



The Asana Playbook for managing distributed teams

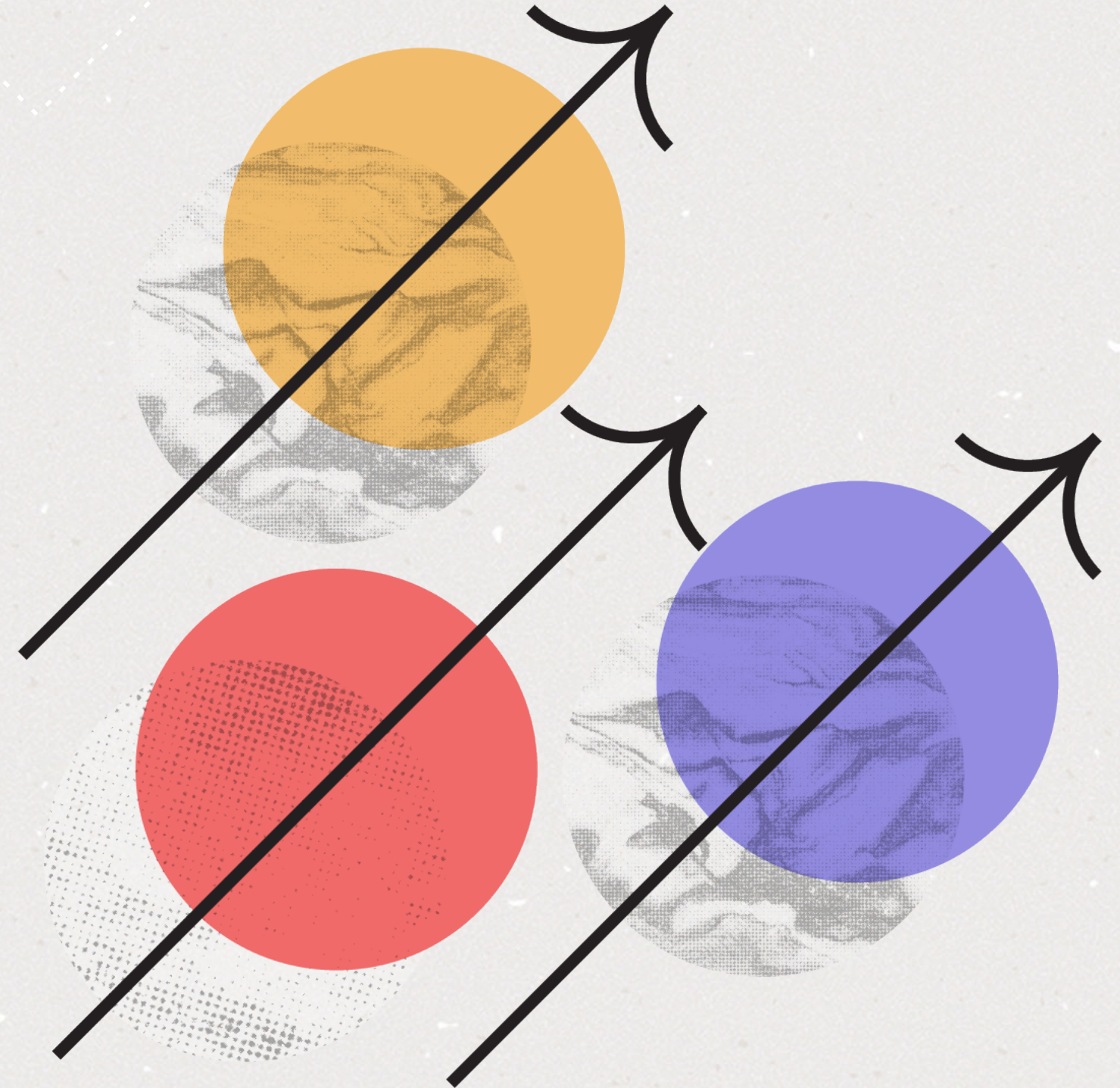


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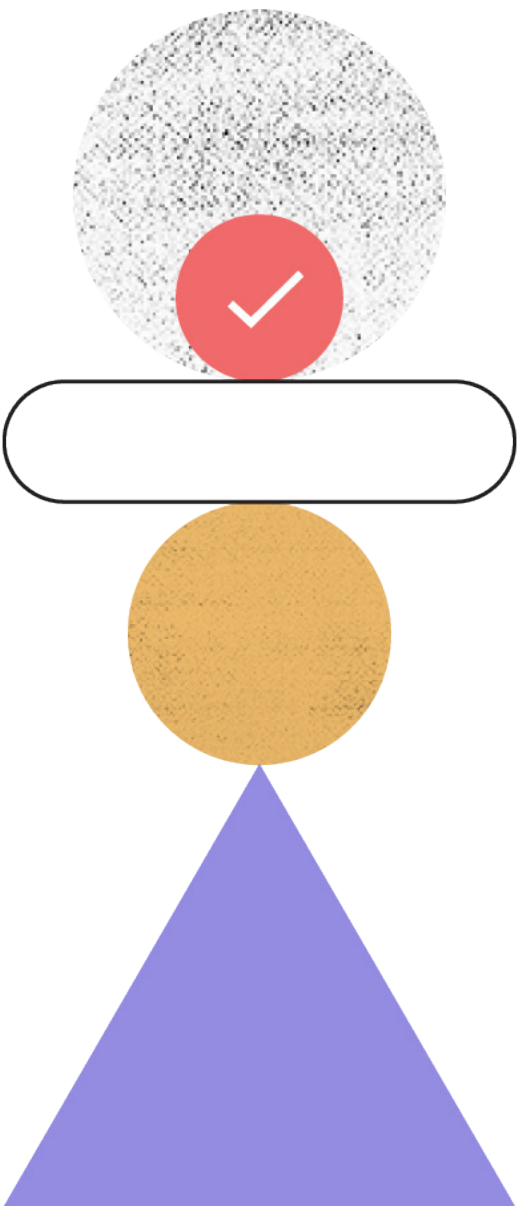
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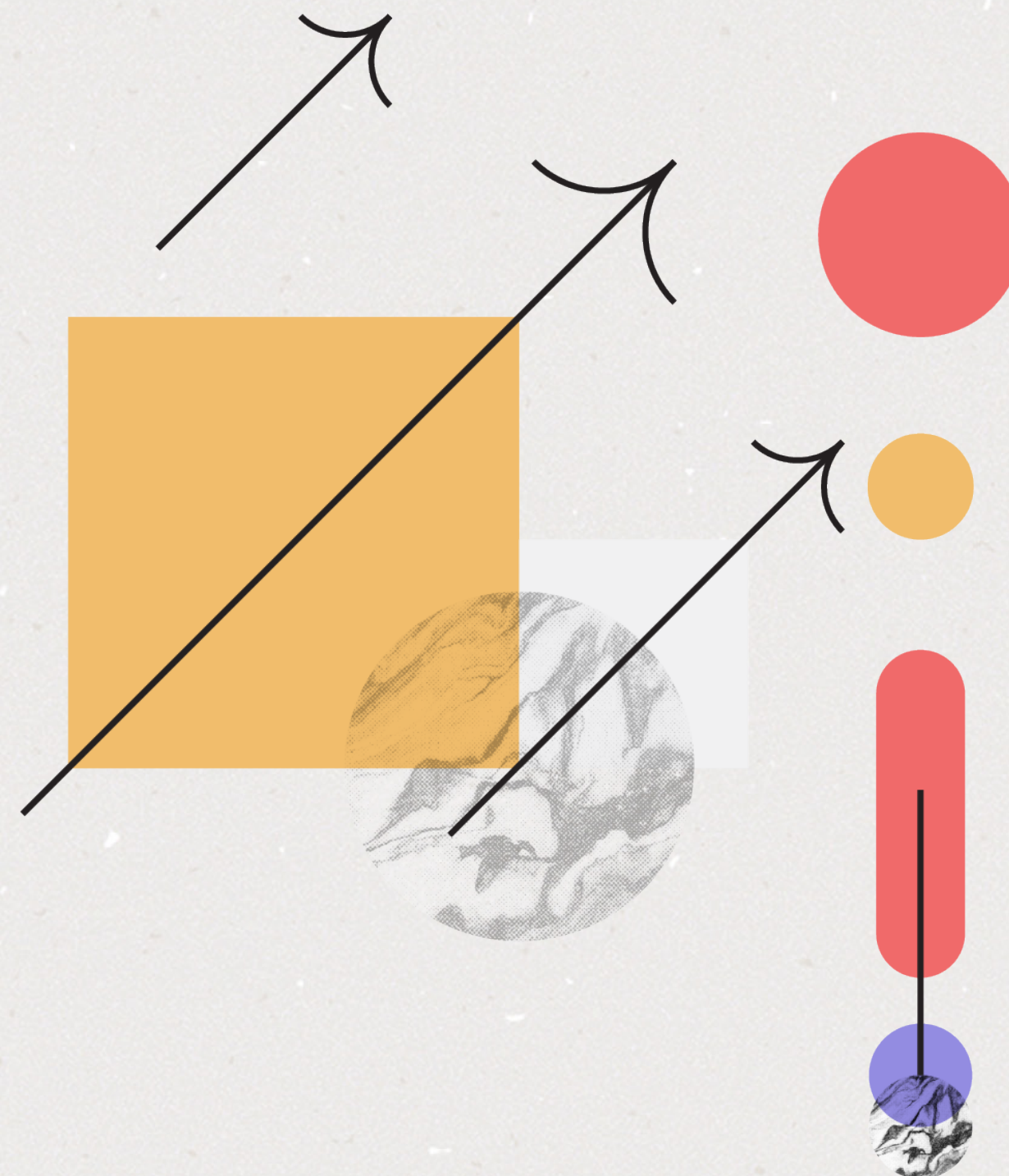
01

Introduction

The beginning of the pandemic took most of us by surprise, requiring almost all 1.25 billion global knowledge workers to start working remotely overnight. Now, more than a year later, a return to office is finally in sight for many teams in some countries, yet again introducing new work arrangements.

“The way we meet, the way we plan and organize work, the way we enable focus time, the way we manage boundaries and burnout, the way we instill confidence in new hires... everything needs to be re-assessed and reimagined for businesses to succeed in a post-COVID world.”

Dr. Sahar Yousef, Cognitive Neuroscientist,
UC Berkeley

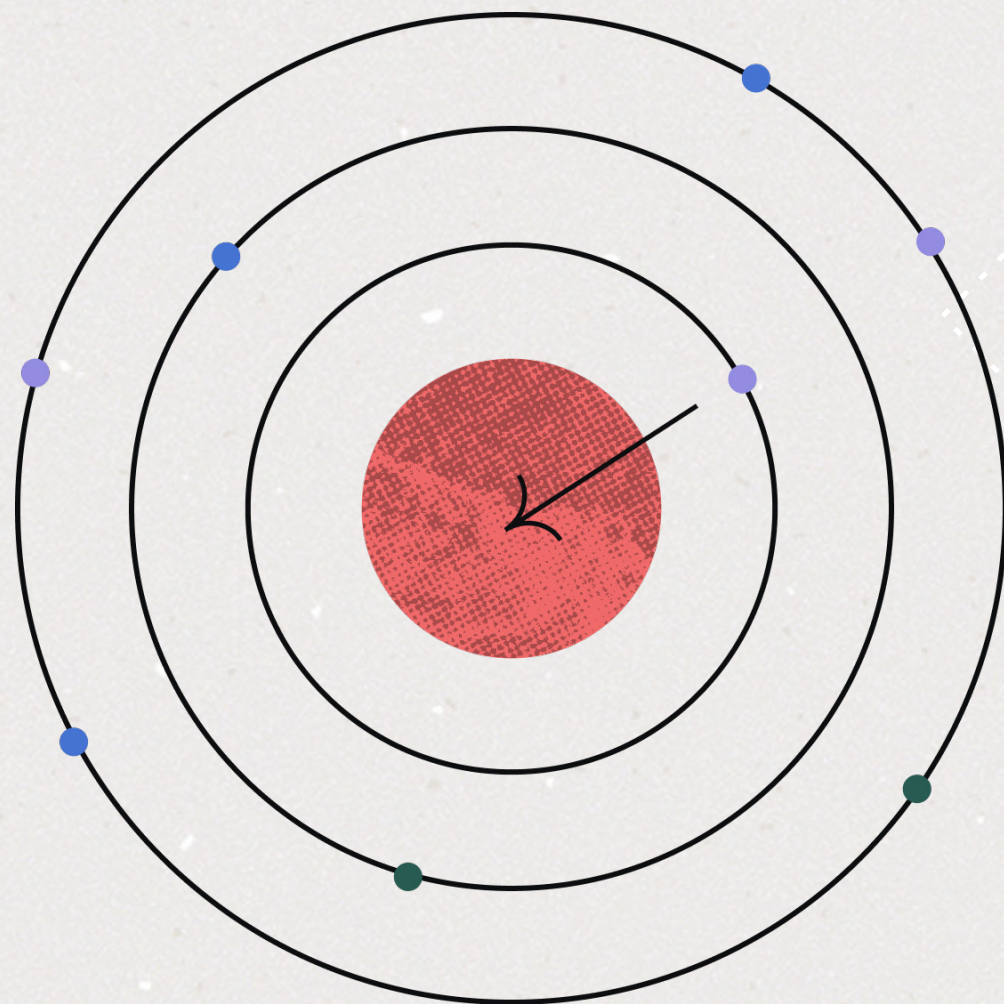


Leaders around the world are thinking through what teamwork and collaboration will look like at their organizations.

While distributed and hybrid work are not new concepts, what is new is how they've moved to the forefront of key considerations—currently, leaders around the world are thinking through what teamwork and collaboration will look like at their organizations in a post-pandemic world. For some organizations, it may mean returning to pre-pandemic models, such as the typical 9-to-5 in an office. For others, the current moment means embracing change and organizing distributed teams and hybrid work by choice rather than necessity. In fact, **a recent survey by WeWork** found that 79% of the C-suite plan to let their employees split time between the office and home (if their job allows for it). If that statistic holds

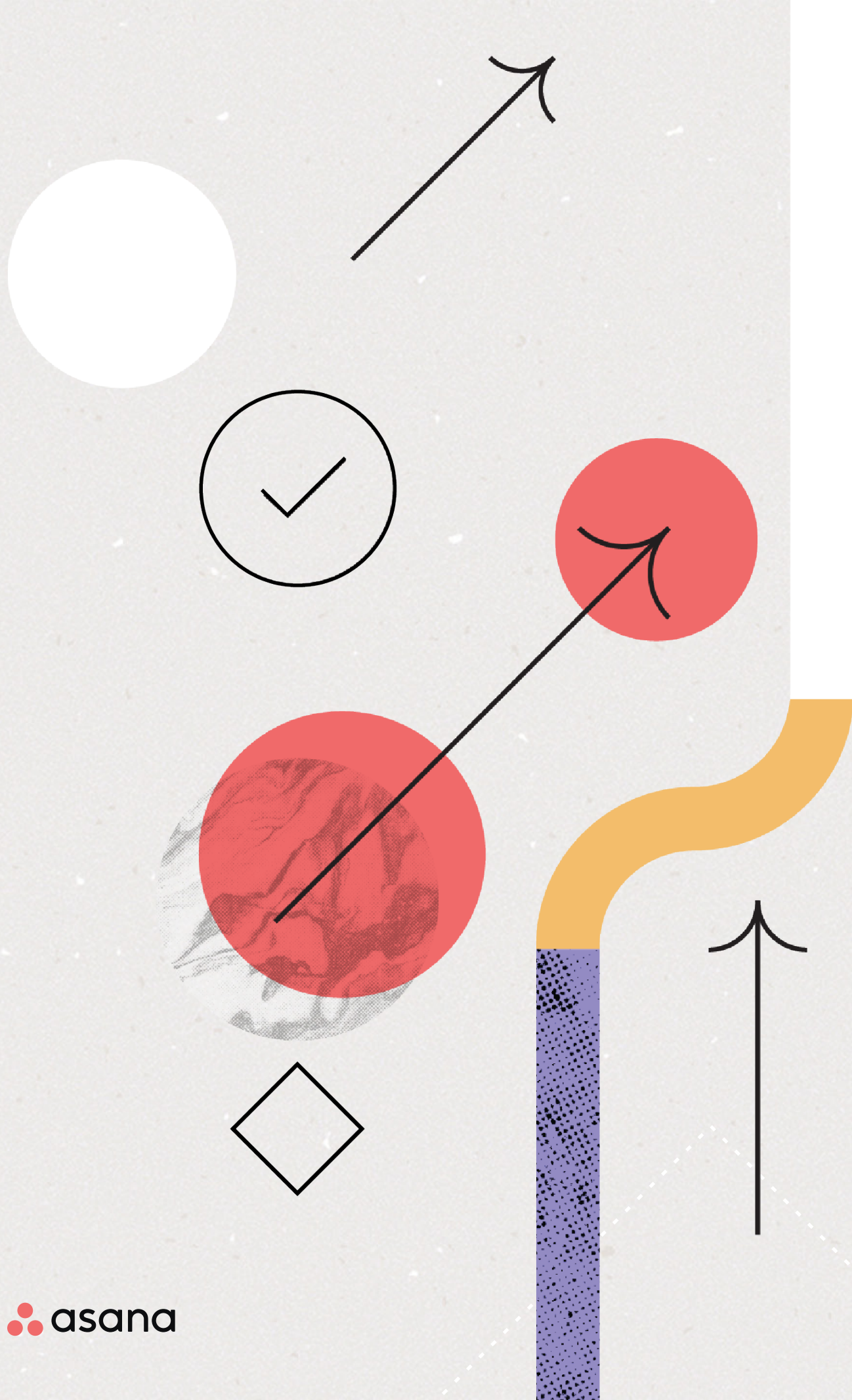
true, more managers than ever before will be managing distributed teams of various forms.

While there are many ways to manage and structure a distributed team, it does come with a unique set of challenges. From cultural differences to time zone tetrads, leaders of distributed teams juggle different priorities than teams that are fully in-office. Whether your team is distributed throughout the globe in different offices, working from home, or a little of both, you can manage distributed teams effectively by understanding and applying a few core principles.



In this playbook, we cover the nuances of distributed work and four key areas for you, as a leader of globally distributed teams, to pay special attention to.

First, we'll level set and define key terms regarding remote and distributed work. Then, we'll look at how managers can lead with cross-cultural empathy, bring inclusive communication to the table, and build a tight-knit team across time zones. We'll then wrap up with some real talk—how to ensure that you, as a global leader, know how to manage your own time and energy for long-term success.

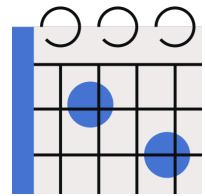


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What's in a name?

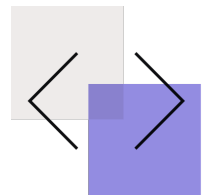
Key terms in the future of work

Every organization seems to have their own ways of talking about or describing the new ways of working. So, for clarity's sake, let's define five key terms for this playbook:



Office-centric hybrid

Office-centric hybrid means that people will spend most of their time in an office but have flexibility to regularly work remotely. This is the approach we're taking at **Asana**.



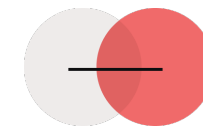
Fully flexible hybrid

A fully flexible model means employees can either work from an office, at home, or a combination of both. Ford Motor Company has decided **to adopt this model of work**, giving employees a maximum amount of flexibility.



Remote-friendly

Remote-friendly companies allow employees to schedule time to work remotely as needed. They may also have a group of fully remote employees, however the majority of employees are expected to report to an office most days.



Hybrid remote-office

A hybrid remote-office gives employees a menu of options to choose from. For example, employees can decide if they want to be fully remote, fully in office, or create their own flexible work option. **Hubspot** has adopted this way of working.



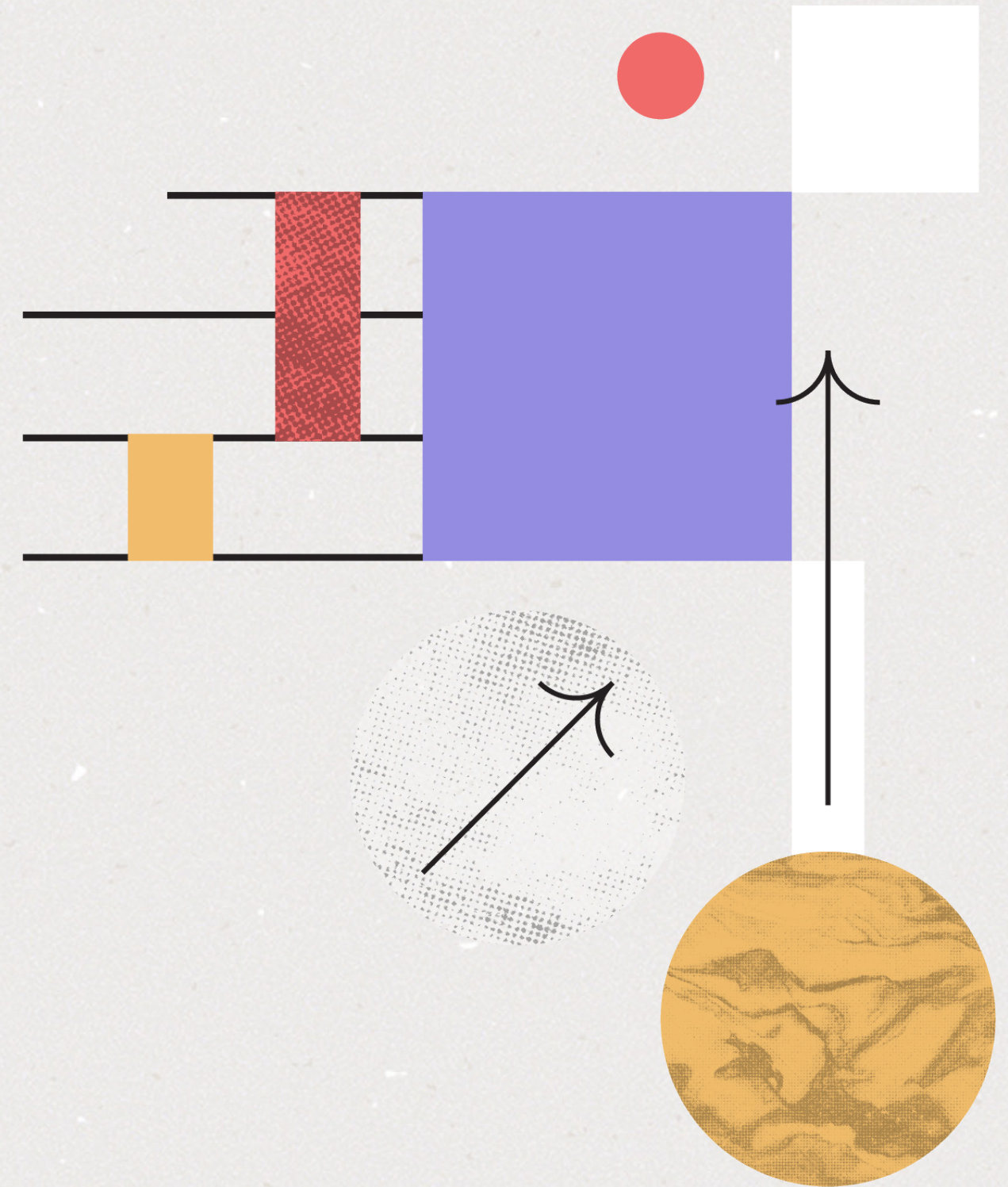
Remote (or virtual)-first

Remote-first or virtual-first is exactly as it sounds—everybody (or the vast majority of people) work from home. A remote-first company, like **Shopify**, may have offices, but they are not where the majority of their employees work every day.

03

How to lead with cross cultural empathy

Regardless of where your team is located—in one city, one country, or globally—leading with cross-cultural empathy and supporting diversity is a critical leadership skill. The more diverse your team is, the more important it is to remember that not everyone communicates the same way. As a leader of a distributed team, how do you bridge the communication gap between and across cultures to ensure seamless coordination?



✓ Start with your own education

If you have team members in countries other than your own home country—or team members who immigrated from other countries—it's important to understand the cultural and communication norms of those other countries. Like building muscles, this isn't a skill you'll pick up overnight—it takes time and education to get it right.

Here are a two ways to start your education:

- Read news in the places your teammates are located or are from.
- Keep track of major events happening in those areas and understand how those events could affect your team members.

✓ Be mindful of time zones and global holidays

Not every country has the same holidays or celebrations and the easiest way to keep these top of mind is to put global holidays on your calendar. The last thing you want to do is to accidentally schedule a meeting on someone's day off. The same goes for time zone differences. For example, team members in Asia and Australia are a day ahead of North America. So, if you schedule a meeting on a Friday in Pacific Time, you're actually scheduling a meeting on Saturday for those team members. Alternatively, if you're located in Australia and schedule a Monday morning meeting with team members in North America, it'll still be Sunday for them.

✓ Keep written communication succinct

Written communication is important for distributed teams, but it's equally important to remember that the language you use for work might not be a team member's native or preferred language. Although written communication is important, it is equally important to keep memos easy to read and succinct. Long comments or task descriptions can be time-consuming to parse for teammates whose native language is not English. That's why a great rule to set for yourself and your team is to always strive for brevity and clarity in written communication.

There's also a second advantage to sending brief, clear messages as well: communication outside of the United States tends to be more conservative and less casual. Especially for teammates you don't know as well, sending a casual chat message can be interpreted as uncomfortable or overly casual.

✓ Factor in cultural norms when giving feedback

Every culture has different communication norms. German culture, for instance, tends to be more direct than the United States. This may lead German teammates to prefer direct feedback and clear, straightforward communication. Alternatively, team members in Japan may be less inclined to provide feedback or ask for help, since those behaviors aren't necessarily the norm in Japanese culture.

There is no right or wrong way to communicate. Your job as a leader of a distributed team isn't to standardize communication norms across your team. Instead, make a point of understanding the cultural norms and preferences for each of your team members so you're better prepared to manage them.



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How to practice inclusive communication

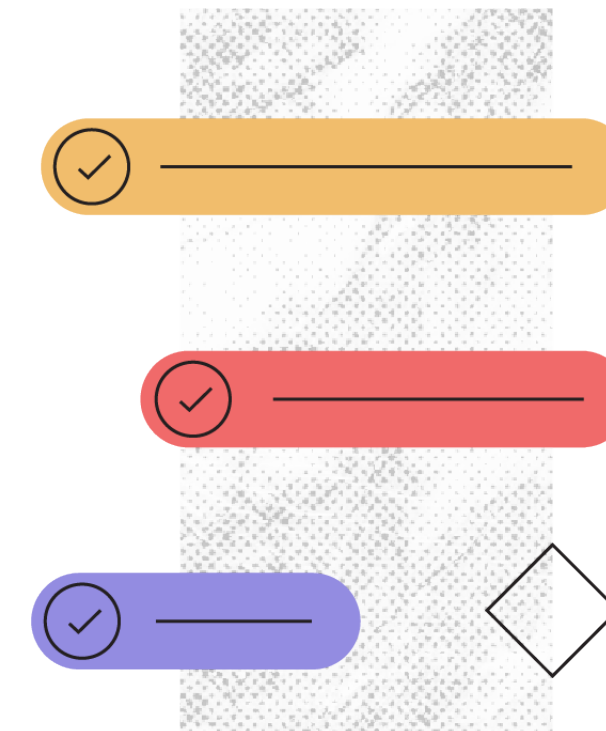
Once you begin to understand how to communicate with your team in a culturally inclusive way, you may end up against another roadblock: the mechanics of communicating with a distributed team.

If your team is distributed across the globe or time zones, how do you ensure seamless communication with everyone, no matter where or when they're working? These three tips are a great place to start.

Get comfortable with written communications

One of the biggest challenges with distributed or remote teams is that they experience information asymmetry. People who work in satellite offices (or outside the office with the most team members) want insight into what's happening in other offices, particularly at headquarters. If people aren't aware of what's happening in other offices, they may feel out of the loop and have trouble engaging with the team.

To remedy that asymmetry, set clear standards about written communications and be deliberate about what and when you communicate to your team—and remember to be clear and concise! Avoid impromptu meetings or water cooler conversations with just part of your team. If you do make decisions or share information ad hoc, make sure to document and communicate that information with team members who aren't in the same office as you.



In addition to establishing inclusive communication practices for yourself as a leader, make sure that the rest of your team follows suit by codifying conversations in writing and sharing them with all relevant team members regardless of location.

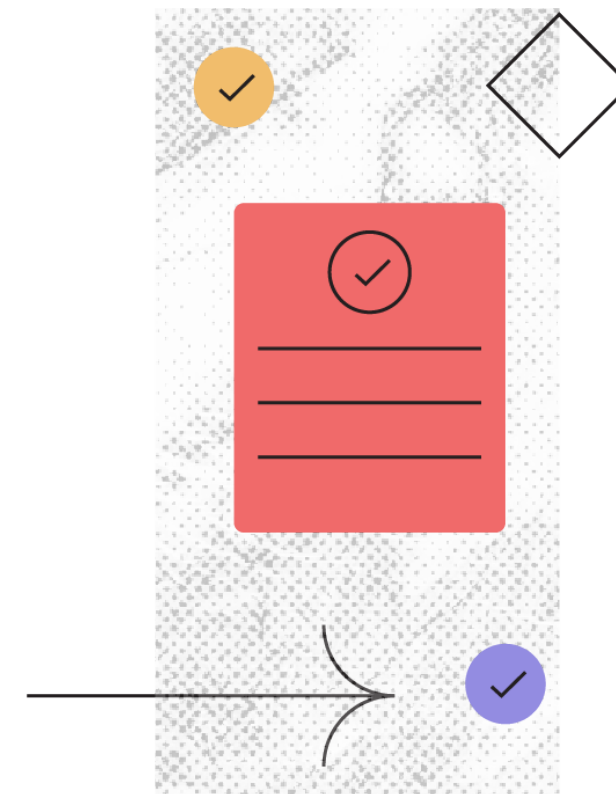
Send weekly updates to your entire team

Even if you're good about sending written communications to everyone who needs to be included, it's helpful to send weekly updates to the entire team. This ensures that nothing—and no one—falls through the cracks.

What should you share in your weekly update? Here are some ideas:

- What you've been working on that week
- Key information you've learned from other leaders
- Key wins or learnings from other team members
- Reminders about your team values and culture

The weekly update doesn't need to be ground breaking, but it ensures that everyone on the team is working from the same baseline of information to do their jobs well.



Hold fewer team meetings

Because of the timezone challenges that may come with a distributed team, in-person meetings can be really tough. However, completely nixing meetings isn't a good solution, either. Rather, be very intentional about the types of meetings you do schedule for your entire team. Here are two types of meetings you do want to keep on the calendar:

- **Bi-weekly (every other week) meetings with team leads.** If you have team leads on your team, schedule time every other week to check in with them as a group. This meeting serves as a good pulse check, builds bonding between that group, and can be a great time to problem solve or brainstorm.
- **Monthly all hands with the whole team.** These meetings can be a mix of team bonding and work and are important for getting to know team members across time zones. Since this is a more infrequent meeting, consider rotating the time to ensure that one time zone isn't constantly left out. Also, recording the meeting is a great way to make sure that everyone gets the content even if they couldn't make the time.



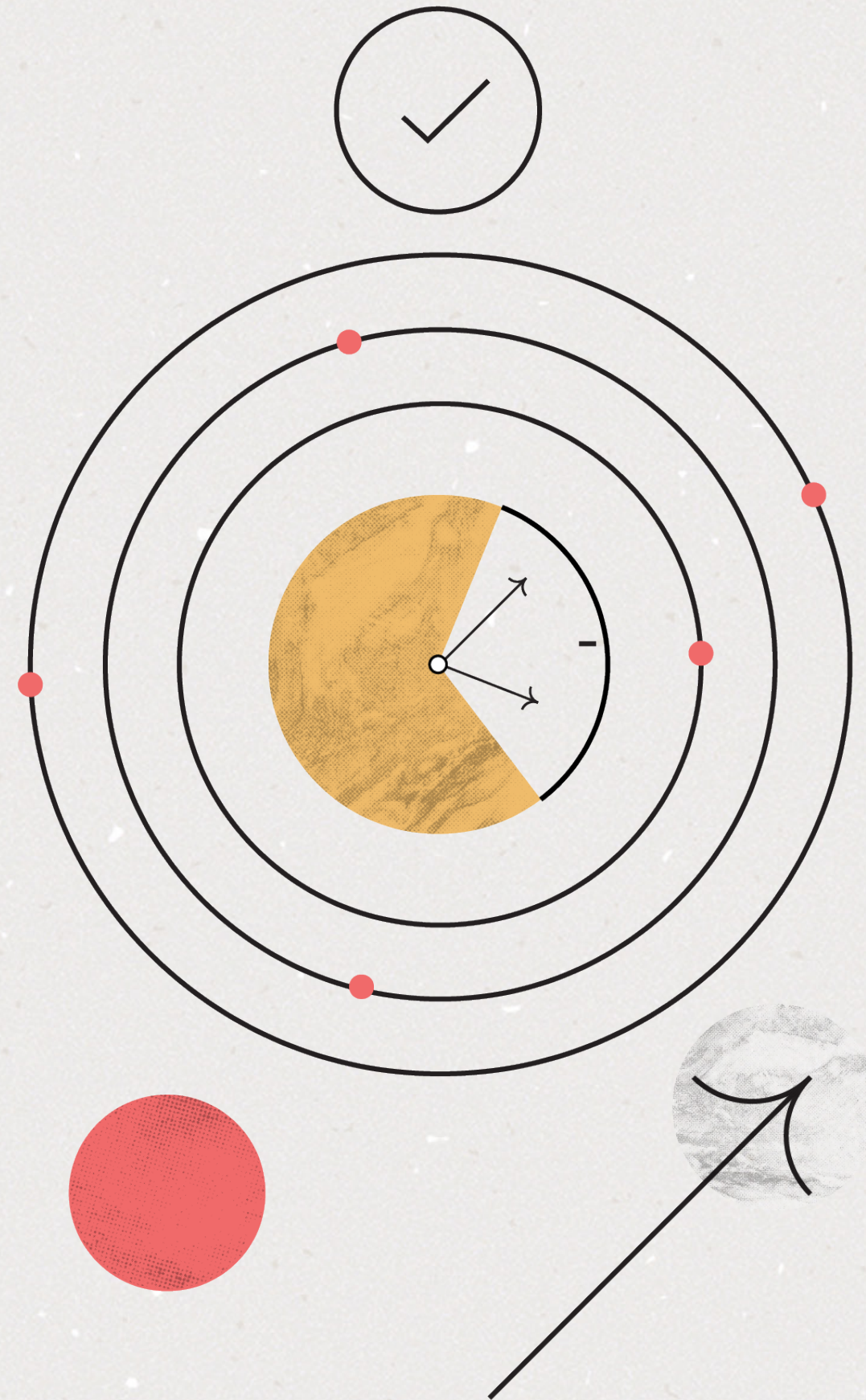
Although there will inevitably be miscommunication or misunderstandings on a distributed team, remember that would also happen even if everyone worked from the same conference room day in and day out. However, being intentional and having a few tricks can help make people feel comfortable, heard, and have a sense of belonging. If you can do that, then when miscommunications do happen, they'll more easily be resolved.

05

How to build a tight-knit team across time zones

Honing communication across time zones and cultures is an important part of leading a high-performing distributed team. But there is still another hurdle to overcome—team bonding.

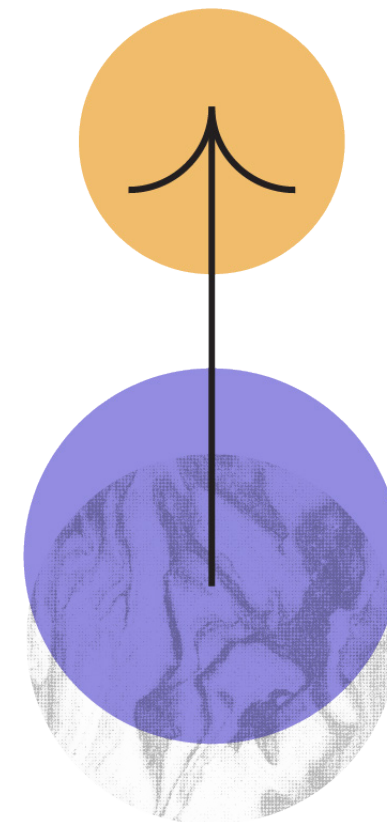
One of the most challenging aspects of managing team members located in multiple regions happens to be team bonding. How do you create tight connections across countries or cities, and how do you maintain those bonds over time?



Create connections from day one

When companies suddenly shifted to remote work, teams that were still hiring grappled with how to **onboard new hires** from different locations. This has been, and will continue to be, true for leaders of distributed teams.

With fewer opportunities for ad hoc information sharing, be extra thoughtful and intentional about onboarding a team member who is working from another location. Document and share everything your new team member needs to know to be successful in their role. One great way to do this is to create an “onboarding” project template in your work management platform. Every time a new person starts, they can work through the project to learn processes, find key projects, meet stakeholders, and access files. The onboarding project can also include tasks for inviting new teammates to core team projects, Slack channels, and recurring meetings.

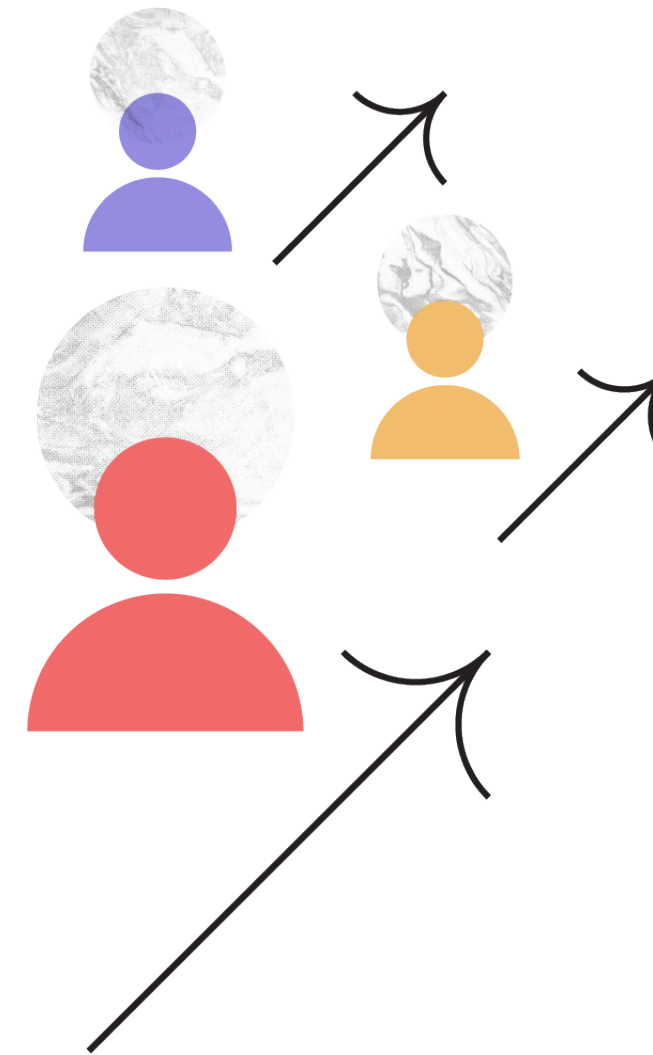


You'll also want to set up 1:1s between your new hire and as many teammates as you can outside of their home office (if they work from an office). These can range from formal briefing sessions to casual (virtual) coffee chats, giving your new hire the opportunity to start building relationships with core collaborators.

Ensure team members feel seen

Real talk: It's harder for team members working in different locations to get recognized for their work. "Out of sight, out of mind" is unfortunately a reality. If you're managing a distributed team, be really deliberate and intentional about finding opportunities for team members in other regions to get visibility and recognition for their contributions.

Make sure you look for ways to give public recognition for a job well done. It can be as simple as a quick shoutout in your team's Slack channel or, if you have team awards, be sure to nominate team members who don't necessarily share the same office as you. It's so rewarding to celebrate individual achievements with the broader team.



06

How to manage your time and energy as a global leader

This final piece of the puzzle is often forgotten about. As important as it is for you to ensure the success and well-being of your team, it's equally important that you ensure your own well-being. Even if you manage a small group of people, the calendar tetris, time zone juggling, and 1:1s can be tiring day in and day out. That's why it is important to become an expert at managing your own time and energy when you're leading globally distributed teams.

Spend your energy mindfully

When you're managing a globally distributed team, you might try to attend every meeting across all time zones. This is a recipe for burnout, and you'll drive yourself into the ground if you try to attend all the meetings at the times that work for your team.

Instead, aim to attend key meetings, and get comfortable with delegating responsibilities to regional teammates whom you trust to get the job done.

By prioritizing the meetings where your participation is critical, you'll have more energy to focus on the challenges and opportunities where you can make the most impact. As a side bonus, you'll show your team you trust them to get work done without needing to be involved in every detail.

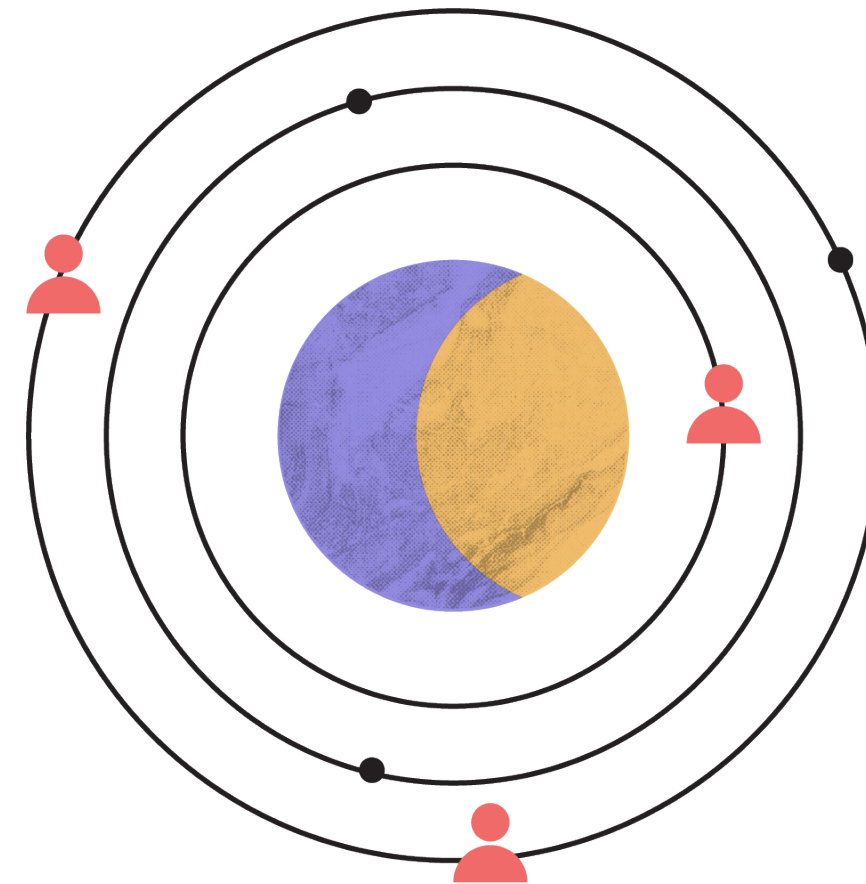
Shift your working hours

If you have team members working in multiple regions, it's perfectly okay to shift your working hours rather than trying to fit in all regions every day. For example, if you're based in San Francisco, you might have an "early day" that goes from 7am to 4pm for working with team members in Europe and a "later day" from 10am to 7pm for working with team members in the Asia-Pacific.

Build this into your schedule, communicate it to your team, and put it on your calendar, along with any Do Not Schedule (DNS) hours. Do not attempt to work 12- or 14-hour days. It's not fun, and when you don't prioritize rest, you can't be your best self for your team.

Embrace the global nature of your role

If you're managing a global team, you can expect that, from time to time, you'll have to join a meeting that's happening very early or very late in your day. It's part of the job of running a global team. However, the occasional inconvenience is worth it. You'll gain incredible exposure to other cultures, build your cross-cultural communication skills, and feel like you're part of a bigger world than the one outside your own window.



07

The future of work is distributed

No matter where or how your team works, one of the most important parts of your job will never change—making sure that people feel comfortable, heard, and have a sense of belonging. If you succeed in doing that, chances are you’ve built a high performing distributed team.



You can ensure that everyone is on the same page.

With psychological safety and the right collaboration tools, you can ensure that everyone is on the same page and feels heard, no matter the location or time zone. For example, by implementing a tool like a work management system, you can ensure that everyone knows who is doing what by when and has access to the same information no matter where they log in from. By doing so, you democratize information access on your team, ensuring no one is unintentionally left out.

And, unlike the last major shift in the way we worked—at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020—leaders have more time to think through and prepare for how their teams and organizations will operate. Rather than wishing we could go back to “the way things were,” by being intentional and thoughtful, we can move into the future of work, together, with more resilient teams.



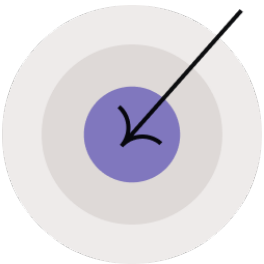
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