

Culture Through the Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities

By Tracey Smith and Hannah Flint

A year into the COVID-19 pandemic, the country is beginning to open back up.

While many companies have had some employees return to the office, most are still using a hybrid approach of both virtual and in-person working. As the vaccine becomes more available, executives are beginning to execute their return-to-work plans. In the undercurrent of these discussions, a theme is arising around corporate culture. Leaders are digging into these questions:

- How is our culture doing after not being together for a year?
- What have we learned about the benefits of working remotely, and how do we balance the pros and cons of hybrid working styles?

The ongoing pandemic prompted many leaders to examine how they can, and should, influence and improve culture in a virtual environment. When in the office, colleagues had the opportunity to catch up and make connections face-to-face. Leaders were able to “walk the four corners,” as one executive described, to get a pulse on their teams and a sense of morale. The impact of this loss of informal



relationship building was subtle at first but has now become a prominent conversation between leaders and within teams. It is clear culture has been impacted over the last year, but many leaders are unsure what to do about it.

Maintaining Culture in a Virtual Environment

So what is company culture? Culture is broadly described as how an organization does things. This includes stated behavioral expectations, as defined by a company’s core values and leader competencies as well as the unofficial norms around how employees are expected to interact. These unofficial norms are created by a combination of individual behaviors that are reinforced and sometimes incentivized. Culture is created through the traditions, policies and systems that unite and define us. Culture is also influenced by the type of people you hire and the systems you use to manage those people. Your company has a culture, whether you’re intentional about its creation or not.



Early in the pandemic, executives were hypersensitive about maintaining engagement with their people by communicating with employees. With everyone transitioning to the remote environment and the uncertainty surrounding the virus, many leaders had to reevaluate how they communicated with their teams.

One executive we interviewed shared that he provided weekly updates to the entire company, including financial updates, to be as transparent as possible to help employees manage through the uncertainty. Leaders at multiple levels started holding daily check-ins with their teams to maintain engagement as well as keep a pulse on productivity. Employees appreciated these updates, and technology allowed collaboration to be at an all-time high. Unfortunately, executives started running out of things to share with their teams, and on-camera fatigue became a concern.

While it can be challenging, executives need to continue to focus on building employee engagement and keeping communication levels high. Most employees are feeling worn down after the past year, and stress piled on top of stress is taking a toll.

Here are a few best practices we've identified to maintain employee engagement remotely.

- 1. Provide Mental Health Resources:** Leaders across the industry are increasingly concerned about the mental health of their employees. While people have enjoyed some of the freedom and flexibility found in working from home, there has been an increased feeling of isolation. One industry leader said his company is providing mental health resources to anyone who needs them. His message to employees is "It's OK to not be OK." He went on, "I want people to know that we care about them; maintaining that family culture is critical." That sentiment that our leaders care about us as people (we're not just cogs in the machinery of the company) is perhaps more important now than it's ever been.
- 2. Organize Diversity and Inclusion Chats:** One executive created forums for employees to come together to discuss current events. Topics have included the Black Lives Matter movement and International Women's Day. Setting aside time to allow employees to discuss current events and their societal implications has helped teams remain engaged and get to know each other more deeply by sharing individual experiences.

3. Create Individual Calls to Action: Strong cultures provide a means for employees to leverage their strengths to help achieve company goals. The executive director of ESD Global Raj Gupta said the company created individual calls to action to give each person a short-term focus with a strategic purpose. Examples include:

- A call to get aggressive on collections. The company quickly went from 100 to 60 days due to the increased focus.
- Encouraging people to take time to do research on things they've always wanted to do but haven't had time.
- Other tasks or opportunities to help position the business in the best way possible for the future.

These examples are a few of many opportunities to keep your employees engaged and feeling part of the team. As Raj shared, "It's not one magical step; it takes lots of little things. Be honest and transparent, and don't be afraid to ask for ideas and solutions to problems."

Keys to a Successful Post-COVID Transition

Knowing what we know about the stress COVID-19 placed on our corporate cultures, what do executives need to be focused on as we transition back to the office? Many executives are starting to see the benefit (and employees' desires) to create hybrid work options.

While some plan to go back to the office full time, others are looking to decrease time in the office to two to three days per week. This will provide employees the freedom and autonomy they've grown to appreciate, while helping teams consistently achieve much needed face-to-face time.

"We have to be conscious of the second- and third-order effects of having some people in person and some remote," one leader remarked. "For managers in the office, will there be an unconscious bias to give work to people in the office with them? Will remote employees be mentored less than those in person?" Leaders need intentional conversations about potential impacts to split attendance and put in place measures and expectations to minimize negative outcomes.

The reality is that hybrid models will put an additional strain on the business, especially on leaders, as their people will be in different situations and require specialized leadership development. An employee working daily in the office will need a different approach to someone working remotely, versus an employee who chooses to return to the office part time.

However, that doesn't mean organizations shouldn't pursue flexible work arrangements. Many employees are expressing concern that, with the vaccine, organizations will push to go back to previous work arrangements. This fails to acknowledge that the landscape in the future will never be like it was before the pandemic. Remote work and a more flexible approach to work arrangements will become more of the norm, and employees will expect their organizations to take that into consideration.

Another interesting outcome of working remotely is the impact on recruiting opportunities. Willy Stewart, CEO and chairman of Stewart Engineering, shared, "The remote environment has enabled us to recruit coast-to-coast versus a focus on local hires."



In the industry's highly competitive environment, this expanded reach increases the potential talent pool significantly. Once hired, onboarding becomes a significant step in what one leader describes as “drinking the Kool-Aid” to incorporate the new employees into the organization's culture. The first few months of a new hire's tenure are focused on meeting people throughout the organization to understand the work that gets done, but, more importantly, HOW it gets done (your company culture). If we don't have everyone in the office, how do we embrace new hires and, in return, have them embrace us?

Some best practices include:

- Be intentional in who you select as someone's manager. Find a supervisor in that division or business unit who is a culture carrier. These people tend to be the ones who create connections between individuals and teams and will be good role models for new hires.
- Have clear roles and responsibilities. Clearly define how the rest of the team will engage in the onboarding process. Have a younger employee talk the new hire through the day-to-day systems and processes; have a midlevel manager explain how the company selects people for new client

work; and have a business unit leader talk through the different markets the company is in and the strategies behind them. Over the course of three months, the new hire can be exposed to most of the team, even if everyone is still working remotely.

- Look for opportunities to build social connections. Humans are social beings, and the strain of isolation over the past year has affected nearly everyone. Even in remote situations, people need to feel connected to others and be able to make friends at work. It can be extremely difficult to do this if every meeting is 100% focused on the task at hand. Build time into your agendas for people to connect with each other and to build trusting relationships. With new hires especially, remind the team to build in that connection time to help them feel like they are truly part of a team.

Moving Forward With Purpose

After an extraordinarily challenging year, it's hard to fault anyone for wanting to get back to normal. However, forward-thinking leaders will recognize that organizations will never completely return to the way they were pre-COVID. Things will settle down, but our businesses will need to operate differently.



Leaders need to pay even closer attention to their people and to what they need to be successful. There are still big, unanswered questions about what work looks like moving forward. However, some things will never change.

People want to feel appreciated. People want to be recognized for the value they bring, not just as a number. People want some degree of flexibility and understanding for the multiple responsibilities they carry outside of work.

Most importantly, people need to feel part of something bigger than themselves and have opportunities to engage with and be embraced by the team. The leaders who stay close to their employees and focus on taking care of them will be the ones with a culture where people thrive. They will be the ones who enjoy the most success in the post-COVID world.

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