

If you want a balanced RTO solution, you need mutual trust

As more companies call workers back to the office full-time, their leaders have a challenge. If they don't act consistently and communicate effectively, they'll further erode trust.



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BY [Elizabeth Lowrey](#) 3 minute read

The [return-to-office](#) (RTO) pendulum continues to swing toward the wants of CEOs, and we expect this trend to continue. A 2024 [survey of CEOs by KPMG](#) found that 79% believe employees will be back in the office five days a week within three years—a dramatic increase from 2023's survey. For many leaders, the workplace remains a vital tool for reinforcing company values and driving strategic alignment across teams.

Yet, while employers prioritize a return to the collaboration, culture, and innovation that the office fosters, employees say they enjoy the autonomy and flexibility they've gained working remotely. If leaders don't act consistently and communicate a RTO strategy effectively, they'll further erode employee trust.

As a designer and workplace strategist, I've been reflecting on how to design offices that encourage in-office collaboration, and engaging in deep conversations with clients about how they are implementing RTO policies.

"Trust begins with leading by example," Jon Martin told me recently. Martin is the North American CEO of AEW Capital Management, one of the world's largest global real-estate investment managers. AEW is a client of my firm Elkus Manfredi Architects, and we helped them reimagine their headquarters in Boston.

AEW currently doesn't have a mandate for how many days a week its employees are expected to work out of its office. But its leadership team—like many others—has been explicit about its desire to promote a predominately in-office culture. To encourage employees to be in the office more often, AEW's senior management team works in-person nearly full-time. "If you have a return-to-office policy, whatever it may be, and it is not upheld by leadership, you will lose credibility quickly," says Martin.

Success begins with transparency

RTO policies often fail because inconsistent actions erode trust among employees, making it essential to align leadership actions with transparent communication. Employees often ask: "Are our leaders considering our needs? Are they asking for our insights? Will these mandates truly increase efficiency and purpose?"

These are valid concerns that can be addressed through a thoughtfully designed process to maintain organizational trust.

I know from experience that listening to and engaging with the people for whom you are designing is immensely important for creating solutions and ensuring buy-in. [Research](#) shows involving employees in policy development enhances their commitment to change initiatives.

Best practices for company leaders to take include:

- **Establish a shared vision before seeking feedback.** Frame discussions around organizational goals to align responses with achieving these objectives rather than focusing solely on personal preferences.
- **Ask for input within a structured framework.** Provide context and priorities to guide decision-making rather than posing open-ended questions like, "Do you prefer working at the office or at home?"
- **Be transparent about trade-offs.** Set expectations early, acknowledging they're unlikely to meet everyone's needs perfectly, and balance individual preferences with broader organizational priorities.
- **Incorporate feedback thoughtfully and communicate decisions clearly.** Asking for input and then failing to address it—or worse, ignoring it entirely—can erode trust. Even if not all suggestions are implemented, explain decisions and how feedback shaped them.

Mutual trust = a balanced solution

When leadership demonstrates its trust in employees, staff are increasingly willing to collaborate on changes within their organizations. In fact, [research finds](#) that creating internal structures for feedback makes employees feel more included in organizational decisions and has downstream benefits on productivity and profitability.

Leaders should also encourage employees to consider the broader impact of decisions on the business, fostering a sense of shared investment in a company's path. Insights on team dynamics and performance can help leaders communicate the workplace strategies that support both individual and collective success.

From intangible to innovative

Crafting a successful return-to-office strategy is much like effective workplace design: Both transform intangible inputs—emotions, interests, and individual experiences—into solutions that benefit everyone.

Martin sums up the stakes: “If your return to the office policy feels administrative, is inconsistently applied across your organization, or lacks support from leadership, it will be nearly impossible to have a shared vision and achieve success.”

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