YSC'S CULTURE CHANGE & LEADERSHIP SERIES: ISSUE 1

ERODING OR THRIVING?

How leaders can maintain organizational culture during Covid-19.

Organizational culture need not be a victim of Covid-19, despite the challenges of remote working, zoom meetings, and dispersed colleagues. In fact, distinctive cultures can thrive even under these conditions, and leaders have a critical role to play.

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought extraordinary changes to both how and where we work. Even before the pandemic employees in many organizations were pushing for more remote working, but companies were hesitant. The reason is culture: an all-important business asset. In recent research referenced by the World Economic Forum, seventy percent of managers described the potential erosion of company culture as their number one concern about virtual working. However, the reality of the pandemic has turned up a surprise: that for the best prepared organizations, the best aspects of their culture have not only persisted but are thriving during mass remote and virtual working.

PREVENTING CULTURAL EROSION DURING COVID-19, AND COMING OUT THE OTHER SIDE STRONGER

The surprising reality for some organizations is that the shift to virtual working has been largely effective. Indeed, even those companies who are known for being proud of their distinctive, collegiate cultures have doubled down on remote practices.

1 REI Co-op are planning on selling their headquarters to integrate remote working into the way they operate, finding that collaboration was not tied to a location and the interactions that drive their culture made a smooth transition to virtual working.

2 Google invested heavily in their state-of-the-art offices to create the physical conditions to foster their culture, having communal spaces to encourage collaboration and innovation. Post-Covid-19, Google pivoted, empowering their employees to work virtually whilst remaining connected. This appears to have been successful, as Google announced that they would extend their work-from-home policy through to June 2021.

These companies are championing a new way of working, demonstrating that they can shape their company culture when working virtually, by enabling employee's creative freedom with a more flexible work-life-balance.

The lesson? Those companies that are thriving have paid attention to the impact of virtual working, and consciously implemented new ways of promoting their desired culture.

LEADERSHIP, THE STARTING POINT OF CULTURE

Culture can feel intangible at the best of times, and remote working could exacerbate this. It is complex and multifaceted, with both visible and invisible manifestations. Structural factors like office layout and use of technology are easy to see but hard to change, and the underlying narratives and perceptions of employees are not even easy to see.

Yet leaders have more influence over culture than they often realize. Culture and leadership are entwined - culture is influenced by leadership norms and points of focus, and leadership behavior is in turn influenced by culture. Whilst it is common for leaders to feel overwhelmed by their responsibilities towards corporate culture, the reality is that the signals leaders give out are often the most important factor in setting the tone.

Maintaining consistency and emphasizing the desired mindsets and behaviors when leading remotely ensures that the best parts of your culture persist through Covid-19.

WHAT LEADERS WORKING VIRTUALLY CAN DO TO MAINTAIN & AMPLIFY THE BEST PARTS OF THEIR CULTURE

TIP: Be clear on the best parts of your culture and how people can put them into practice day-to-day

Know the strengths of your culture and appreciate what was great about your office environment that you're trying to continue virtually. Remote working calls for an increase in flexibility, but at the same time desired behaviors should be role-modelled and reinforced and detracting behaviors called out. Clarity and consistency of expectations is key. To make culture meaningful, link these expectations to your wider organizational purpose, as well as specific individual and team outputs.

TIP: When communicating, go beyond the plain facts of your message by considering the symbolic meanings

Think about how you use symbols and language to represent the desired culture and create social norms virtually. This may be as simple as defining the key words that represent mindsets, behaviors or values you want to reinforce. With the increased use of technology, you can share consistent messages across the organization and repeat these sound bites over time, whilst mixing up the mediums. Virtual working presents a great opportunity to reach a greater number of employees with a more consistent, meaningful message.

TIP: Actively use technology to maintain the social side of your culture

One of the concerns over virtual working was that a sense of belonging and shared identity could become hard to maintain. Cultivate a sense of unity by facilitating informal social interactions on tech platforms such as Teams or Slack. In a virtual world, leaders need to keep creating the connection opportunities which encourage 'water cooler conversations' or 'corridor conversations' between workers. Fairness is also essential as people continue to have very different experiences. Multiple organizations have decided that if even only one person must attend remotely, the meeting is held virtually for all. These leaders are using tech to show how they live their cultural values.

TIP: Encourage new expressions of your culture by letting go of norms which no longer fit

The habits and rituals that worked in the past may no longer be the best way to express your cultural values. Head off any tension by embracing employee-driven patterns of work, where they fit with your values. A study by Microsoft at the start of their period of virtual working, found that employees rapidly adapted their working rhythms after going virtual, with a 10% increase in social meetings scheduled, and the emergence of a voluntary 'night shift' among some employees. These behaviors were the natural expression of a more flexible and connected culture, and employees were trusted to get the work done outside of typical office hours.

IN CONCLUSION

Remote working need not lead to cultural erosion. Leaders are the key, just as in pre-Covid-19 times, as at all levels they continue to be the main shapers and amplifiers of culture. With virtual working here to stay, it's vital to make sure that the most positive, distinctive aspects of your culture continue to thrive.