



The Post-Pandemic Culture Dance

Steps to Shape a Thriving
Workplace Culture



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As you explore the best way to help your employees return to the workforce—whether that’s in a traditional office, at home, or somewhere in between—we are here to help. We understand that adapting to the ever-changing “new normal,” especially during these extraordinary times, can be a time-consuming and challenging task because we’re experiencing it, too, and learning right along with you. The insights we’ve gained during this crisis from our own experience and our work with clients, along with years of research about people, the manner in which they work, and the correlation between cultural characteristics and company performance all form the contents of this report.

We hope what you find in these pages will give you the framework to shape a bold new workplace culture that considers all perspectives and is aligned with the forward trajectory of your organization. There’s no doubt that the future of work will be dynamic, and our focus must remain on people. If we act together, develop resilience, and demonstrate empathy, we can ensure that everyone thrives.

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INTRODUCTION

It was one of the hardest conversations I had since the onset of the pandemic. A dear friend and former colleague (I will call her Monica) set up a virtual coffee meeting at 6:00 a.m. because it was before her children were up. She was able to get a few moments of concentrated time to address a serious concern and ask for guidance.

Monica works as a senior HR leader. Her CEO tasked her with figuring out “this workplace culture so we can get people back to the office.” She shared that business was barely meeting performance metrics and she has (among other things) sent out surveys, hosted virtual lunches, and worked with their Employee Assistance Program (EAP) vendor to offer additional support to employees. When I mentioned it sounded like she was taking important steps and asked her what her real issue was, she became emotional.

“I am so overwhelmed, and we haven’t made any decisions about whether or not we will go back to the same office footprint or retain some degree of remote work. We have hired so many people and they haven’t met anyone. How do we connect them to who we are as an organization? How do I figure out the best way to manage engagement, performance, and commitment with so many different variables and all these unknowns? We are losing the culture we worked so hard to develop.”

Her words resonated with me. I work in an organization too, and this is certainly a familiar predicament to our organization, as well as many other’s right now. Monica’s concerns also reminded me that when it comes to people and culture, sometimes we need to flip the situation over to see it correctly.

FUNCTIONALISTS, DANCERS AND OBSERVERS

In the social sciences, a functionalist perspective sees culture as a complex system with interdependent aspects that make up the whole. When applied to organizational culture, it is our collective conscience and values, and it establishes the norms and ways things get done by the people who work there. So, when considering organizational culture, my perspective points to focusing on how to best understand how the different parts are working together rather than addressing each individual part or initiative.

That is just fine for my sociology students, but how can this be applied to Monica's immediate problem?

Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky are well-known for Adaptive Leadership theory which also takes a systems perspective and enables organizations to adapt to challenges. Their popular metaphor of the balcony and the dance floor, found in their book, "The Practice of Adaptive Leadership," guides leaders to take a step up to see the organization from a more strategic or "big picture" point of view from the balcony rather than from the dance floor or "in the weeds" among

the daily activities. Leadership gurus and influencers have taken this concept to the extreme—to the point that many have forgotten how to get off the balcony and require others to share a 30-thousand-foot perspective.

But, my friends, culture is lived on the dance floor and even from high above, we must put one foot in front of the other. To identify the **answers** to our pandemic workplace culture we must rewrite the **questions** and look at our unique environment from a different perspective, the dance floor!

DANCING WITH YOUR CULTURE PARTNER

No one imagined this. The pandemic reality has taken a huge toll on the workforce and unearthed unforeseen global and local complexities. Unfortunately, there is no blueprint for operating business in complexity. Just knowing what the term VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity) means does not offer the readiness to know what to do next.

Business and HR leaders must arm themselves with a keen understanding of what is in their control, which efforts are merely just moving the furniture around, and what strategies might yield the outcomes to influence the workplace culture. Most importantly, we must accept that no matter how hard one tries, the workplace culture is a bridge built as you walk it. The key is to not fall off.

Organizational Culture has **always** been defined as a widely shared set of beliefs that are supported by the company structure and, in turn, enable the execution of strategy. Organizations are also **always** in the process of formation and change. As people leave and join, as strategies and priorities shift, and as demographics and pandemics emerge, the organizational culture naturally changes.



THE BEAT OF THIS DANCE HAS UPPED ITS TEMPO

This began long before the dawn of the pandemic. We are living in a heightened state of change and automation; the pandemic is just an accelerant. The workforce was quickly moving into a hyper-connected, cloud-based environment before the pandemic, where employees had to operate with even greater agility and work against the clock.

Now, there is ample information from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and survey results from Gallop, McKinsey, LeanIn.org and others highlighting the alarming responses of workers and employers struggling to manage today's turbulence. Some are struggling with the loss of revenue, the death of workers or those who have voluntarily stepped away, while others are struggling with incredible success because the past year offered unexpected opportunity.

No situation is immune to the culture dance. For far too long, trust in workplace institutions has been damaged and many were reprioritizing work, family, and healthcare concerns as evidenced by the emerging gig economy and frequent job turnover out of even the most sought-after companies. Even so, we do know some things that can help us gain perspective when we think about intense shifts in culture.

CAREFUL TO NOT STEP ON THEIR TOES

It is important to examine the employee perspective. Most companies have spent time, enterprise-wide efforts and resources developing their organizational culture, brand, and value proposition. A strong organizational culture influences many things; it attracts and retains talent and is influenced by leadership. It also influences how leaders behave, how diversity and inclusiveness are experienced, and how engaged employees are in their work. Workers adjusted to new office environments where hoteling, collaborating and innovation were cultivated by breaking down office walls, opening up creative spaces and creating time devoted to connecting. Many companies enabled good workplace citizenship and volunteering, applied initiatives such as promoting psychological safety, work-life balance, and even engaged in public-private partnerships through charities or schools.

So now, we are all remote. We are seeing into people's worlds and the vulnerabilities of colleagues, friends, and organizational leaders. We are scared for our safety and scared that we will lose jobs. We are scared that companies profiting right now will move too quickly for us to keep up or manage through the ongoing stress or residual impacts. The lines have blurred between what can be asked and what remains off limits. People are fatigued by being "seen" all the time and often must hide not only their face but their feelings. The impressions and fancy footwork we routinely managed in our everyday interactions have devolved into exhaustion and, quite frankly, a bit of improv.

FOLLOW THE LEAD OF YOUR HR BUSINESS PARTNER

The perspective of those fortunate enough to have both learning and experience in the world of organizational dynamics and human resources have taken their seat at the strategic table in some of the most progressive and innovative organizations. There has never been a more important time to follow their lead and shine a bright light on their knowledge and expertise.

A new culture cannot be created on a white board or in a lab. It is not something a CEO can call on HR to fix or impose as they seek to “return to normal.” If this role is not available, then everyone must put their dance shoes on, take the lead, and ask themselves:

- *Are you ready to lead the employee experience?*
- *Do you have information at the ready to measure what matters most for your company’s culture? Or can you get it?*
- *Have you discussed as a leadership team the importance of why this is important and why now?*

The tools needed to harness organizational culture are available, but people need to engage and be engaged differently. What used to be asked and measured must change. Tapping HR leaders who have the basics right can help pivot when you need to and arm others to be culture champions if they want to.

THE STEPS TO TAKE

1. Take the Current Culture Temperature

Start by assessing the reality of the workforce. When asked, most organizational leaders do not know why they have the culture they have in the first place. As individuals, when we do not feel well, we take our temperature before deciding what to do. So, when a company has a temperature, it is important to first look inside yourself and the workforce for the answers before calibrating it with what is going on outside. It is like the best indoor-outdoor thermometer; the conventional liquid-in-glass design is transparent, which allows for the outside temperature to be seen indoors, but it is also ambient which means that changes may be difficult to achieve.

In my work with organizations and teams, I developed the **Healthy Culture Matrix** for use with our 3-Horizons Framework for interactive planning. Designed to explore the organizational culture from the point of view of the employee, this user experience (UX) method establishes the current state of the organization across the performance and commitment continuum. Some areas it taps into includes:

- ✓ The effectiveness of the current organizational structure. Of course, this varies widely based on size, industry, etc., but the degree of current state performance and organizational commitment helps tap into potential at-risk areas.
- ✓ Identify lived values. This “gut check” opportunity ascertains the degree to which leaders are living the espoused values. Attention to noticeable behavior changes point to potential cascading effects across teams.
- ✓ Direct data and dialogue are used to stop relying on what everybody, anybody, somebody, and nobody says. The stories people tell and those left unstated are strong indicators of underlying assumptions and beliefs of the culture that exists. Uncovering what people feel enables them to be at their best, what is working and what is not offers insight into what else employees need to feel confident in their work and connected to the organization.

It is so important that this is not to be a survey. This must be leader-driven, intentional, and human-centric. Each manager must engage personally, build connection, and relationship. Remember: culture is about the people and how they act and interact within the boundaries of work. Ask managers to disclose how important it is that the company grows its culture to reflect the future, and not be an archive of the past.

2. Engage Remote Teams

Leadership is about connection, not about presence. In studies of remote leadership, physical distance had little influence on either communication effectiveness or perceived leader performance. Leaders must elevate trust and pro-active outreach while also heightening their listening skills to be effective in a remote environment. Staff must feel heard, supported, appreciated, and understood. This cannot be left up to chance because time and attention is required. To be successful at supporting the workforce today, organizational leaders must:

- ✓ Elevate emotional intelligence skills and awareness.
- ✓ Ensure DE&I strategies are applied to help people know their opinion is valued.
- ✓ Engage goal-setting, do it together, and re-confirm that plans and deliverables are embraced and understood.
- ✓ Do not assume employees believe they can count on you.

3. Heighten Attention to Personal Needs

The data is clear. There are four factors required to align the people strategy with the business strategy which are reinforced with data from our [E³ Engagement Survey™](#) across client organizations. The work lies in ensuring that conditions exist throughout the organizational structure, processes, and expectations for managing people to enable them.

✓ **Purpose & Meaning - Believing the vision and values of the organization are real and have a sense that work matters to realizing the organization's goals.** It is easy to attribute a disconnected company culture to a remote work environment where people naturally have limited exposure to overall business activities, strategic direction, and values. Now is the time to ensure values are over-communicated, demonstrated by leaders, and called out so employees can spot them in their own behavior. People managers can help employees connect to the larger purpose and not just the mission or worse -- department goals.

✓ **Belonging - Experiencing a sense of pride and affiliation with the organization and its members.** People who work remotely often feel a lack of community and a disconnect from the everyday norms within the walls of the office. Create a variety of opportunities to focus on the collective good, connect with peers, and build a remote employee experience to be as strong as that of a face-to-face one. Be sure inclusive behaviors are being recognized and rewarded widely and that focused attention is being placed on procedural justice.

✓ **Autonomy - Being empowered to have a level of control over work and responsibility for outcomes.** Different checks and balances are needed now because the way we measure output must change. People managers still want to know if individuals and teams are doing what is asked, but trust and transparency are required now rather than squash autonomy with micromanaging or automated surveillance. Navigating a new culture where virtual work is becoming the norm requires a shift in focus from activity-based metrics to goals and accomplishments since the way work gets done must be more flexible. Organizations should embrace technology, not the IT department, because many find they are stuck in systems like e-mail, zoom or slack channels and work only gets done after hours. There are some necessary tools, but others need to be retired.

✓ **Communication - Promoting open communication and encouraging dialogue and meaningful interaction.** Without trust, there is no communication and without communication, there is no trust. Through the pandemic we are learning that parents are worried about disclosing struggles, Black and Asian workers are disheartened at the lack of empathy and understanding coming from organizational leaders who feel that simply launching a DE&I initiative will replace a personal conversation asking, “how are you and how can I support you?”

In any organizational culture there is isolation and disengagement when people do not feel seen or heard. This invisibility is especially hard when employees normally connected to their colleagues feel left out. Explore how employees are interacting with those around them. Set expectations that connection is important and then examine it is being done. Now more than ever, health and safety is a very real issue for so many. Listen deeply to employees to gain a clear understanding about what is in front of them because it resembles what is in front of the organization’s culture.

4. Everyone Needs Onboarding Now

HR leaders understand a strong onboarding program but, especially now, few companies are as effective as they could be which is a risk to cultural continuity. Decades of research shows a best-practice process for socializing a new employee to the company culture. When bringing on a new employee, it has become commonplace to review the people and relationships, the organization’s history and politics, the goals and how their role fits in, the jargon and *Jawn*, and the general strategic direction.

The new norm is fast becoming boarding from both the front and back of the plan and in organizations, everyone needs onboarding. When moving in the direction of reinforcing elements of current culture or changing priorities that shift the direction of culture, the way it gets done must also change. Today, both new and legacy employees need to acclimate to the new organization.

DANCING TOGETHER BUT TO A DIFFERENT BEAT

Bringing people back into alignment with the organization is not an easy task. Some have described how the pandemic has left portions of the population suffering from a form of PTSD, other portions have elevated personal priorities well above those of the workplace, while even others cannot wait to return to the way things were. But when organizational leaders take a step off the balcony and back onto the dance floor, they can see from the perspective of all those inimitable people who, through their efforts and commitment, achieve the organization's competitive advantage.

A Transformational Leadership style works well during times of disruption and intense culture change. Keeping an eye on employee performance and commitment to the organization starts by looking down at your feet and then up at your partner. As the perspective of your workforce becomes known, it will be easier to see the multitude of opportunities to keep your culture alive and moving forward. You will learn where internal career management programs can help, where retirement coaching and knowledge transfer or mentor programs can celebrate connections across generations, and where your talent reviews and succession planning processes may need to shift and tap into new aspects of what success looks like.



LEADERSHIP WRITES THE SONG

It is a well-known fact that leaders are the biggest influence on culture, performance, and commitment. Organizational leaders are also expected to focus on the profits and, unfortunately, many leave the culture piece to others and especially those in HR. In times of disruption and culture shifts, leaders must be the driving force of change and lock arms with their HR team to dance together.

You cannot just trade in your culture for a new one. Your culture already exists - you can just help it to evolve.

TAKE THE FIRST STEP

Creating and adapting to a new work culture can be difficult. But the good part is you do not have to make every single decision all at once. Find out what works for your organization and then use it to see where you should go. When you approach it the right way, creating a new work culture for your organization can help make your team and organization stronger than ever and resilient enough to withstand not just the next crisis—but any crisis.

CCI Consulting is uniquely equipped to take a long view of the future and help you foster a healthy workplace culture that aligns with your strategic priorities. We hold expertise in this area and our general approach to this topic is to make sure we are aware of the culture at its most observable level, the lived values, and the underlying assumptions surrounding how relationships work within the current social environment. Regardless of the changes that lie ahead, the best outcomes will result from a coordinated and collaborative approach.

For more insights on culture and other workforce topics visit:

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