenda, so that we are focused on the pandemic fully once a week. When things change (e.g., the emergence of vaccines, or the Omicron variant), we ramp up our meeting cadence, reducing it when the wave of change has passed. We have found that when things are most out of control, that's when we need to meet the most. And from Dec '21-Jan '22, things were as explosive as ever.

Q: What advice do you have for organizations that are 100% remote?

A: In some ways, that's an easier communications challenge, as you are not managing the complexity of a hybrid workforce. In that case, I'd work with my IT teams to make sure that all employees have good access to organization resources, and by extension, communications channels. Does everyone have access, and instructions on how to watch livestreams, to post to an intranet, to contribute to an online brainstorming session? Tools and access become very important to ensure the messaging gets through.

Q: Do you have advice for people at manager levels, who are not in senior leader meetings? What are the steps I need to take to align leaders when I'm not invited to the cocktail party yet?

A: As a manager, I'd encourage you to start now and keep advocating for a seat at the table, and when you get it, make the most of it. Be informed, pay attention, ask clarifying questions, propose solutions. Make recommendations that will help the organization achieve its goals, and stay focused on the outcomes leaders are expecting, vs tactical decisions that sometimes interfere with day-to-day execution of communications. Speak with your supervisor and ask for their help in enabling you to achieve that goal.

Q: Any advice for onboarding new employees in a remote/hybrid environment?

A: We've developed a checklist for all new hires, which includes basic items—from "how do I get a PC?" to "where do I find help decoding acronyms?" We typically assign a new hire a buddy or "navigator," someone who can answer basic questions and guide them to others who can help when they run into something they don't understand. We set up a series of meet-and-greets so people can get to know their colleagues; Zoom is better than nothing because the human interactions are as essential as ever.

Q: Can you explain what an "Open Mic Night" is for Argonne?

A: Argonne worked hard to bring our remote work force together in fun ways from the very start of the pandemic. One such effort was an open mic night, which we held in the summer of 2020. We put out a call for performers, and we outlined a variety of ways people could showcase their talents or hobbies—from poetry reads to musical performances or showcasing their art, photography etc. It was a hit, so we did a holiday themed version where families participated, and our CEO joined in and shared his recipe for a "Yule Mule." Our most recent holiday version had painters, singer/songwriters, a family string quartet and a few winter haikus. We've found that asking the performers to record their performance, then stringing the videos together with a live "DJ," worked best. It was a great engagement event. People logged into Zoom to watch and there was an abundance of positive comments.

Q: What measures do you use to track culture?

A: Culture is slow to build, slow to change, so most of our culture metrics come from climate or employee engagement type surveys that we do every 2-3 years. Those surveys ask about trust in leadership, quality of supervision, understanding of mission/vision/values, etc. We use other more short-term tools to understand employee mindset, but that's only a part of culture.

Q: Do you have any experience in managing not only virtual communication - but international virtual communication? Perhaps including those who might want to visit the labs from various locations?

A: The lab's business is global, as the scientific community is global and the organizations we serve are global. Our employees come from over 50 countries, and we have visitors from many cultures. We stay mindful that many in our audience may not be native English speakers, so we work to simplify language, slow down speech cadence, provide subtitles and host of other actions to help international participants get the most out of the communications we serve up.

Q: What is the size of your internal comms team?

A: We have 5 people on internal comms; that's less than 10% of the total communications team. They are supported by a small set of external freelance resources, and our in-house design team.

Q: Given the hybrid nature of the workplace, would you talk about building / maintaining culture from a business-as-usual perspective?

A: I'd reinforce the main message of the session. You need to know what type of culture you want to have and codify it. Are we innovative? Can we tolerate failure? Or are we tried-and-true, and risk avoidant? Do the work, ideally with a supportive top leader, to gain alignment. Expect to lose people who do not agree with the culture you want to build (and that's ok). Make sure you repeat those cultural hallmarks frequently; they cannot disappear from view. Keep the core the same, but keep the comms fresh. For instance, we have core values posters around the lab, but to aid in understanding and internalizing the core values, we've done things like paint Adirondack chairs and do "when Harry met Sally" type videos about their importance.

Q: As a fully remote company, how can internal communication alleviate "rude" behavior when team members are stressed?

A: It is not the job of internal comms to mediate rude behavior in an organization. That responsibility lies with supervisors. Internal comms can lay out the expectation and the standards to which

people will be held, but the supervisory chain must hold individuals accountable for meeting that standard.

Q: **Our firm is small -- most employees are based in NYC with only 2 employees remote. How do we ensure remote folks are remembered?**

A: That takes a collective commitment, and some constant reminders. There are reasons people were offered the option to work remotely, and perhaps that needs to be shared. Creating a few ideas (or a checklist) to help people remember to be inclusive might be helpful. It's typical to forget about time zone differences. Rookie mistake, but oh so common. Simple reminders like 'Did we designate the time zone? Did we include a dial in number? What's the remote person's role in the meeting?" Consistency on those kinds of things will go far. Plus you could ask the remote people what makes them feel most excluded, then seek solutions to those disappointing moments.

Q: **Off topic, but how did you do that digital branded background?**

A: The digital background was done by one of our designers based on the graphic motif we had for our 75th anniversary. There are many stock images, and you can create your own pretty simply, if you can create a gif, jif, jpeg or other image file. Most virtual platforms (Zoom, Teams, etc.) have made it easy to upload whatever background image you want. There's discussion to be had, culturally speaking, as to whether you want to have that consistent (from a uniformity or brand perspective), or allow personality to shine through. We don't police it generally, but for Board meetings, we absolutely create and insist that all participants have the appropriate background image.

Q: **Have you gotten a sense of which mode of communication has been most successful for you? Email newsletters, the intranet, MS Teams?**

A: We track the open rates, visits, page views, time on page, etc. for all our newsletters, emails, web pages, etc. It's hard to generalize. Our intranet page on the COVID cases in our workplace remains the #1 place people go to get that information. A summary of it goes in a newsletter, but the detail is on the intranet. Best advice is to have measurement available for the most important channels and review it frequently.

Q: **To follow up my question - you're putting out so much great info in so many different ways. How can you tell if people are listening? Or can you?**

A: I can tell if people are listening based on the questions they ask. For instance, there are 2-3 people who constantly make suggestions that we should do X or provide Y, and I send them the link to where we did that a week ago. Some people just don't read. They wait to be told. Not sure why they keep making suggestions when we can say "done," but it's in their nature. I know we're in virgin territory when people ask questions that we don't have answers to. That's the important moment.

Q: **How important is it for senior leaders / executives to take part in MS Teams chats or open mic events?**

A: It depends on the leadership style of the leader, and how they want to be perceived. As the leader goes, so goes the organization. If the leader keeps secrets, others will feel empowered to. If the leader is transparent, others will step up and share more information. If the leader is rude, others will think it's ok for them to be rude too. If leaders join in an Open Mic or other event, allowing others to see a different side of their personality, they open the door to others doing the

same. I recommend having a very frank conversation about how the leader wants to be perceived, and the pros/cons of that stance. Once an understanding is reached, line up the tactics and behaviors that support that goal. My leader wants to be approachable, transparent, and engaged with employees. So he put on an apron and taught them how to mix drinks. Very consistent with how he wanted to be perceived.

Q: In a manufacturing environment, remote isn't really an option - any ideas from other participants, or the speaker on how to continue to build culture when you feel some of the messaging doesn't include you?

A: I've worked at Sara Lee, so I understand the manufacturing environment. We are challenged by the tendency toward an us vs. them mentality, and everyone is reluctant to waste their time on things that don't affect them. We work hard to focus our comms, and tell our stories, in a way that is accessible to everyone (e.g., we tell stories about quantum physics in a way that an accounts payable manager understands). We work hard to tell stories where both scientists and operations work together on a common goal (like when our electrical teams had to figure out how to supply enough power to turn on a supercomputer). Make it a point to find mutual, shared goals, and feature everyone in the telling of the stories.