

HOW DO WE BUILD CULTURE WITH DISTRIBUTED TEAMS?

By [Afshan Kinder](#) | Published in Contact Center Pipeline: June 2021



A strong culture provides remote team members with a sense of belonging that can counteract feelings of isolation.

COVID-19 redefined how we work together. It caused us to act differently and work better together as humans, and not just business leaders. It was very apparent in the latter days of 2020 that leading, managing and coaching virtually was here to stay. In addition, companies realized the benefits of securing talent outside of their geographical footprint. This, coupled with

an imminent decision for employees to choose their work location preferences, should have us rethinking our approach to keeping culture and engagement evolving within distributed teams.

Now more than ever, strong relationships and networks are required as the cement that keeps distributed teams engaged and working at optimal speeds. It's like having a good friend with whom you can just pick up where you left off—even after many years. This type of leadership leaves you with a feeling of connection that survives when we don't see some individuals on a regular basis. Strong work cultures give people an unshakable sense of belonging. It counteracts feelings of isolation that so many employees are experiencing today.

The trust and bond between a team manager and a team member are even more important.

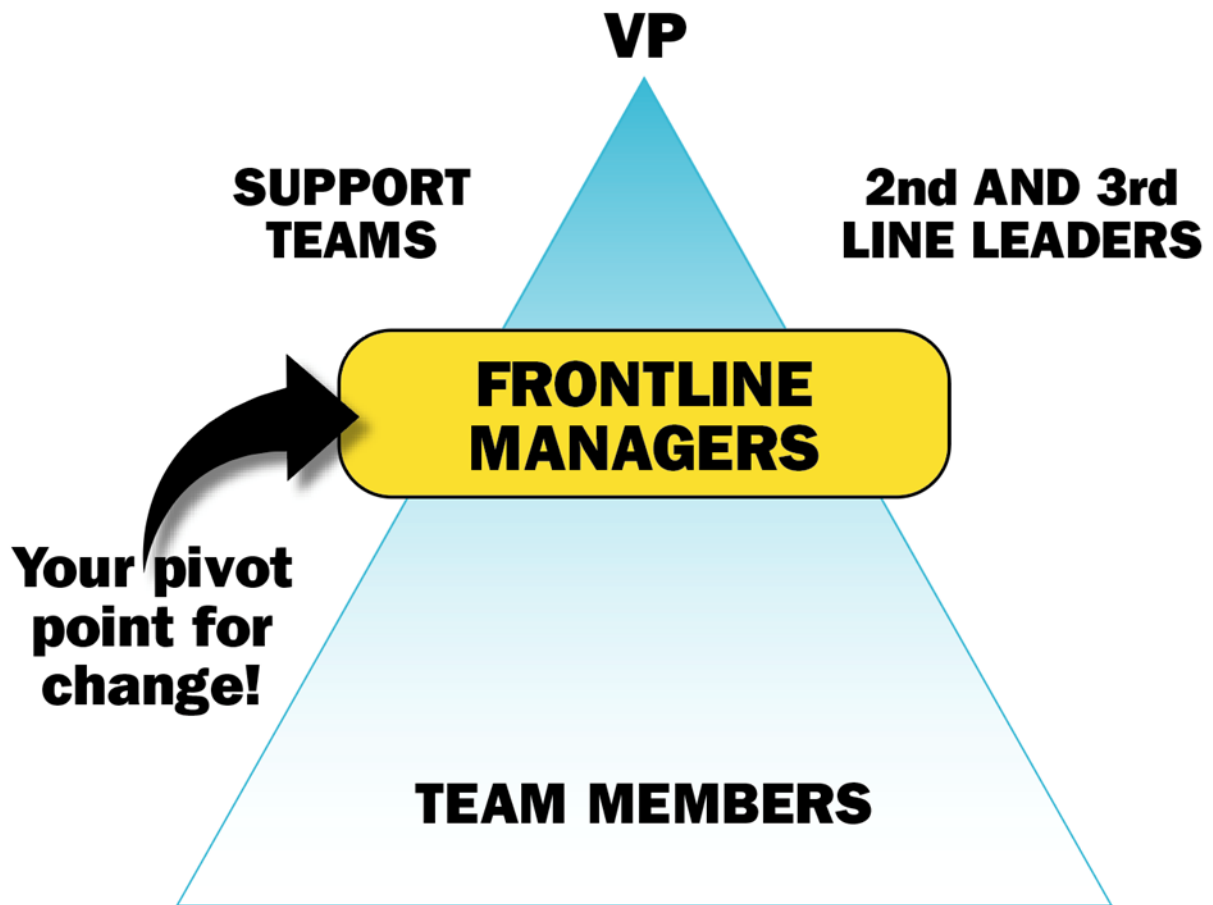
To get to this level of connectedness, senior leaders must send a clear and consistent message of what must be red-circled and is of unwavering importance. For example, should the manager's focus be on the latest operational issue, integrating a new change, projects or developing people? When all these activities are of equal importance, coaching and developing team members typically falls to the bottom of the list. The only exception is when there are performance issues, and then those team members become front and center. For distributed teams to feel connected, the solution is to be consistent in the time we allocate to each individual, and the value we bring to each interaction.

How we choose to help our frontline leaders will be instrumental in unlocking this challenge. To ensure that your first- and second-line leaders are set up for success, the first step is to clear their path. How?

1. Tame your competing priorities. Senior leaders can achieve significant gains by executing well against a few key game-changing initiatives. This sends one clear message to all teams and creates a sense of purpose and clarity of what's important. When clarity goes up, resistance goes down, and change is easier to introduce and ultimately sustain.

2. Leverage your pivot point. The only role in your organization that can affect the behavioral change of your customer-facing teams are your team managers. They are your instrument to integrate and sustain change. (SEE FIGURE 1.)

FIGURE 1: TEAM LEADERS ARE INSTRUMENTAL IN DRIVING CHANGE



In best-in-class organizations, the first-line leader's role is clearly defined and can be measured based on their ability to improve the performance of everyone on their team, not just low-performers.

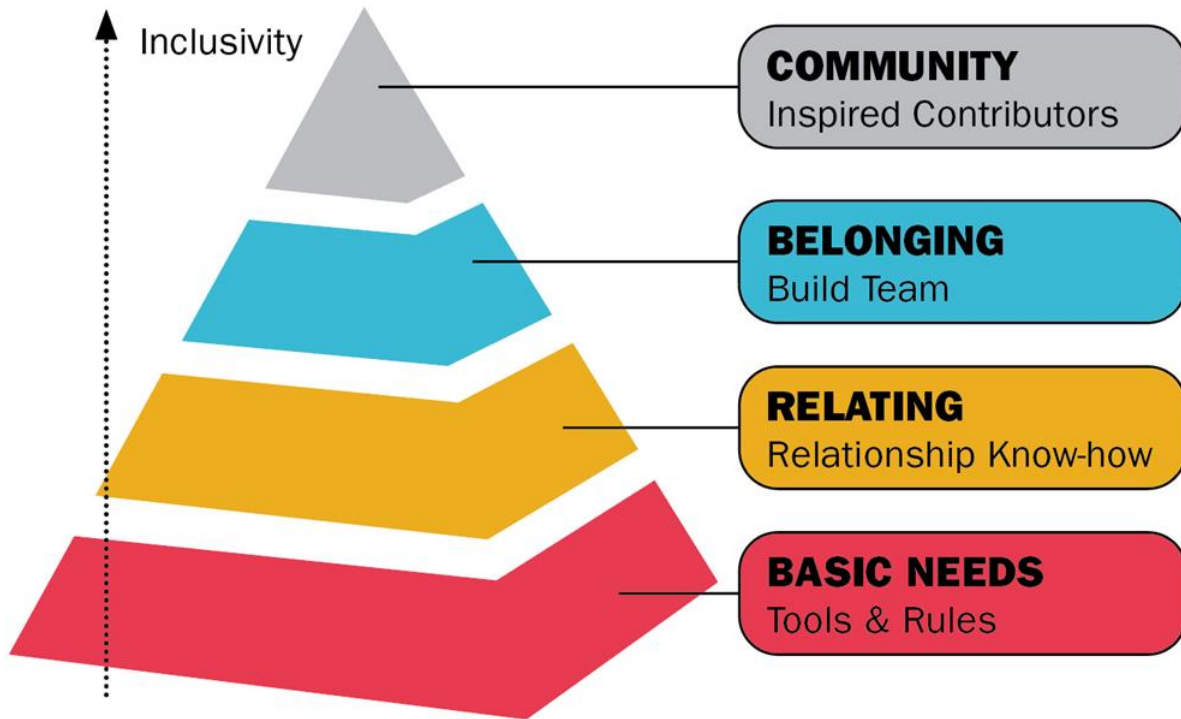
The fastest way to realize the benefits of an agile organization is to build knowledge and skill with your team. To do this, team managers must have a system and methodology that allows them to be consistent with one another in how they support, develop and grow talent.

3. Align intention and outcome. With distributed teams, first- and second-line leaders must build consistent rituals such as building trust and connection through high-frequency, low-duration touchpoints. For example, having a meaningful conversation daily for 10 minutes builds a relationship faster than talking to team members once a month. As a result, leaders can provide stability and reduce feelings of isolation.

4. Reimagine how to build a cohesive culture systematically. Like Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, there is a similar hierarchy when building a culture with distributed teams.

There are four tiers to achieving inclusivity: Basic Needs, Relating, Belonging and Community (SEE FIGURE 2).

FIGURE 2: FOUR TIERS TO ACHIEVING INCLUSIVITY



Four Tiers to Achieving Inclusivity

▲ BASIC NEEDS: TOOLS & RULES

- **Set clear expectations** with leaders: Be clear on the number of touchpoints; plan a monthly event calendar and rules around communication. Match mode to the complexity of the message.
- The team is clear about boundaries.
- Provide stable technology.
- Train leaders on how to engage individuals and teams using technology.
- **Be ready with answers** when team members ask, "How can my contribution become visible?" "What's my career path?"

▲ RELATING: RELATIONSHIP KNOW-HOW

The top four:

- **Be human** and take time to learn about each other.
- Have a heightened sense of observation and active listening; lean in and pick up on cues.

- Make it an intention to give value.
- **Build knowledge and skill** in areas that are a pain point for a team member. It's not your agenda.

▲ BELONGING: BUILD TEAM

- Your distributed team culture will flourish or fail purely on communication. **Leaders must be deliberate** in choosing the right medium based on the importance and complexity of the message.
- Team meetings are a conversation. Build team commitment to hold each other accountable to adopt a change.
- Stay true to an events calendar. This is where leaders lead from the back. A positive state of mind leads to change and faster adoption.
- **Leaders' new role is to facilitate.**

▲ COMMUNITY: INSPIRED CONTRIBUTORS

- **Leaders must be consistent** in publicly recognizing specific behaviors that reflect company values.
- Team members can visualize their desired career trajectory, starting with meeting their personal best in their role.
- **Managers are in the business**, not in meeting rooms. They are close to customers and team members, gathering insight to contribute back into the business.

After a year like no other, ongoing changes may feel overwhelming and daunting.

#WeAreInThisTogether may be overused, but it is very much true. We are in this together as a culture, an organization and as individuals. Our job is to make sure everyone feels this sense of community.



Afshan Kinder is a Leadership and Coaching subject-matter expert & partner in Canada's premiere sales & service consultancy SwitchGear. Afshan works with many Fortune 500 companies and her fresh ideas, concepts and cutting-edge strategies are instrumental in sparking and sustaining organizational behavioural change. What's unique is the way she leverages micro-learning to help leaders adopt new ways of thinking. Her virtual facilitation is fun, high-energy and engaging, making clients rave about the value they gain. Afshan sits on the GTACC Advisory Board. She's also a contributing author to three books, "Call Centers FOR DUMMIES," "Game Changing Ideas: 10 Years of SwitchGear Insights," and Amazon Kindle best-selling book, "Called to Action."

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