

DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING AN ENGAGED AND HEALTHY WORKPLACE CULTURE IN A FRACTURED WORLD

“Welcome to the beginning of the end of the workplace as we know it,” Gustavo Razzetti quipped in his book, *Remote Not Distant*. “Normal is gone. The culture that got you here won’t get you there.”

Razzetti is correct – the 2023 workplace is almost entirely different than the 2019 workplace. Wedged in between these years, as we all know, was a life-altering – really, world-altering – Global Pandemic. Depending on who you talk with, you will hear a number of different descriptions related to the current state of the world. Some will tell you we are now in a post-pandemic world, while others who recently contracted COVID-19 might say that we’ve never fully left the pandemic state. No one, however, will argue the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic was disruptive and caused all sorts of change in our personal and our professional lives.

One of the biggest, most significant changes in the lives of professionals, as Razzetti said, is the current state of the workplace. The office still exists – and likely always will – but the relationship that employees have with the office has been forever altered. With the change to this relationship comes big changes to the development of workplace culture and the ability to sustain a workplace where people are engaged, connected, and are ultimately thriving in their work, leading to increased productivity and overall success.

Famed management guru and scholar Peter F. Drucker once said “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” This quote will always play well to corporate audiences and looks good printed on a coffee cup, but what does it actually mean? Should organizations focus solely on their company culture over their strategy? Absolutely not. The intentional development and work to sustain a

healthy company culture should be an integral part of the organization’s strategy.

“Has your organization focused enough on the strategy of developing a workplace culture that not only survives, but could even thrive in our current remote-first, hybrid-first, disjointed work world?”

According to a recent study conducted by Gallup, approximately 8% of the pre-pandemic workforce was exclusively remote; that number shot up to 39% in February 2022. While the percentage of fully remote employees has settled back down to what is anticipated to be 22%, almost one-third of employees would prefer that their work be conducted exclusively remotely. What’s more, nearly 60% of workers prefer to have some sort of hybrid working situation, while only 9% prefer to be completely in office.

This is a big wake-up call for employers in all industries. Clearly, some work is not able to be conducted via a remote or hybrid situation, but for work that can be conducted remotely, flexibility is now the preferred working situation.

There are a number of new terms used to describe the current state of our work world. Some call it remote-first, some call it hybrid-first, some might call it fractured or, worse, broken. For some organizations, the latter word may be the sentiment regarding the current state of the organization in a post-pandemic world. While virtual meet-ups and messaging tools (i.e., Microsoft Teams, Slack, etc.) are helpful in keeping individuals connected, they will never quite replace the in-person experience.

In a recent article from MIT’s Sloan School of Management, Author Douglas

Ready wrote, “Funny thing, culture. We rarely pay attention to it when things are going well. Far too often, we take it

for granted. It’s just there.” Well, what happens when it’s not just there? Has your organization focused enough on the strategy of developing a workplace culture that not only survives, but could even thrive in our current remote-first, hybrid-first, disjointed work world?

What happens when your employees, your colleagues, your work friends aren’t just there? This question is especially important in light of Gallup’s statement that “Your organization’s culture has a direct, measurable impact on performance.”

In the midst of what is becoming a major workplace reset – an overhaul, of sorts – organizations are being presented with an opportunity to re-evaluate their culture. This includes why they do what they do and how the organization shows up when providing the services or goods they sell.

In 2021, Gallup published a book titled “Wellbeing at Work: How to Build Resilient and Thriving Teams.” The content of the book was (and is) incredibly relevant and prescient as its release came as the world was starting to re-open and everyone was trying to figure out how to once again carry on as normal (what’s normal, anyway?).

The authors of the book, Jim Clifton and Jim Harter, wrote, “In 2020, organizational culture saw historic



threats.” They go on to write, During the health and economic crisis of 2020, meeting the organizational cultural requirement that “serves the person and society as well as the shareholder” became even more urgent.

Clifton and Harter argue that before you can build a thriving culture you must first make every effort to avoid the following four risks: not looking out, and caring, for employee mental health; lacking clarity and purpose; becoming overly reliant on policies, programs, and perks; and having poorly skilled managers.

Consider these four major risks and how they might apply to the culture of your own organization – especially when in the midst and the aftermath of the pandemic. Consider how things were going while everyone was in person; it is probably safe to assume that the pandemic only amplified many of these already existing challenges. Now, consider the reality of having to address these challenges in the aforementioned reality of the hybrid-first, disjointed working world.

In the face of these risks – whether in-person or virtual – how can an organization build not just a healthy culture, but a thriving one, prepared for the additional upheaval and challenges that are inevitably coming? Authors Clifton and Harter share, according to

a recent Gallup study, the four things employees need most from their leaders:

- **Hope – Is there a clear plan for the future?**
- **Stability – Am I well-prepared to do my work?**
- **Trust – Does my manager keep me informed?**
- **Compassion – Does my organization care about my wellbeing?**

If followers get these four things from their leaders, they see it as a signal that life will be okay. That their life will be okay whether they’re in-person or virtual; connected or disjointed; present or distant. They’ll be okay even in the face of uncertainty and constant change.

There are few constants in life; change is one of them. Change will always be with us. Change can be hard, but it is often necessary. How are you strategically planning for a future full of change? What are you doing to create and maintain a thriving organizational culture that leads to higher levels of performance and success?

Razzetti writes, “Reset is not about getting rid of everything and starting from scratch. It’s about leveraging what worked in the past and adopting new behaviors as needed.” Now is the time

to move from a culture by chance to a culture by design and away from a one-size-fits-all approach to one of flexibility.

Sociologist and author Tracy Bowers summed it up perfectly for Forbes when she wrote, “Culture has always been a challenge to strengthen and sustain, but with hybrid work models, the level of difficulty will be increased many-fold. It won’t be easy, but it will be worth it.” As the saying goes, ‘anything worth doing is worth doing well.’ Working to build a thriving workplace culture is certainly something that will take work – a lot of purposeful, strategic work – but it will be worth it in the end. While the level of difficulty may increase many-fold, the success of a healthy, thriving, flexible workplace culture will increase all the more and will carry your organization into what will hopefully be a healthy, happy, and thriving future.

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