

CREATING A POST COVID CULTURE

As the world starts to open after months in lockdown, societies and organizations are trying to imagine what the next normal will look like. For business leaders the focus is on recovering and eventually growing business. Leaders realize that this involves some degree of redesign for their organizations to deliver on new asks effectively and efficiently. New systems and processes will have to be developed to enable the new strategy, but strategic and operational changes will not take root unless they are also supported by cultural changes. Reimagining and reshaping your business will certainly be a challenge but one that leaders are more equipped to meet. Identifying and encouraging the behavioral changes needed to support a new business strategy is a challenge that few leaders have faced.

THE JUMPING OFF POINT

The COVID imperative for adaptive, technology driven, and virtual ways of working has disrupted existing workplace definitions as well as habits. Notions of 'normal' have changed. Some aspects of the 'new normal' have worked well for many and are likely here to stay. Others have been questionable – and may not have a place going forward. As we enter the phase of reimagining the future, the opportunity is to take advantage of the disruption that has been forced upon us and create a new set of workplace habits and culture that will enable future success. The moment to embed the desired changes, and challenge the dysfunctions is now, not once we are through to the other side.

LEARNING FROM THE CRISIS



Empowerment for innovation

Technology has been part of our world for some time but COVID has enabled organizations to see a glimpse of its full potential. Jack Dorsey's recent announcement that twitter employees can work from home permanently has reinforced what a lot of people have experienced through this period – the freedom of working from anywhere on flexible schedules. While this has implications for talent, it also has implications for culture. The ability to build trust quickly, to be comfortable with empowerment and work around hierarchies that virtual work has called for have played an important role in facilitating problem solving and innovation. It is easier than ever to access knowledge and expertise from colleagues across teams, geographies, and specializations. Organizations will need to work out their own policies for remote working, to harness the best of flexibility alongside needs around productivity, collaboration and agile resourcing. Whatever is right for your organization, holding on to an empowering mindset will play a critical role in leveraging diverse talent and fostering creativity.



Empathy belongs in the workplace

Working virtually has offered an intimate peek into the lives of colleagues and customers alike – kids popping into Zoom meetings to say hi, pets with high inclusion needs demanding attention, background family conversations, eclectic art, arresting views, creative kitchens and an occasional bedpost all have seemed normal. Judgment has taken a backseat for a while and has been replaced with curiosity and acceptance. Will your workplace of the future demand a return to showing up as 'perfect'? Alternately, holding on to this empathy, understanding and invitation to bring yourself fully to work as you transition through recovery to growth is what will motivate your talent to bring their best. Research has shown that psychological safety is a key enabler for business. Finding ways to stay open and curious in all aspects of work life will keep people fully engaged and inspiring innovation.



Flexible working rhythms are here to stay

Years ago, in "Everything Is Miscellaneous", David Weinberger described the new principles of digital order that were remaking business, education, politics, science, and culture. We have in the past few months seen these come to life in a more heightened way, across different aspects of life. It is now 'normal' to have to use your lunch break to walk the dog or limit the hours you are available for meetings as you juggle childcare duties with your spouse or partner. Calls while taking a mid-morning walk are encouraged as health and wellbeing is an important value. Employees in turn are willing to stretch hours and go the extra mile when needed. The freedom to intersperse and integrate one's workday with 'life' is what this crisis has given permission to do. This has now come to be expected by many – especially the younger generations and could well define the new normal for your organization.



Measuring and maintaining productivity

Maintaining productivity and engagement has been a key challenge faced by leaders. Added to this is the question of tracking and measuring performance. Disruption of outcomes due to the pandemic along with changing goalposts and timelines to recovery have meant a focus on inputs for some. Virtual work has led to tools designed specifically to track the way employees use time including logging in hours, sending screenshots at fixed intervals, nudges to get off social media, all seemingly focused on enhancing productivity, but largely tracking inputs. They can create an environment of being watched as they are unable to differentiate between priorities and productivity. There is a need to track and assess in a manner that is meaningful and motivating for people. For some leaders this could mean thinking differently about how to track productivity in the form of outputs, so that the focus is on the milestones that return the business to growth. This will necessitate a mindset of trust, and a culture of accountability around deliverables, rather than focus on the activity to get there.



Disruption ready. Always

An important lesson through this crisis has been the pace and agility demonstrated in the face of disruption. In a recent study of startup organizations, it was found that their response to consumer and enterprise trends in the last 90 days would normally have taken 3-5 years. Large enterprise too, have demonstrated the ability to pivot significantly during this time. This agility has required challenging many of the existing cultural norms and ways of working. The learning that leaders need to take forward from this period is the ability to hold on to this agility and challenger mindset, encourage it even in the absence of a crisis to provoke accelerated change. It is about continuously challenging the assumptions that may be slowing you down – e.g. statements like "we have always done it this way". Encouraging the voices of difference, the devil's advocate in the team, which came so naturally during the worst of that crisis, is another learning from this period to value.

THE CULTURE OF THE FUTURE: INTEGRATING SEEMING OPPOSITES

The need for clear, decisive leadership was apparent as organizations across sectors learnt to deal with the impact of the crisis. People looked for direction, someone to frame the future and provide a sense of stability. Many leaders stepped up, being the problem solvers, taking the difficult decisions and carving out a way forward, while most people were happy to follow. At the same time, virtual working, agile workflows, and the urgency of resolution have called for significant empowerment and flexibility provided to teams to shape change through innovation. Empowering teams to take charge of change has been a significant contributor to firms emerging through crisis successfully. The implications for culture are evident – a work environment where you can be decisive 'and' be influenced by the teams around you can help support recovery through both clarity of vision and innovative approaches towards it. The new paradigm is that you do not have to be one or the other – it is about being choiceful about where to step up and provide direction, and where to create the space for ideation through empowerment.

The crisis also made central the issue of survival for several businesses. While for some the decision to let go of people to preserve the business has been relatively straightforward, in most cases it is not. Organizations are living, breathing systems and performance and people go hand in hand. A performance culture therefore must be one that values, not devalues people. One that retains the empathy, the flexibility and the compassion that has been so evident through the crisis. It is the ability to tap into the potential of its people that will distinguish cultures that enable exceptional performance in the post-COVID world. The leadership opportunity is to create a culture that integrates the focus on performance with compassion for your people.

YOUR ROLE AS A LEADER

The crisis has brought home to us that change in culture and ways of working support change in business and strategy. It has also highlighted the fact that seemingly different leadership behaviors together can accelerate and maintain momentum for the business. However, it is far easier to default to old habits and ways of working than create space for differences, specially those that may be complex to navigate. We know that workplaces will be different as we travel the road to recovery. We know what our people and our stakeholders value and aspire to has changed through this. As you stand at the decision points, you can consciously choose the paths to take and those to leave behind. You need to articulate the values and behaviors that will support your business in the future – and these will need to integrate the past and the emergent. Strategy and culture go together, the "how" of change is as critical as the business imperatives, and your role as a leader calls for setting and owning both.

**LEARN
MORE**

Email info@ysc.com to find out how we can partner with you to redefine leadership strategy.

YSC.COM