

The 2020 effect: Can organizations pull off a cultural reset?



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Even before COVID-19, 9 to 5 was on its way out. In 2019, 75% of global business leaders already considered flexible working to be the new normal. This was driven by workforce globalization and technologies that allow us to do our jobs anytime, anywhere; the need to attract and retain top talent has been another factor that has pushed many organizations into offering more flexible working options.

How organizations responded to these events – to keep employees safe, to support them, to communicate with clarity and transparency – was put in the spotlight. This scrutiny engendered the need for a cultural reset within organizations.

It is a trend that is unlikely to slow down in 2021, and the organizations that do not change risk two things: reputational damage beyond repair and the loss of key talent. How, then, can businesses hold on to their people, as those people become more and more discerning?

They can start by reflecting on the values that shape their cultural DNA and establishing what they stand for. So what are the workplace values that will matter most in the year ahead? And how can organizations use their culture to build loyalty and trust among hybrid and geographically dispersed teams?

The four values that will reshape workplace culture in 2021

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1. Empathy

The health and economic impacts of the pandemic and the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement have shown that empathy is a key value that organizations must promote. But pre-pandemic, many were not prepared to promote it: in February 2020, only 68% of employees said that their company is empathetic.

“Against a backdrop of complexity and human nature, empathy is the most important asset that we could offer our own employees,” says Alex MacAdam, vice president, head of global go-to-market at Fujitsu.

Leaders need to be able to listen, understand, and offer employees the flexibility, support and advice that suits their particular circumstances. According to MacAdam, this means: “Understanding that everyone is in a different place and a different time, with a unique set of challenges to contend with.”





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2. Connectedness

To promote empathy, leaders must also be able to connect with employees. But this was a problem in 2020, and it will continue to be in the years ahead as remote working becomes the norm.

Virtual meetings might have offset the lack of face-to-face communications to some extent, but they have not replaced the need for genuine in-person connections. “The solution is not virtual meetings,” says MacAdam. “That’s like putting a sticking plaster on the problem.”

To build a strong sense of community even among remote workers, organizations need to create opportunities – beyond pay and remuneration – to bring people together outside of the work they collaborate on. Fujitsu, for example, is creating virtual communities called Tribes in which employees take responsibility for supporting one of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. To do this they take part in different community initiatives outside of work, such as volunteering with non-profit organizations.

Dashlane takes a similar approach. “Even when working remotely, we are still encouraging managers to use their quarterly team-building budget to do something with their direct reports to build a sense of community,” says Ciara Lakhani, the password-managing app’s chief people officer. “They can do anything or choose some of the popular ideas we suggested such as virtual escape rooms, or beer and wine tasting sessions.”



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3. Transparent communication

"If you drown people in a ton of information, is it like you've told them nothing?" asks Lakhani. She has a point. Transparent communication about the issues that affect employees is now a must, but done badly it is a burden for employees and employers alike, and impedes connectedness and empathy.

"There is great demand for transparency," adds Lakhani. "However, it is a difficult and time-consuming topic for executives to manage because transparency doesn't have a clear-cut definition, and it can become a big communication challenge."

The answer for organizations is to learn to communicate frequently, openly and effectively. For instance, just because a message has been shared on internal communication channels, it does not mean it has effectively conveyed its intended meaning. "Technology is a platform for communication. But it doesn't actually teach you how to communicate effectively," warns MacAdam. "Thinking that technology would be an answer is probably the mistake that most organizations make." So leaders should see the technology as the enabler of effective communication rather than the solution.

They must also make an informed call on the amount of information they share. "Transparency does not mean absolute access to everything," says Lakhani. "To be transparent, leaders should share with employees only what they need to know. There shouldn't be anything that employees are surprised about." Leaders must remember that quality of communications matters more than quantity.



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4. Commitment to action and impact

Communicating about issues is important, but an organization that does not commit to acting on those issues will do nothing to build trust with employees.

To show that they understand their people, organizations should commit to practical action on the issues that matter to them, whether that is racial justice, climate change, diversity or mental and physical wellbeing. They will be rewarded with a more committed and loyal workforce.

Adobe, for instance, has introduced a wellness reimbursement programme that pays employees up to \$600 a year for things like gym memberships, bike-share memberships, fitness classes, massages and nutritional counselling. "Wellness programmes like this one are a great way to support your employees," says MacAdam. "The corporate value is great as well: you've got happier and healthier employees, who are more engaged and productive at work."

Committing to effective action will underscore the success of promoting the other three key values: empathy, connectedness and transparent communication. "It is great to have good intentions, but it is not enough – impact matters more," says Lakhani. "As leaders, we are accountable for the impact of our actions and communications (or lack of them) to each other, to the company and externally."



Looking forward

For employees, a values-driven culture could prove to be the competitive differentiator needed as we move into the new world of work. The organizations that refocus their culture around these four values will reap the benefits of loyal, engaged and trusting employees, at the same time as laying the foundations to support a workforce that can navigate new ways of working in 2021 and beyond.

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