

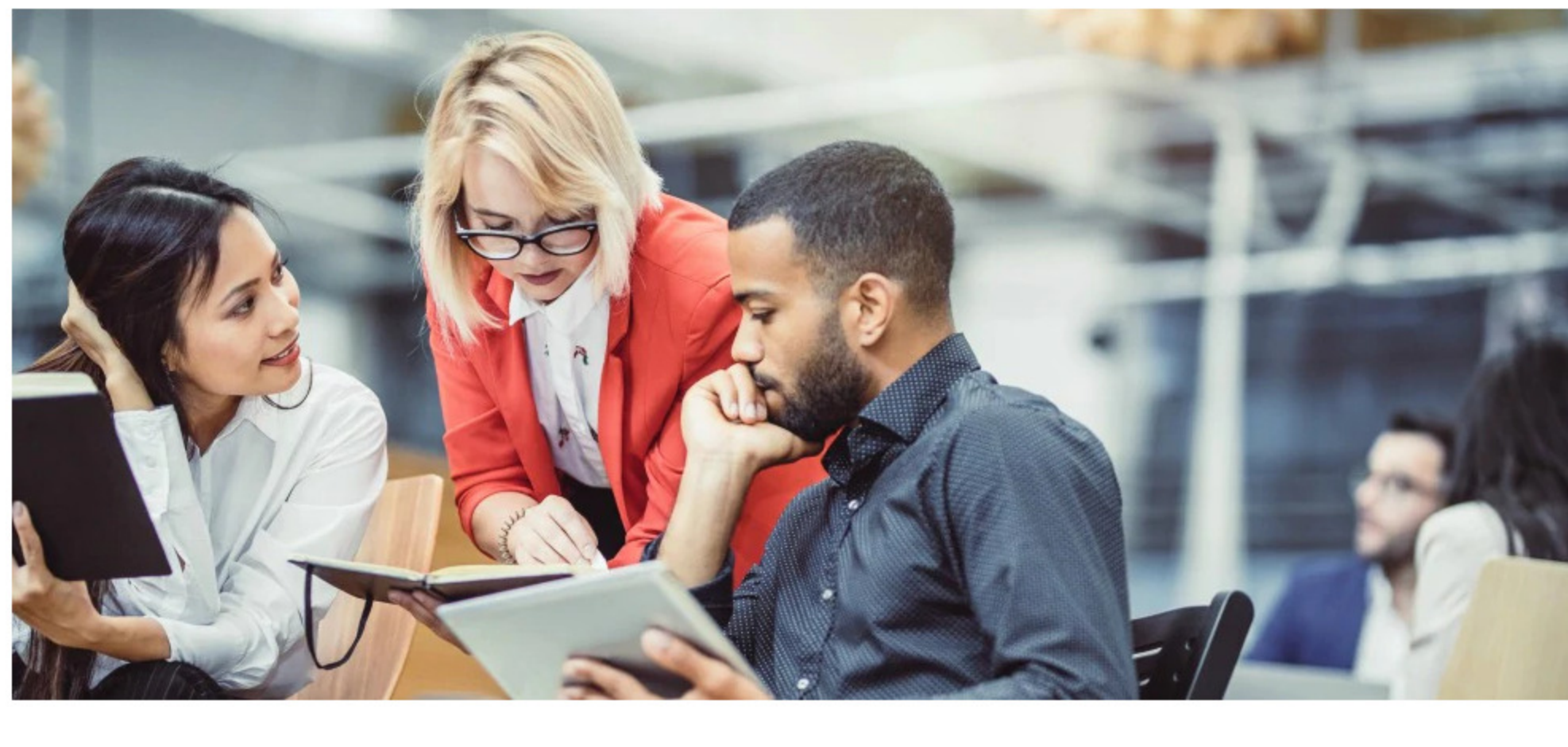
July 11, 2019

# How to Create a Culture of Collaboration With a Fully Remote Team

Remote collaboration takes the right mix of tools and processes, and these continue to evolve as the team grows. Here are some tried and true strategies.

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Without the benefit of face-to-face communication, building rapport across distances is a challenge for remote teams, especially with everyone distributed across different time zones. As a company grows and evolves, this challenge may be compounded—how do teams maintain a [culture of collaboration](#) while making sure everyone's goals align with the company's goals?

"I think a big part of it is experimentation. There's not a playbook for how to do this, so be willing to try new things and be willing to listen to each other and ask for feedback a lot," advises Wade Foster, co-founder and CEO of [Zapier](#).

Foster knows well what it's like to run a business that grew from a very small startup to a successful large company. When he and two co-founders launched Zapier in 2011, the three bootstrapped the startup on the side. Today, Zapier's workflow automation app has 4 million users, with 150,000 companies using the app.

The company became profitable fast by startup standards—within three years. It has grown from the three founders to more than 200 people located in 27 U.S. states, 20 countries and on all continents except Antarctica.

Foster, who is the main author of Zapier's recent ebook "[The Ultimate Guide to Remote Work](#)," shares the following strategies that helped the company create a strong culture of collaboration.

## 1. Build personal relationships and camaraderie.

The team is the main "ingredient" in Zapier's overall success, and there's a strong focus on camaraderie. Activities center on creating both personal and professional relationships within Zapier.

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Foster says they're constantly iterating and [adding new ideas to the mix](#). Some of the sticky strategies include:

- **A virtual office:** Slack has replaced the physical office. As Foster put it in the ebook, "If you're in Slack, then you're at work." There are more than a hundred channels that range from marketing and engineering to cooking and other "watercooler" topics.
- **Weekly hangouts:** Every Thursday morning or afternoon, there's a variation on the "all-hands" meeting, except these are demos, lightning talks and other nonstrategic discussions, recorded for those who miss and want to catch up later.
- **"Pair buddies.":** A weekly random pairing brings together two or three people for informal chats about work and life. The goal is to get employees across departments to get to know each other better. The pairings are done via Donut, a Slack app.

In addition to digital communication, Zapier aims to get employees together a couple of times a year for a retreat "somewhere cool" but easy to get to. Retreats usually last four days, not counting travel time and an optional "fun" free day. The retreats are a mix of work and non-work activities and have included things like hiking on Mount Rainier and visiting an old Texas farm used as a movie set.

"Meeting people in person, there's something special about it," Foster says. "We know from doing this now for seven years that people feel inspired by each other. [...] It's sort of a reconnection, rejuvenation period."

## 2. Provide a good management infrastructure.

Foster says the management structure in a remote environment is critical. The managers don't only build rapport with their teams through activities like weekly one-on-ones, but also mentor and coach them.

While the managers may have different styles and bring management skills to the job, a support infrastructure provides them with tools like personality tests and training on various topics.

"We're not prescriptive—we allow some creativity in terms of how people want to approach that relationship," Foster says. "The one thing that we do ask is to make sure they're delivering on their objectives, and making sure the team feels nurtured, coached, developed and grown, because that's what's going to ultimately help them stick around and be successful here."

## 3. Use the right collaboration and communication tools.

Zapier has a comprehensive set of communication, project management and [collaboration tools](#). Besides Slack, an internally developed tool called Async has replaced internal email communication.

Other essential tools range from the video conferencing app Zoom and software development platform GitHub, to password manager LastPass Enterprise and customer support platform Help Scout (everyone at Zapier takes turns providing customer support).



Be willing to ask for feedback a lot—ask about what's not working and then honestly and earnestly listen to it and try to respond to it and improve.

—Wade Foster, co-founder and CEO, Zapier

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Like other strategies and programs, the specific apps used have changed a bit over time, as the company experimented with different tools and as the [needs became more sophisticated](#). But, Foster notes, they recognized the need for good tools from the outset.

"We've looked for new tools to meet our new needs, to help coordinate in a different way for a bigger company," he says.

## 4. Create accountability and set expectations.

In a remote environment, companies typically pivot to results-driven performance, and Zapier is no exception. "Managing by expectation" takes the form of setting OKRs—objectives and key results. These, Foster says, help everyone stay on the same page.

Foster says it's a good idea to mutually agree on the expectations.

"At the beginning of the week, month, quarter or whatever, work with your team and say, 'Hey, what should we get done?' You want the person you're managing to say, 'Yeah, I can sign up for that, I'll definitely do that.'"

Then, just as important is to hold the team accountable—and ask questions when things don't go as planned.

"You just need to make sure that you're really crisp about what the expectations are, vs. saying, 'You showed up at eight o'clock and left at five o'clock every day—you're doing a good job.'"

## 5. Make sure objectives align.

One challenge for a company is what Foster calls making sure "you're rowing the boat in the same direction." This alignment piece becomes more difficult as the number of teams and employees grows, and as the organization collectively can tackle more things.

That's where the OKRs become especially important. This is how it works at Zapier. The executive leadership sets the key objectives and opportunities for the quarter and the year, often times based on feedback from customers, partners and the team. These high-level, key objectives then are narrowed down into a set of objectives that teams and individuals can focus on.

"They can look at those and see how they can contribute," Foster says. "That's where collaboration and discussion starts to happen, where it's a bit of a give and take between the manager and the individuals and the teams."

Foster acknowledges that some things that worked with 20 people may not work with 200.

"There are some things that are still good and true no matter your size, but a lot of the systems and processes look different as you grow," he says.

And that's where his advice about experimentation comes in.

"Be willing to ask for feedback a lot—ask about what's not working and then honestly and earnestly listen to it and try to respond to it and improve," he says. "You won't ever be able to make things perfect, but being willing to experiment and try new things, being willing to respond to feedback shows everyone that we're in this together—we're going to try and make this a really good experience for everybody."

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