RETURNING TO WORK WITHOUT RETURNING TO THE PAST

How organizations design the return to the office, whatever form that may take, will be as important culturally as how they managed the onset of working from home.

In a recent meeting, a colleague made a bold assertion: that returning to in-person work, even after such a remote and unusual year, would be just like riding a bike.

Before anyone could interject, he told us about his return to cycling to work. It was a hair-raising ordeal that took him by surprise. Not only did he have to reacquaint himself with the rules of the road (had there always been so many little things to pay attention to, and so many cars?), but he also had to navigate a new road layout with which he was entirely unfamiliar.

Of course, he was still able to cycle, but this wasn't the point. The 'old normal' was gone, and so his habits for navigating it no longer worked.

Just like our cyclist, organizations are plotting their route back to the office after a vast stretch of remote working. They too need to consciously reshape their default patterns for navigating challenges – in other words, their culture.

Today, it feels like there is a lot to get right when there are still many unknowns. Do we mandate a certain number of days in the office? Do we go back to office formalities? Which decisions about flexibility and autonomy do we devolve, and which do we take centrally? How do we react to press releases from organizations who have chosen a different path? And even more than the immediate effects of these decisions, it is their long-term cultural implications that are keeping leaders up at night.

Whilst there are challenges, organizations have every reason to feel positive about the upcoming arrival of the 'new old normal'. Organizational culture is famously hard to shift – except when change in the external world acts as a catalyst for internal changes.

The re-opening of offices around the world presents a unique opportunity for proactive organizations to reset their culture to become more innovative, inclusive, and performance focused. Culture is unlikely not to shift, and the real question is whether organizations are shaping their future culture – with purpose and intention – or being shaped by it.

A SHARED EXPERIENCE WITHOUT A SHARED SPACE?

There are few certainties when it comes to the re-opening of offices, but a global consensus is emerging – a majority of organizations expect some form of working from home to persist, with around 40% expecting to see over a third of their workforce staying remote. This is uncharted territory for organizational culture. Almost all definitions of culture use some variant of the word 'shared': shared values, assumptions, norms, habits. Given that a vibrant organizational culture is a key driver of value – with research suggesting as much as a 20-30% performance differential against 'culturally unremarkable' comparables – organizations which find a way to build a shared experience without relying on a shared space will be at an immense competitive advantage.

It can be hard enough at the best of times to maintain a unified culture, but it's never just been about passive factors like the design of the office or the symbolism of the ping pong table. A distinct culture requires the active cultivation of an overarching purpose, shared identity, and shared patterns for resolving tensions.

HOW TO DEVELOP A HIGH-PRODUCTIVITY HYBRID WORKING CULTURE

1 BE INTENTIONAL AT THE TOP

Don't focus solely on the logistics – this is a moment of elasticity in which the culture can and will be readjusted. Operational considerations can be a safe zone for senior teams, avoiding potentially messier and more confronting drivers of value, like culture. It would be easy to be distracted in the first few weeks of opening the offices, but these weeks are your window. We have all had the experience of sliding into a pattern that has become hard to shift once the critical moment has passed. Regardless of the organization's formal working from home policy, the transition represents a great reason to introduce open contracting discussions into the culture, where teams and departments are empowered to set defined working patterns and ground rules.

2 CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR YOUR LEADERS TO SUCCEED

All organizations are aware that leaders at all levels represent their culture. Less common is an awareness of how leaders shape culture, whether they are motivated to do so, and if they shape it intentionally or unintentionally. Think in terms of ABC – Aware, Bought-in, and Capable. Little will be gained by training leaders to become better culture carriers if they're not aware of the organization's cultural expectations, and why these values and behaviors are important to success. At the same time, having leaders who are aware and bought-in to your goals will only make a difference when those leaders are truly capable of sending the right signals. If leaders aren't setting the right tone, consider at which level the problem resides, and focus your efforts there.

3 ENSURE THAT LEADERS AT ALL LEVELS ARE SENDING THE NECESSARY CULTURAL SIGNALS

What's coming is going to be a murky time for many organizations. Research shows that when 'normalcy' is ambiguous, and standard behavioral patterns are not as clear as usual, what matters are the informal signals sent by leaders at all levels – these shape culture even more than in regular times. When people don't know what to do, they follow the leader.

To illustrate this, a study into altruistic behavior found that leaders' generosity had a modest effect on employees when there was a clear 'normal' amount to give, but a very high impact when the socially acceptable sum was uncertain (Gächter & Renner, 2018). Leaders should be especially aware of their power as role models when social norms are still to be forged.

YSC's research suggests that leaders transmit three types of signals: visible, emotional, and unconscious. Formal policies only go so far in defining normalcy, and they don't necessarily win employees over – but leadership signals provide the truest indication of what is likely to be accepted and rewarded.

Whilst the most effective way of signalling a culture always depends on the existing context, here are some tips for a leader guiding their team into a hybrid working model:

- **Consider how others interpret your example:** Your example, attention, and casual commentary all provide a window into what you really think and feel. As the leader of a team transitioning to hybrid working, how do you make transparent your own choices about when to be in the office and when to work remotely? Perhaps you see that erratic patterns of working from home are destabilizing team dynamics – setting the example of coming in on the same days every week, and drawing attention to the importance of consistency, will help to nudge your team in the right direction.

- **Engage others emotionally:** Tell stories that help people engage emotionally with the new pattern of working. If your team values the autonomy of working from home, don't be afraid of describing how that autonomy drives success, but also give examples of how their relationships and collaboration have made a difference in the past. Help them believe that hybrid working gives them the best of both worlds. Focus on appealing to their values as an audience. Narratives are at their most potent when they encourage the audience to feel good about itself – not the storyteller.

- **Manage 'unconscious' communication:** Consider the impact of your language – not just its raw information, but also the associations of the words you use. The term 'remote workers' may sound innocuous, yet in organizations struggling with perceptions of fairness, the implications of 'remoteness' and distance may exacerbate a dynamic of being held at arm's length.

IN A NUTSHELL

Returning to work is about more than re-establishing what worked in the past. Most organizations are going to have to devise new hybrid working patterns – but focusing solely on the pragmatics and hoping for the best on everything else is likely to cause immense disruption. The winners of the post-pandemic period will have leveraged this moment of change to set up a culture which drives success.

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