

AMA RESEARCH

## Navigating the Next “New Normal” for Business in a Post-Pandemic World

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## AMA RESEARCH

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# Returning to a Post-Pandemic Work Reality

Like the end of Prohibition” is how one article referred to the atmosphere right now as mask mandates ease, cases of COVID continue to decline, more people are vaccinated, and more workplaces talk about having everyone come back to the office in some capacity. Some hope things will go back to the way they were before the pandemic. But should they?

This issue of *AMA Quarterly* contains a number of articles that share advice and tactics on how to handle the return to the office, in whatever form that takes. Our cover features recent research from AMA, which highlights the tactics that will seem to prevail for reopened offices: masks, social distancing, and partial staffing.

AMA faculty member Brian E. Porter shares how executives can use process management tools such as communication, stakeholder engagement, process revisions, and templates to help plan how their offices will be operating in 2021 and beyond.

Morag Barrett and Eric Spencer of SkyeTeam outline the roles that resilience and adaptability will play as we adjust to current circumstances, and why executives need to cultivate these characteristics now more than ever.

On the academic side, Rob Cross and Inga Carboni look at how leaders can drive performance and innovation in our post-pandemic world.

Minh Hua, chief talent officer at Stanley Black & Decker, offers a view on how managers can take the opportunity now to examine the ingrained racial biases against Asian Americans that were exacerbated by the pandemic, and make sure that offices are more just, equitable places in the new normal.

Now is the time not to reinstate systems and processes that didn't work well before the pandemic, and certainly won't work now. AMA can help in that journey.

Christiane Truelove  
Guest Editor, *AMA Quarterly*

## AMA QUARTERLY

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## Getting Back to the New Normal—Whatever That Is

**W**ith the rate of vaccinations increasing, many states relaxing or eliminating restrictive mandates, and more offices opening back up, there are questions from many about how the workplace will look in the “new normal.” With time, I believe the new normal will look a lot like the old normal, but enhanced by the proliferation of technology and flexibility. However, it will take at least a few years before COVID is no longer top of mind.

In the United States, we have seen significant differences by region. We have to remember that even pre-COVID, the ever-increasing rate of innovation in remote technology tools led to significant changes in how we did business, paving the way to where we are now. Many businesses operated under hybrid and remote models. These companies will likely continue doing so, as they focus on what makes the most sense for their situations.

Organizational strategies will differ depending on specific business challenges. While some businesses produced record results during COVID, others in industries such as hospitality were late to restart their engines. I believe very strongly that much of the ultimate outcome will depend on the actual business—there will be no one size fits all. Some businesses will find that there is no reasonable replacement for brick-and-mortar offices. One thing no leadership team should lose sight of is the pre-COVID thinking that went into laying out office space. For many, there were specific reasons why an office was planned a certain way, including better collaboration and creating an environment that produced more innovation.

For other companies, remote or partially remote workforces will become their new normal. And for those businesses that can manage it, remote work may open new possibilities to labor pools and reinvestment of capital that otherwise would be consumed by real estate.

As far as leadership development in these times, many of the fundamentals of what makes an executive successful have not changed. Depending on an organization’s unique situation, executives may find themselves in a position where they have to become better communicators, more flexible, and more empathetic. Executives also have to focus on balance. Many times when executives find themselves focusing more on one thing, they are focused less on something else.

AMA surveyed members and seminar participants this past year and found that the two top priorities are creating and maintaining office relationships and engaging the workforce. If an executive focuses on cultivating strong relationships in the office, they can establish trust; and by engaging employees, they can ensure the business will thrive. AMA has found that flexibility, collaboration, and human connections are critical for executives to navigate the next “new normal” for their organization.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Manny Avramidis'.

Manny Avramidis  
President and CEO  
American Management Association

# Workplace Strategies for the Road to Recovery: Navigating the Next “New Normal” for Business in a Post-Pandemic World

**AMA researchers talked with executives about the plans they have for returning to the office.**

It's been more than a year since the COVID-19 crisis struck, forcing business professionals to adapt on a dime to working remotely, collaborating virtually, and staying focused and productive in the midst of upheaval and uncertainty. While many offices plan to reopen, few employees expect to return to what was business as usual before March 2020. Across industries and the country, even the best laid return-to-office plans remain a work in progress.

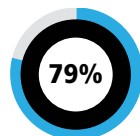
Most organizations do have a post-COVID return-to-work plan. In a recent survey on the subject, AMA asked members and seminar participants nationwide whether their company had a roadmap in place to “reopen” once stay-at-home orders were suspended. Nearly 64 percent of participants responded yes, while just under 16 percent answered no. Close to 21 percent of participants, however, were unsure. Participants were also asked a critical question: How will your organization adjust to

ongoing COVID-19 health concerns once employees return to your workplace? They were offered a variety of options and asked to select all that apply. Of the in-office strategies to be implemented in the near future, three stood out as the most common, based on participants' responses (see below).

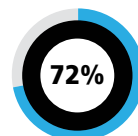
In the weeks and months ahead, will those strategies change? Although it's a positive step towards reconnecting families, revitalizing communities, and

rekindling optimism, the recent CDC announcement that fully-vaccinated individuals do not need to practice social distancing—particularly, the widely reinforced COVID guidance to keep six feet of distance between people—or wear a mask in most situations might well complicate office re-openings. Will employers remain committed to enforcing social distancing protocols and mask mandates? Will employees with lingering COVID fatigue comply?

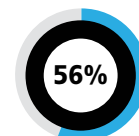
## How will your organization adjust to ongoing COVID-19 health concerns once employees return to your workplace?



Social distancing



Masks at work



Partial staffing



Practically, ethically, and legally speaking, how will organizations identify and deal with employees who are reluctant to get vaccinated? These are among the myriad questions facing senior leaders, middle managers, and frontline workers alike during the looming transition period.

To aggravate matters, many organizations lack a formal process for addressing their people's concerns and easing their adjustment to an in-office routine after they've spent months getting comfortable with working from home—or anywhere they choose. When asked whether their organization would be conducting training to acclimate people back into office environments, less

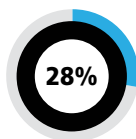
than a third of AMA's survey participants responded in the affirmative and more than 50 percent answered "not sure."

One long-term and widespread business outcome of the pandemic is certain: working remotely is not simply a trend that will fade away after COVID restrictions end. Working from home has been on the rise—in terms of its adoption rate by organization as well as, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics, sheer employee numbers—since the early 2000s. For both employers and employees, remote work has considerable benefits. Along with reductions in real estate, rental, and facility maintenance costs, organizations gain the ability to attract,

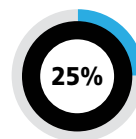
hire, and maximize talent from all over the country, if not the world. Beyond eliminating the time and money spent on commuting, employees often enjoy increased flexibility and greater work-life balance. Yet, remote work can also create significant challenges for business leaders and managers in areas from teamwork to mentoring, from performance evaluation to data security. To keep talented people, minimize communication problems, strengthen camaraderie, and increase productivity, many organizations are embracing a hybrid of remote and onsite work.

In March 2021, AMA surveyed members and seminar participants nationwide about workplace strategies

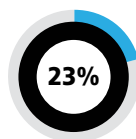
### When asked about their anticipated work setting in July 2021, participants responded:



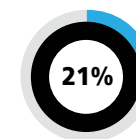
were still uncertain about their future work setting



would be working remotely part-time and in-office part-time



would be working remotely full-time



would be working in-office full-time

critical to their organization’s post-pandemic health. The results offer a clear indication that remote work is here to stay, in some shape or form. Prior to COVID, 73 percent of participants worked in an office full-time. At the time of the survey, 56 percent of participants had shifted to working remotely full-time. When asked whether their business is considering going back into a physical office full-time, only 40 percent of participants answered yes. 25 percent of participants responded that their company does not intend to bring employees back onsite. And 35 percent of those surveyed were unsure about

their organization’s future return-to-office plans.

As the results of AMA’s two most recent surveys clearly indicate, “not sure” is the answer that applies to much about the post-pandemic nature of work and the workplace. What is also clear from the responses of managers and business professionals: flexibility, collaboration, and human connections are critical to navigating the next “new normal” for their organization.

As businesses strive to keep moving forward, leaders at all levels need to stay on top of trends and take charge of developing skills to support their

organization, their team, and their own career. AMA understands the needs of today’s managers and offers resources to help. Learning specific strategies to build a cohesive, inclusive, and productive team of employees can ease the complications and frustrations of managing a hybrid team. Becoming proficient at communicating virtually, up, down, and across the organization, can ensure that important messages get heard. And in the coming weeks and months, just about everyone could use some expert insights and practical guidance on building agility and managing through uncertainty. [AQ](#)

## Key Finding No. 1

### Relationships are vital to post-pandemic business success.

When asked to rank several capabilities critical to thriving in the post-pandemic workplace, participants overwhelmingly placed top priority on **building and maintaining strong relationships**. During a year marked by isolation and anxiety, compassion emerged as a hallmark of effective leadership, teamwork, and customer interactions, whether virtual or in-person. Relationships bring humanity to the workplace and establish trust in times of radical change.

**#1** Rankings  
191 responses:  
strong relationships



## Key Finding No. 2

### Employee engagement is essential during the coming months of transition.

When asked to assess the strategies needed to secure an organization’s future health, participants considered **improving employee engagement to maintain focus** a matter of high importance, a close second only to **establishing leadership best practices to meet the challenges of the pandemic**. No business can afford a disengaged workforce, especially while struggling to rebound from a health crisis.

**#1** Rankings  
282 responses:  
leadership best practices



**#2** Rankings  
281 responses:  
employee engagement







# Finding Normalcy after **DISRUPTION**

BY BRIAN E. PORTER

Odds are that most readers automatically assume the “disruption” has something to do with the restrictions of 2020, right?

That makes sense, but we really cannot leave our lessons learned from 2020 with only those caused by health-related disruptions. Instead, we need to consider all possible scenarios that might cause a change in the way daily business operates:

- Physical damage to facilities due to severe weather events and/or fire
- Turnover of employees due to some emotional situation
- Succession failure from unexpected loss of leader
- Lawsuit through product, physical, or IP-related litigation
- Supply chain disruption due to supplier bankruptcy or new competition
- IT failure from outage and loss of business for more than a few minutes
- Data breach causing significant customer blowback, requiring the rebuilding of trust



“Considering that we are looking to determine the new normal, we must listen to understand which changes worked during a disruption and which did not. Listen first and speak second.”

AMA Quarterly's Winter 2021 edition focused on how to operate under chaos. But then, how do we accelerate normalcy after a disruption? For the past few years, I've been involved in a number of AMA's project management and AMA Certified Professional in Management™ courses. A number of the terms and concepts from the AMA courses are included here to align you as a manager with best practices.

### THREE FAILED “EXIT” ASSUMPTIONS

Here are three scenarios that managers may encounter when things appear to be returning to normal:

**Assuming normal will return automatically.** Don't let yourself get lulled into the false sense that things will right themselves just because the original disruption is gone. After a hurricane, perhaps the building is replaced but new technology is installed. Following a pandemic, some health protocols may linger. The old “normal” may never be normal again.

**Assuming employees want the old ways back at all.**

Many employees may prefer to keep some of the changes that came about due to disruption. Flexible time, working from home, a new organizational structure, or additional technology may be attractive to workers and something to include in the new normal.

**Assuming everyone is the same.** You may have an organization with split-personality behavior. Some want the old ways back. Others prefer the new normal. As an example, in my college classrooms, surveys have found that roughly 40% preferred in-person learning, 40% preferred live online learning, and 20% would accept either way. What is the school to do?

### USING PROJECT MANAGEMENT TOOLS IN THE TRANSITION TO “NORMAL”

There are four project management areas that should be considered. They are communication, stakeholder engagement, process revisions, and templates.

**Communication.** In the AMA Total Professional model, the first section presented is communication. Why is it first? It's due to the immense importance that a manager must place on this skill. Whether you will communicate up, down, or across the organization, you should make sure to adapt your style moving forward.

Historically (let's say the year 1500 and before), the only way to communicate was via letter or in person. Today we have a plethora of tools, including push-and-pull communication styles such as phone calls, fax machines, email, instant messaging, chat boards, dashboards, virtual conferencing, and many others that continue to evolve.

One of the major outcomes from 2020, and the new normal of 2021 and beyond, will be the growing use of virtual conferences. Why am I so confident of this?

- **Experience.** People have a lot more experience with virtual conferencing than they did in February 2020.
- **Tools.** Just about every laptop and cell phone now has one, two, or even more virtual calling (VC) tools.
- **Travel costs.** Organizations will challenge the need for travel and consider savings more important.
- **Immediate gratification.** Individuals do not want to wait for a meeting in a day or a week if they can set up a VC for later that day. The speed of information demands such.
- **Reduction of office locations.** Necessity will be a significant driver, as many organizations are not going to renew leases because it will save them time and money. VCs will be necessary, or renting temporary meeting spaces will become a new reality for business.

Sure, there will still be plenty of in-person meetings due to the need for human interaction, but they may be more localized.

Considering that we are looking to determine the new normal, we *must* listen to understand which changes worked during a disruption and which did not. Listen first and speak second.

**Stakeholder engagement.** One of the primary benefits from improved communication is having a better handle on stakeholder communications. Once we master the tools and flex our communication modality and style for the people involved, it will automatically transfer some benefit to stakeholder engagement. If managers actively request input from project, process, and operational teams up-front, with the modality that best suits that stakeholder group, the manager will see engagement.

Remember that a portion of stakeholder management is listening. This means we have to stop thinking about our next

position or statement and actively focus on what the other party is saying. By paraphrasing, taking notes, and giving feedback through facial expressions and head nods, we acknowledge that what they are saying is critical to our mission.

When the stakeholders feel they are heard, they will be even more open to new ideas and may respond more positively to contradictory opinions as well. When combined, communication and stakeholder engagement legitimize the entire process.

**Process revisions.** As the shift from disruption and survival tactics changes to the new normal, you will have to implement the communication from stakeholders. Why else would we have asked for their input?

Review the processes your organization uses in meetings, expense reports, inventory, shipping and receiving, invoicing, customer service, design, development, training, legal, quality control, or any other departmental function. Perhaps you will find that even the most basic things, such as parking and security entry to buildings, have improvement possibilities that affect more than one process.

Consider the process-revision effort an opportunity to brainstorm even further among your team. "During a disruption, we \_\_\_\_\_, but now that we have learned from this disruption, we should \_\_\_\_\_." You may find efficiencies, cost savings, customer-focused improvements, and other benefits. Don't just copy what was completed during the main disruption effort. Get creative!

**Templates.** Based on the prior three sections, you're now ready to complement the processes to gain maximum usability. Create a standardized tool that can be efficiently and effectively implemented as quickly as possible.

Use this analogy: *Process* is the sequence of finding an online product, comparing, selecting, and then paying for the item. *Templates* are the actual design layouts of the website tools that allow easy entry to complete the process. Take, for instance, manufacturing. The quality inspection or QC process may have many steps, but the template is the checklist to ensure that you completed all the steps. For applying to a job, the process may include uploading the latest CV/resume, obtaining references, providing work examples, or creating other documents. The templates are the web pages and the checklist of items that company needs from candidates to apply for the job before they can click "send." Consider what updates to both process and templates will be needed.

## OUTLINE THE RETURN TO NORMALCY FOR THE TEAM

If you wish to make the return to normalcy simple, use these basic steps and reword as you see fit:

- Determine appropriate new **communication** standards you will implement.

- Relay communication standards to the team for optimal effectiveness.
- Reach out to all **stakeholders**, even the grouchy ones, to legitimize changes.
- Take the feedback and organize the data to observe trends and decision points.
- Review existing processes and consider what works and what might benefit from change.
- Take the time to **revise processes** that should have a permanent impact on the organization.
- With a multigenerational, multifunctional team, update older templates to meet the new process and generate **new templates** required.

Make reviewing and improving the processes that your team uses an ongoing part of your responsibility as a manager. These reviews can be done quarterly or annually. For many years, I've considered my role as a manager to put the employees' roadblocks as a first priority. My issues come second. You may have something that is important and urgent to address, but most days, my goal is to make sure my team, whether it was one employee, 20 employees, or more than 100, knew their role and how to move forward. Bolstering their efficiency improved the department's efficiency.

My general rules included two prongs: addressing the immediate improvement opportunities right away by using lessons learned (predictive) or sprint retrospective (agile) ideas to help the team grow, and having quarterly meetings with employees to identify how each could improve. Questions to ask during these meetings could include what tools to consider using to accelerate delivery or accuracy; how you can better support the employee; how they view their own performance; what steps they might take for future improvement; and what suggestions you have for them.

Don't wait for the next disruption. Be predictive in finding ways to adapt, adjust, and keep things running smoothly through the everyday waves of change.

Together, the new process and new templates, based on communication with all stakeholders, will introduce a new normal that optimizes your value delivery—no matter your department, business, industry, or market. [AQ](#)

*Brian E. Porter is the president of EEE Consulting LLC, based in Fort Myers, Fla. He is also the VP of strategic partnerships for MGCG in the Boston area and an AMA faculty member. Porter has more than 20 years of experience in training, teaching, project management, product development, engineering, safety listings, patent, business strategy and start-up management in computer sales and consumer products.*

# ADAPTABILITY AND RESILIENCE

## Lessons for Post-Pandemic Times

BY MORAG BARRETT AND ERIC SPENCER

There are only three things that are certain in life:  
death, taxes, and change.

To thrive in a change-heavy environment, you must build adaptability and resilience within your organization, and the added pressures of the pandemic and societal issues have made this even more necessary. As we navigated the past few months, we lost count of the number of articles that challenged us to pivot (aka adapt) or to develop our “stiff upper lip” (aka resilience), which didn’t really seem to be sustainable advice.

Adaptability and resilience are often treated as synonyms, but we’re not sure that’s the reality. There’s no doubt in our minds that they are intertwined, and the most successful of us have learned to develop and leverage both. Our experience working with leaders around the world is that adaptability and resilience is a team sport, not a solo endeavor.

In our discussions with leaders, we’ve explored the key difference between resilience and adaptability. The consensus from those conversations is that resilience refers to the capacity to quickly recover or “bounce back” from difficulties, while adaptability is the ability to adjust to those difficulties and create something positive from them.

Develop one without the other and you’ll have those short-term bursts of energy. We liken it to the energy required to run a sprint race. The risk is that as we respond to the challenges and stresses facing us with these intense moments of focus, there ultimately comes a crash of energy.

The “aha” moment for us was when we learned to hone both of these skills. It’s adaptability and resilience, not adaptability or resilience. The leaders we worked with to develop both capabilities also reported increased stamina for the longer-term marathon race, and less volatility between the peaks and valleys of their energy levels. Given all that we’re dealing with these days, reduced volatility and increased stamina sound like good news for everyone. Research shows that many of us are at a high risk for burnout, further underscoring the need to build resilience and adaptability in order to navigate work and life. The good news is that *anyone* can learn and adopt the necessary skills to become more adaptable and resilient.

### WHAT DOES RESILIENCE LOOK LIKE?

We use the terms “resilience” and “adaptability” all the time, but what does resilience actually *look* like? There are



certain characteristics of resilient people. Looking at the definition of these traits as outlined by Brad Waters in his 2013 *Psychology Today* post, “10 Traits of Emotionally Resilient People,” they can include knowing their boundaries, keeping good company, and having self-awareness. But these characteristics are not innate by any means. We’ve developed our own definitions of five of these characteristics:

**Self-awareness.** It’s easy to ignore the subtle cues our bodies and minds send us when we’re trying to simply get through the day. But being “blissfully unaware” is not a long-term strategy for success or well-being.

It’s important to recognize our psychological and physiological needs and know what we need or don’t need, and when to reach out for help. Ignoring the problem merely allows it to bubble under the surface, which can have negative impacts in many facets of life.

We’ve introduced an icebreaker to our programs. It’s simple, yet powerful. We ask everyone “what’s your number?” on the following scale: 1 = running on empty, and 10 = firing on all cylinders. We then give everyone two minutes to do something in the moment that will increase their score by +1. It can be a moment of mindfulness, refilling their coffee mug, or taking a much-needed bathroom break.

**Acceptance.** Stress is a thing, for all of us. Understanding that stress is an unavoidable part of work and life is a necessary step to navigate it more effectively. Rather than denying or repressing the negative emotions you’re feeling, which will ultimately blow up in your face, lean into

what you’re feeling (*don’t* give up and let it take over) and acknowledge it. This approach can allow you to recover more quickly and efficiently.

**Mindfulness.** Mindfulness is a popular construct right now. It’s practically a buzzword in today’s corporate speak. However, there’s some heavy science behind this which shows that mindfulness benefits us all. Laura G. Kiken and Natalie J. Shook’s 2011 article, “Looking Up: Mindfulness Increases Positive Judgments and Reduces Negativity Bias,” in *Sage Journals* reported that mindfulness is associated with judgment accuracy and insight-related problem solving. Essentially it enhances our cognitive flexibility. Being fully present in the moment, without any judgment or avoidance, can be an incredibly effective means of healing from stress and burnout and thus building resilience.

**Realism.** Resilient people stay realistic in their approaches to problems. When you acknowledge your own limits and consider all possibilities, you allow for a more realistic understanding of the situation at hand that isn’t infused with personal bias. It’s important to admit that you don’t have all the answers and know when to enlist the help of others. This doesn’t mean that we should censor ourselves when considering possibilities, though. Sometimes it takes that big, hairy, audacious idea that gets us to the best, most realistic option that we can actually implement.

**Mental agility.** Being able to think on your feet, reframe problems, and look at things from different perspectives, in real time, is a key skill. To be resilient, you must be able



“Resilience and adaptability are critical skills rooted in the survival of humankind. Our ability, as humans, to adapt quickly to unexpected challenges and stress, and even thrive in these situations, is central in our evolution story.”

to de-center stressors in order to manage them more effectively. This is not to say that denying or repressing stress is a good way to deal, but rather that pausing, acknowledging the situation from a neutral perspective, and then figuring out how to solve the problem allows for a more comprehensive understanding and effective solution. By taking a cognitive step back from stress, we can better manage our emotions and thus recover more easily from difficult scenarios. Mental agility helps us de-escalate, reframe, and choose our tack.

Returning to the “what’s your number?” activity, this provides the team leader with an opportunity to reframe and be mindful of how to lead the meeting. If everyone is at 3 (or less), consider rescheduling. If you have a mix, then give the benefit of the doubt to those who appear quieter than usual.

### **SO, WHY DOES THIS MATTER?**

Resilience and adaptability are critical skills rooted in the survival of humankind (that’s bold, we know). Our ability, as humans, to adapt quickly to unexpected challenges and stress, and even thrive in these situations, is central in our evolution story. Mindfully integrating these attitudes and

behaviors into the workplace will allow you and your team to avoid being dragged down by pressures, and instead turn them into opportunities.

Pre-pandemic workplaces were steeped in stress and anxiety. These days, it’s even worse. We know that this can ultimately have a negative impact on performance and cause higher levels of anxiety, depression, and burnout. The consequences can be astronomical—lower productivity, absenteeism, anxiety, and burnout, to name a few. In the crucible that has been 2020-2021, we’re seeing this in spades with our clients. Psychological resilience isn’t a “nice to have” anymore, it’s a “need to have.” If we, as leaders, want to take care of our employees, so that they can take care of us (and our organizations, our customers, our products and ideas), we’ve got to be dialed in and paying attention to *how* our folks are doing. Helping them to build these skills will make us all better off.

Beyond just “keeping the lights on,” there’s a pretty significant upside here. Resilience and adaptability are associated with higher levels of optimism, curiosity, and energy, any of which could change the game for all of us. Increased resilience and adaptability in an organization

can allow for more creative solutions to problems and can provide a cushion for the day-to-day stressors we may be experiencing. It seems that there is a time and place for rose-tinted glasses after all!

There are organizational benefits to building these skills as well. In their 2020 *Harvard Business Review* article “A Guide to Building a More Resilient Business,” the authors Martin Reeves and Kevin Whitaker list four specific benefits to resilience in the workplace.

- **Anticipation benefit**—the ability to quickly recognize threats
- **Impact benefit**—the capacity to better withstand the initial shock
- **Recovery speed benefit**—the ability to identify what needs to happen after the initial shock for the organization to recover and return to normal, thus rebounding from the shock quickly and effectively
- **Outcomes benefit**—the increased strength of the post-shock environment

We know what resilience and adaptability are, we now know why they matter, and we can point to specific benefits of building these capabilities in our organizations. So what now?

## HOW DO YOU ACTUALLY MAKE IT HAPPEN?

Clearly resilience and adaptability are important, but how do you actually put them into practice and build an environment that’s conducive to them? Here are four simple tactics to encourage resilience and adaptability within your organization:

**Cultivate compassion.** Being compassionate is perhaps one of the most effective ways to build positivity in the workplace. More positive emotions at work lead to more positive work relationships, as well as increased cooperation and collaboration. We’ve learned in our research at SkyeTeam that the more we know, trust, and like each other, the more likely we are to feel empathy, have each other’s backs, and keep each other safe. Connection and compassion are critical to what is called an “Ally Mindset” in *Cultivate: The Power of Winning Relationships* (Morag Barrett, River Grove Books, 2020).

**Find opportunity in adversity.** For some, this is much easier said than done—especially given the challenges of the last year. This is more than just “rubbing some dirt on it and getting back in the game.” This is an intentional choice. Rather than just trying to mitigate risk and restore things to “normal” following a difficult situation, try instead to adjust to these new realities and use them to your advantage.

We’ve seen this repeatedly throughout the pandemic. Those people (teams, organizations) that take an evolutionary approach are the folks that win. Waiting for things to return to normal is a doomed strategy. There is no “return to normal.”

There’s only a forward movement to what’s next. Hard times can give your company a competitive advantage as long as you are resilient, adaptive, and equipped to manage the organization through uncharted territory.

A leader we were coaching introduced a “ripples and joy” element to his meetings. He realized that his endless Zoom meetings had become focused on the work at hand and what needed to get done, and had overlooked the importance of how his team members were doing. He started to ask for (and share) examples of ripples—of the work that had moved forward, had a positive impact on others, or had positive feedback from others; and examples of joys—something that had made him smile either personally or professionally. Five minutes was all it took, and the results were almost instantaneous. The team relaxed, the banter returned (even on video calls), and the willingness of teammates to reach out to each other between calls to check in (not just because they needed something) increased.

**Reward cognitive diversity.** Creative solutions to problems are the cornerstone of a resilient workplace, and the different backgrounds, experiences, and personality preferences each employee brings are your greatest asset in reaching them. When you appreciate contrarians and ideas that rock the boat, members of your team will be more likely to come forward with new ideas and alternative ways of reaching solutions.

**Don’t count on stability.** Stability is the buggy whip of 2021. We all need to collectively pull a “Frozen” on this and just let it go. Part of the reason change is so jarring is that we expect stability as the norm, when this is simply not the case. Rapid, constant change is just normal these days. It’s Moore’s Law for the entire world. The rate of change in the world has been increasing at an exponential rate for years. Thinking that there is going to be a pause or some sort of respite from that change is a fool’s errand. Expect change as the default, rather than stability. You and your organization will be able to adjust more quickly and effectively, and everyone will be better for it.

The constant changes and occupational stress so many of us experience are often unavoidable, so it is imperative that we learn how to navigate them and adjust to situations where they arise. By implementing any or all of these strategies, you, your team, and your organization will be better equipped not only to deal with these challenges but to thrive in the challenging, high-stakes times we’re all trying to navigate. [AQ](#)

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# The Surprising Key to Getting the RETURN TO THE OFFICE RIGHT

BY SCOTT MAUTZ





# Yet another wave of change is upon us as we head toward the return-to-the-office phase of this foul pandemic.

While there is no standard answer as to what that will look like, everyone agrees on one thing: It means change. There's no going back to exactly the way things were before.

And there's one other certainty. Nothing can catalyze, or paralyze, an organization quite like change. It's a truth that has been continually reinforced over the past year in particular. One client I keynoted for pivoted brilliantly at the beginning of the pandemic, reinventing the categories it competes in, the services it offers, and how it offers them. Another shuttered its doors. For good.

Now, as we prepare to head back to the office in some form, reentry is mixed with reinvention and plenty of reservation. All ingredients for the dish that is never-ending change. And the key to success with the latest wave of change may surprise you. It's the same success driver with any wave of change, and it lies with the backbone of any organization: the middle manager. That's right, anyone who has a boss and is a boss, who must lead up, down, and across their organization.

Plain and simple, the change that needs to happen now simply won't be executed well without the mid-level players leading the way. It's the middle managers who are closest to top brass that pass down change, who are in the best position to help them formulate change, who might create change themselves, and who are closest to those below that must live the [often emotionally charged] change.

As we enter this next phase of dealing with the pandemic, it's the middle managers who must provide direction, carry themselves as strong change leaders, keep employees focused, and role-model resilience. I'll share some key steps here to help you do each of these things, drawing just a bit from my book *Leading from the Middle: A Playbook for Managers to Influence Up, Down, and Across the Organization*.

## PROVIDING DIRECTION

I interviewed/surveyed/focus grouped/studied thousands of successful middle managers and their employees for my new book. As we drilled down into the subject of change, I came across a startling fact. The No. 1 thing employees want from leaders in the face of change is clear direction. Yet only 15% say they get it. Ouch.

You can beat the percentages in this next pandemic work phase by following these three steps:

**Set a directional agenda.** You can't withhold direction-setting, waiting until you've had time to develop a fully baked,

long-term plan. People will expect direction immediately as you begin returning to the office. So start by setting a directional agenda that outlines the work that needs to be done promptly and why, with timelines and tasks, identified processes and structures, and so on.

It's about quickly fostering a sense of order and forward progress, not about setting the plan-of-all-plans in stone. In fact, you can reserve the right to change your mind on the nuances of the direction you're setting. That's why it's called a directional agenda.

But do share one, because inertia quickly leaves employees feeling rudderless, uncertain, and unsupported. They'll have difficulty focusing on anything other than what the change will require from them personally. In the absence of an agenda, they'll make assumptions—which helps no one.

**Set a vision.** The organization needs a North Star, a broader vision for how the changes brought about by the return to the office fit into a longer-term plan that will improve the organization and help it achieve its goals. It's about cementing a unity of effort, painting a compelling picture of a desired future state for everyone to rally around—getting the change story right.

That's right, something as seemingly mundane as returning to the office presents a great opportunity to tell a broader, grander, "change for the better" story.

Keep your vision simple, be clear on the benefits of the vision for the organization and the employees, and communicate it repeatedly.

**Anchor the organization.** Especially now, people need a steadying force in their life, an anchor to provide some sense of certainty. Provide that by highlighting what won't change as you return to the office, being clear on expectations, roles, and responsibilities as you return, being visible and available to your chain of command and employees as you lead the change, and celebrating victories along the way to foster feelings of success and self-belief.

## CARRYING YOURSELF AS A STRONG CHANGE LEADER

Leading in the face of change is like being a fish in a fishbowl—your every move is visible, all around, and people are watching, especially after being out-of-office for so long. Employees will be taking cues from the way leaders act in this return-to-the-office phase, so it's critical to role-model the attributes that will have the biggest positive ripple effect.

“Change wears everyone down, especially those who must lead it, and especially now. But if you don’t display resilience, employees won’t either.”



Not to worry. My research across a multitude of successful change leaders reveals a very specific pattern of how the best ones carry themselves in times of change. Think of “how to be” during change by considering the 5 Cs of Leading Change:

**Calm.** Emotions run high in times of change. Especially now. People try to resolve the associated uncertainty by making assumptions (often incorrect), further fueling emotion, agitation, and unproductiveness. Chaotic behavior from leaders throws gas on the fire.

Instead, be the calmest person in the room. Don’t jump to conclusions prematurely or make uninformed assumptions. Speak in a controlled tone and act with a steady, measured confidence. Doing so keeps everyone focused on what must be done versus what might happen.

**Candor.** Change creates doubt and fear. Honest communication creates certainty and eases fear, if done well. The key is to share information openly and truthfully, while striking a balance between reality and hope. Employees need the truth, but they also need reasons to feel optimistic.

**Clarity.** Change also creates confusion. Provide clarity in what you say, do, and intend. With what you say, be direct, specific, and concise. Before saying something, ask yourself one question: “Will this communication trigger the WENDY

response?” (What Exactly Now Do You mean?). This is not the ideal response. Asking this question forces precision in your communication, which is vital for clarity.

Also, be sure that what you do reinforces what you say. Employees are watching, and mixed messages here will confuse. And be transparent about your intentions, always. You can make a mistake of content, but never of intent. If people are unclear about your motive for doing something, trust evaporates.

**Concern.** Change elicits an emotional journey. Change in the middle of a horrific pandemic? More so. Show empathy and understanding for employees as they work through what the return to office and associated change mean for them professionally and personally. Acknowledge and ease their distress by reminding them they’re not alone in working through it.

**Courage.** Rarely is taking tiny, risk-free steps enough to successfully adapt to substantive change. Big change requires big thinking and bold moves. It requires perseverance and an understanding that missteps won’t bring you anywhere near as far backward as your progress has brought you forward—that’s why it’s called a misstep, not a mis-leap.

“Change is a lot to process and work through, especially in this case, so it’s understandable—but not acceptable from a business standpoint.”

## KEEPING EMPLOYEES FOCUSED

It’s common for employees to lose their focus during times of adversity and the change that comes with it. Change is a lot to process and work through, especially in this case, so it’s understandable—but not acceptable from a business standpoint. To refocus employees (and yourself), it’s best to keep things simple and follow the 3P Approach:

**Pragmatic implications.** Discuss with employees: “Given the change we’ve gone through or will go through, what are the pragmatic implications we must address?”

**Possibilities.** Discuss with employees: “Given the change we’ve gone through or will go through, what are the possibilities that present themselves because of the change?”

**Priorities.** Discuss with employees: “Given the change we’ve gone through or will go through, what are the priorities we must laser in on?” (Discuss whether they’re the same priorities as before or new ones.)

## ROLE-MODELING RESILIENCE

Many leaders say the single toughest thing about change is staying resilient. Change wears everyone down, especially those who must lead it, and especially now. But if you don’t display resilience, employees won’t either. Here are six powerful ways to be a resilience role model:

**Avoid victim mentality.** Playing the victim in the face of change—believing you have no control over outcomes, thinking you’ve been irreparably wronged, or being stuck in “It’s not fair”—is devastating because the underlying belief is “I’m powerless.” Learned helplessness and inaction follow. That is poisonous. Instead, believe that you can plow through associated challenges—you have before and will again.

**Find the agreeable adversity.** Change brings adversity, not all of which is disagreeable. As you return to the office, ask yourself these questions: “Where’s the good in this?”; “What possibilities does this present?”; and “How might learning and growth happen?”

As for the unpleasantness adversity brings, resilience comes from being pragmatic versus pessimistic. Realistically assess implications without exaggerating, and take the pragmatic actions needed. Key here is putting your energy toward problem solving versus emotional coping.

**Don’t fly solo.** Resilience is a group activity. Lean on your support network to help manage stress, solve challenges, diffuse tensions, and identify opportunities. Leaders say the biggest reason resilience breaks down during change is that they start feeling like they’re going it alone. You don’t have to.

**Let your anchor steady you.** Much as you anchor the organization when providing direction (discussed earlier), you must also anchor yourself. Uncertainty accompanying change drains your sense of control. You regain some control when you re-anchor by considering what *won’t* change with change—your values.

If I asked you to write down your three most closely held, non-negotiable values, could you? If you haven’t tried this exercise, do so. Keeping your values top of mind while upping your tolerance for ambiguity is a powerful duo for staying resilient.

**Remember the Attitude Anthem.** “Life is 10% what happens to you, 90% how you react to it.” That’s a quote from author Charles Swindoll, one I kept on my office door for daily doses of resilience. To practice that spirit here, ask yourself three questions when lamenting the impacts of change:

Will this change as we return to the office...

- weaken me to the point of ruin or make me stronger in some ways?
- cause irreparable damage, or be a setback I can recover from?
- cause others to truly doubt me or just me to doubt myself?

It’s in that 90%, how you react, that resilience lies.

**Remember the Gratitude Anthem.** “You are enough. You have enough.” That’s it. The return to office presents many challenges, but you have so much to be grateful for. Resilience comes from self-reflection.

So, middle-manager heroes, lead the charge back to the office with confidence and conviction. And remember that you’re not stuck in the middle—you have the chance to lead in every direction. [AQ](#)

*Scott Mautz is a keynote speaker and author. He’s a Procter & Gamble veteran who successfully ran several of the company’s largest multibillion-dollar businesses, an award-winning/bestselling author of books such as *Leading from the Middle: A Playbook for Managers to Influence Up, Down, and Across the Organization*, faculty at Indiana University’s Kelley School of Business for Executive Education, a former top Inc.com columnist, and a frequent national publication and podcast guest.*

# How Post-Pandemic Leaders Can Drive PERFORMANCE AND INNOVATION

BY ROB CROSS AND INGA CARBONI

Increasingly, organizations rely on networks of agile teams to get work done—a trend that will only intensify as we move into a hybrid, post-COVID world.



This transition will be difficult for leaders in part because they will need to manage collaboration without some of the structures they have grown used to—face-to-face interaction and co-location promoting serendipity, to name a few.

But other trends have also been emerging that require a new look at teams in the post-pandemic world. For example, employees are on many more teams—twice as many as they were five years ago—and teams are larger and more geographically dispersed than in the past. Research reported in *Creative Conspiracy* indicated that the average team size in U.S. companies in 2013 was 15. And while Katherine Klein of Wharton reported back in 2006 that the ideal team size is five people (and accepted wisdom these days is five to nine people), it is not unusual for individuals at present to find themselves on, or even leading, teams of 20 or more, many of whose members may be in different time zones and accessible mainly through electronic communication.

As people are put into more and bigger teams much more rapidly than ever before, we need new ways of driving results. Increasingly, researchers and practitioners are reconceptualizing teams as networks that need to form rapidly to produce needed results. This research is showing that the structure of internal relationships (social capital) contributes as much to team success as does the composition of the team (human capital).

To better understand the practices that yield performance in today's teams, we conducted 90-minute interviews with

more than 100 high-performing leaders in 20 different organizations. Each individual was identified as having successfully led multiple teams over at least 10 years. The organizations included a wide range of industries (for example, financial services, high tech, consulting, manufacturing, food services, hospitality) and ranged in size from several thousand to hundreds of thousands of employees. Here, we summarize what these leaders did to enable performance through collaboration.

## CULTIVATING INTERNAL TEAM COLLABORATION

We found that high-performing team leaders optimize network structures. In contrast to advice based on old models of team development, the leaders in our study did not focus excessively on team-building activities, nor did they limit their efforts to building strong one-on-one relationships with team members. Instead, they assessed and shaped the relationships among team members, purposefully redesigning the network structure to optimize it for team performance. More specifically, they manage the center, integrate the edge, minimize silos, and generate agility.

**Manage the center.** To manage the center, the leaders in our study took steps to prevent the people who are most centrally connected in the network from becoming overloaded with collaborative demands. Collaborative work (that is, time spent on phone calls, in virtual or face-to-face meetings, and on email or other collaborative technologies)

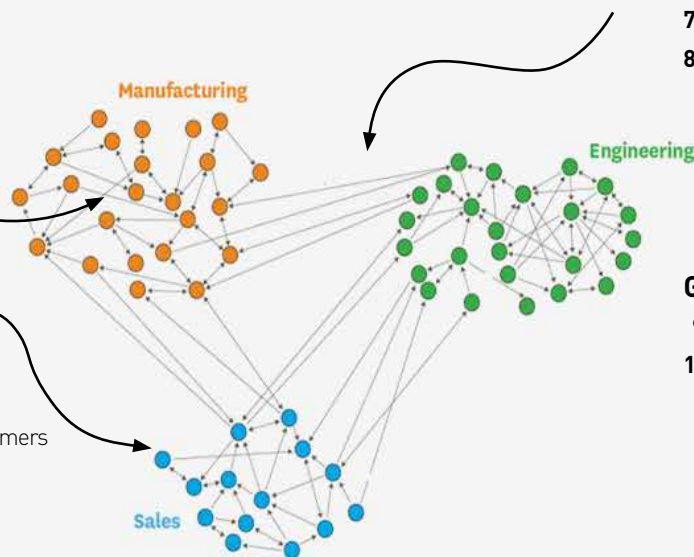
**Figure 1. Internal Structure**

### Manage the center

1. Prevent cliques
2. Identify/reward collaboration
3. Seek out influential members

### Integrate the edge

4. Integrate newcomers
5. Engage remote workers
6. Ensure availability of high performers



### Minimize silos

7. Facilitate connectivity
8. Prevent cliques/subgroups

### Generate agility

9. Engage key contributors
10. Reduce overload

# Appendix

## INSTRUCTIONS

**STEP 1:** Think about a team of which you are currently a member. Choose one that matters to you, one that you really care about. You don't have to be the formal leader. Reflect on the current functioning of the team.

**STEP 2:** Go through the tool below to determine which practices describe your team and which do not. Identify one practice that could have a significant and positive impact on your team's performance.

## INTERNAL NETWORK STRUCTURE

A team's internal network structure refers to the network of relationships within the team. High-performing team leaders optimize relationship structures and cultivate effective networks that replicate patterns of high performance. In contrast to following advice based on old models of team development, the leaders in our study assessed and shaped the relationships among team members, purposefully redesigning the network structure to optimize it for team performance.

Practice	Why This Matters	What You Can Do
We ensure that people or roles within the group do not become so overloaded with collaborative demands that they are unable to support their colleagues in a timely fashion.	Being overloaded can cause lost opportunities as well as excessive employee time and effort spent in trying to obtain information or decision approvals; it also can result in burnout and attrition.	Simple network analysis techniques can quickly reveal people at risk for collaborative overload. Take 10 minutes to draw the network map of your team and who turns to whom for information to get work done. Have two or three teammates review the diagram and make additions as needed. Use this information to distribute collaborative demand more equitably.
We identify and reward/acknowledge employees who engage in collaborative behaviors that make their colleagues more effective.	"Hidden stars" who have a substantial impact on team effectiveness and efficiency may be unrecognized and unappreciated, increasing disengagement and attrition.	Publicly acknowledge and celebrate collaborative behaviors to promote engagement and signal the importance of collaboration, e.g., set a regular reminder to spend 30 minutes once a week to thank a small number of people for their efforts in the way that means the most to each person—handwritten note, email with cc'ing of partners, private conversation, or recognition of a contribution during a team meeting.
We seek out influential team members to promote alignment and team engagement.	Influencers' insider knowledge and credibility can facilitate alignment and engagement efforts.	Invest time to locate and proactively engage negative opinion leaders. The crafting of mutual wins early can pay off substantially over time.
We rapidly integrate newcomers.	The turnover rate among newcomers is high and productivity is low until they integrate.	Assign newcomers a "buddy" who is respected and well connected in the network.

is rarely evenly distributed. Very often, a small set of people—leaders, experts, long-tenured colleagues, or colleagues with whom others enjoy interacting—absorb a much higher volume of collaborative work than do others. Typically, 3% to 5% of the people account for 20% to 35% of the value-added relationships—collaborations that generate sales, efficiency gains, key innovations, or other forms of value.

This means that relatively few employees have a substantial and quantifiable impact on performance, yet, often, they are not managed any differently than those who do not make comparable contributions. All overwhelmed employees suffer due to the volume and diversity of demands; their work quality often falls off, they are at much greater risk for burnout, and they are far more likely to leave the organization.

The leaders in our study engage in three practices and a number of actions to manage the center of their teams. These leaders ensure that individuals, in general, or those in certain roles within the group do not become so overloaded with collaborative demands that they are unable to support their colleagues in a timely fashion; they identify and reward/acknowledge employees who engage in collaborative behaviors that make their colleagues more effective; and they seek out influential team members to promote alignment and team engagement.

Simple network analysis techniques can quickly reveal people at risk for collaborative overload. Take 10 minutes to draw the network map of your team, and who turns to whom for information to get work done. Have two or three

We proactively engage remote and virtual group members to ensure integration.	These group members may otherwise become disengaged or feel disenfranchised.	Create short forums for serendipitous interactions, e.g., institute “watercooler Wednesdays” in which all team members can join an IM group, such as WhatsApp, for informal conversations about binge-worthy shows or holiday shopping.
We ensure that subject-matter experts and high performers are available to help their colleagues in a timely manner.	Top talent often migrates to the fringe of the network if overly focused on individual contribution, lowering the value that they could offer the team.	Increase collaborative accessibility to high performers by having them serve as technical consultants to other teams. This enhances their ability to share expertise with others, provides recognition of value, and compels them to work more collaboratively with their colleagues.
We facilitate connectivity at specific silos across functional lines, physical distance, hierarchical levels, demographics, or expertise domains, where collaboration is critical to performance.	Collaborative breakdowns diminish performance and innovation.	Locate efficiency losses for targeted action, e.g., set up weekly check-in meetings with people whose roles require them to work across boundaries to help them understand when and how to include others earlier in the process (e.g., “Whom have you talked with about the project?” “Whom have you run ideas by?”).
We ensure that cliques or subgroups do not form within the team in ways that diminish alignment, performance, or engagement.	Excessive coordination costs and friction/ misalignment between subgroups slow productivity. They also can drive disengagement and attrition or stifle desired innovation if a core group becomes too dominant.	Prevent the formation of an “inner circle” subgroup by purposefully inviting quieter voices into the conversation and by giving reluctant but capable members added responsibilities.
We assess and streamline collaborative activities within the team to promote efficiency and engagement.	People spend an average of 85% of their workweek in collaborative activities, potentially leading to burnout and attrition.	Employ formal or informal approaches to analyzing collaborative time demands, such as plotting a grid of work streams and standing meetings that are employed to coordinate work. Then, reconsider the purpose, agenda, and required participation in each meeting.
We cultivate diversity in network interactions to promote team agility and innovation.	A lack of diversity promotes insular thinking and reduces innovation.	Leverage moments of connection—however brief—thoughtfully and connect with people who represent different subcultures (e.g., chat for a minute or two with someone at the company café, ask someone about his or her weekend when a meeting ends early).

teammates review the diagram and make additions as needed. Use this information to distribute collaborative demand more equitably.

You should publicly acknowledge and celebrate collaborative behaviors to promote engagement and signal the importance of collaboration. For example, set a regular reminder to spend 30 minutes once a week to thank a small number of people for their efforts in the way that means the most to each person, such as a handwritten note, an email with cc’ing of partners, a private conversation, or recognition of that individual’s contribution during a team meeting. And you should invest time to locate and proactively engage negative opinion leaders. Crafting mutual wins early can pay off substantially over time.

**Integrate the edge.** Integrating the edges of a team’s network structure means pulling in people who are not fully included in the team’s interactions. Frequently this means newcomers and remote workers. But surprisingly, we also find that 20% to 30% of the employees considered as top talent—those on top talent lists or in the top 20% performance category—migrate to the fringe of the network. Often, these are people who have learned how to meet their revenue or other performance management objectives without making much of a contribution to their colleagues’ efforts.

To integrate the edges of their teams, the leaders in our study rapidly integrate newcomers, proactively engage remote and virtual group members to ensure integration, create short forums for serendipitous interactions, and ensure that

“To minimize silos, the leaders in our study facilitated connectivity at specific silos across functional lines, physical distance, hierarchical levels, demographics, or expertise domains where collaboration is critical to performance.”



subject-matter experts and high performers are available to help their colleagues in a timely manner.

To integrate newcomers, assign them a “buddy” who is respected and well connected in the network. One way to engage remote and virtual team members is by instituting events such as “watercooler Wednesdays” in which all team members can join an instant message group, such as WhatsApp, for informal conversations about binge-worthy shows or holiday shopping. And to increase collaborative accessibility to high performers, have them serve as technical consultants.

**Minimize silos.** A big part of a leader’s work is minimizing silos. Collaborative breakdowns diminish performance and innovation and have various causes. In one case, it might be poor communication technology. In another, it might be that none of the groups that should be working together knows what expertise exists in the other groups or understands how that expertise can support their work. Misaligned incentive schemes also can foster parochial behaviors, as can leaders who do not like each other. Companies often try to minimize silos by launching cultural change programs, formal reorganizations, or new collaborative technologies, but these broad solutions often do not address the issues that impede collaboration at crucial network junctures.

To minimize silos, the leaders in our study facilitated connectivity at specific silos across functional lines, physical distance, hierarchical levels, demographics, or expertise domains where collaboration is critical to performance. They also ensured that cliques or subgroups do not form within the team in ways that diminish alignment, performance, or engagement.

We suggest that leaders locate efficiency losses for targeted action by setting up weekly check-in meetings with people whose role requires them to work across boundaries to help them understand when and how to include others earlier in the process. And to prevent the formation of an “inner circle” subgroup, purposefully invite quieter voices into the conversation and force reluctant but capable members to take on added responsibilities.

**Generate agility.** Generating agility encourages team members to efficiently and adaptively work together in ways that respond to environmental demands. In a recent Korn Ferry survey that queried more than 750 CEOs worldwide about how their companies could succeed during the pandemic, one in four stated that “breaking down hierarchies and building agility” was paramount. Agility requires team members to collaborate rapidly and to easily share their sometimes differing perspectives on how best to respond to an environmental demand.

To boost their teams’ agility, the leaders in our study assess and streamline collaborative activities within the team to promote efficiency and engagement and cultivate diversity in network interactions to promote team agility and innovation. We suggest that you employ formal or informal approaches to analyzing collaborative time demands, such as plotting a grid of work streams and standing meetings that are employed to coordinate work. Then, reconsider the purpose, agenda, and required participation in each meeting. And you should leverage moments of connection—however brief—with people who represent different subcultures. This can be done by chatting for a minute or two with someone at the company café or asking someone about his or her weekend when a meeting ends early.

Team performance in a post-COVID world will require more intentional cultivation of networks. Rather than leading with available tools—video calls and instant messaging—more successful leaders will necessarily need to reflect on the points in the network they are trying to influence. Taking more targeted actions to promote desired collaboration will both yield performance and keep leaders and employees from burning out. [AQ](#)

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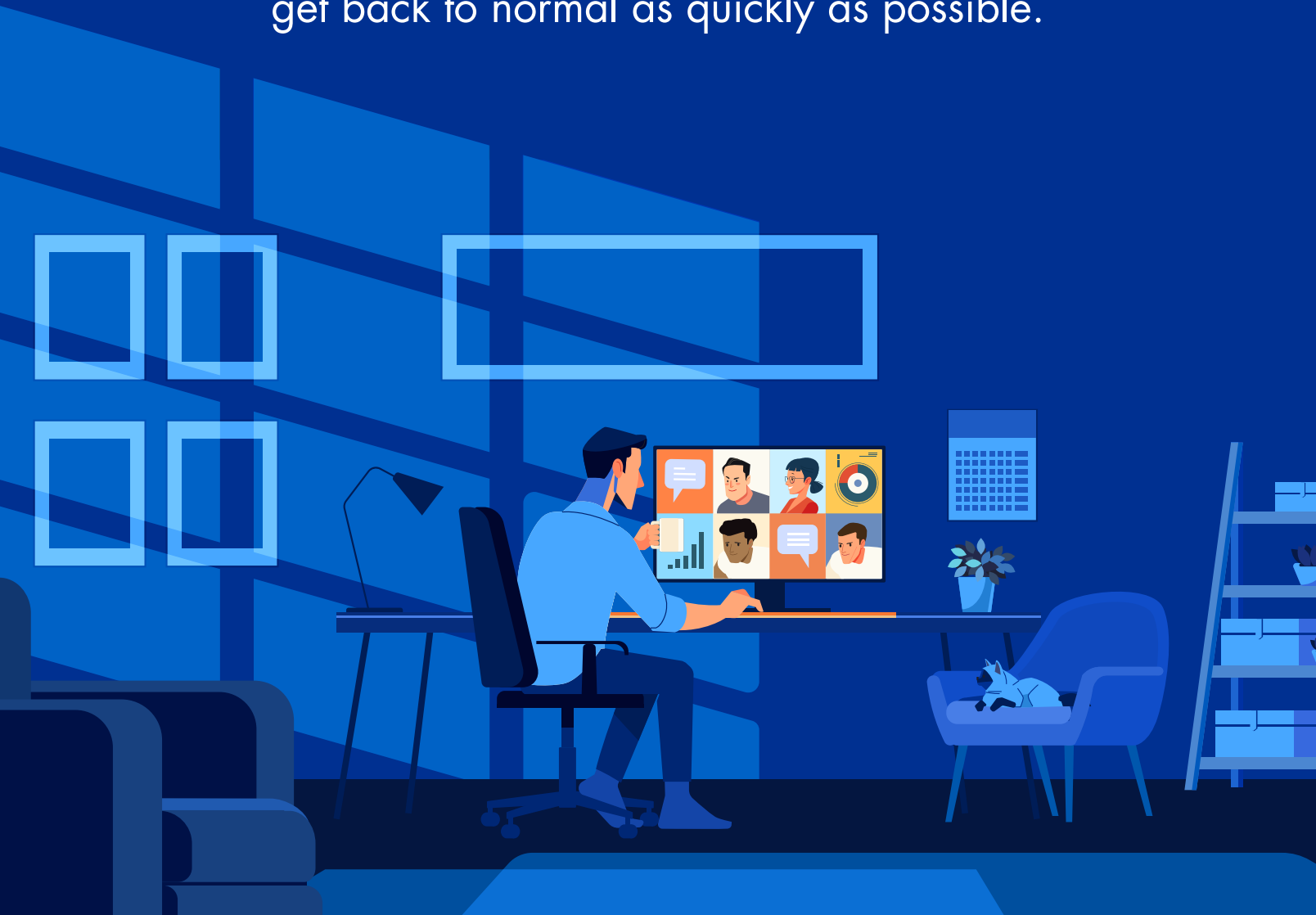
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# Not Everyone Wants to Return to **NORMAL**

BY MINH HUA

As more people receive vaccinations and workplaces start to reopen, the unsaid assumption is that everyone wants to get back to normal as quickly as possible.





“Success with one movement searching for inclusion, equity, and belonging creates progress for the others. An organization that can create the right environment for people to thrive has a competitive advantage in the talent market.”

Not true. Great conversations are happening about a new normal with consumer habits and remote work, but noticeably absent is a conversation about a better normal around how we relate to each other. The myriad social movements happening today have major implications for the world of work, and that’s a conversation members of American Management Association should be having. As we think about the future of work and post-pandemic normalcy, keep in mind that not everyone wants to go back to the way it was.

## WORKPLACE IMPLICATIONS AMID SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

“F--- Racism” read a cardboard sign made from a ubiquitous Amazon box. “Stop Violence Against Women!” another sign exclaimed. An assortment of banners and signage dotted the landscape at a Stop Asian Hate rally in Seattle. A little boy, maybe seven years old, held one that read, “Not Invisible.”

The pandemic has revealed long-standing prejudices against Asians. Phrases like the “China virus” and “kung flu” have become beacons of hate. In 2020, the number of anti-Asian hate crimes reported to the police increased 149%, while all other hate crimes dropped by 7%. Some have pointed out the percentage increase is off a low base, implying it’s not that big of a deal. The criticism is logical, but it lacks understanding. In statistics, two diverging lines mean something is going on. In sociology, bad behavior growing exponentially represents an emerging threat that can get out of control—unless we bend the trajectory.

Through neuroscience, we know the average person is bombarded with 34 gigabytes of information each day. Hence, an event with shock value is needed to capture the collective attention of society. The Harvey Weinstein disgrace and the George Floyd murder brought much-needed media attention to the Me Too and the Black Lives Matter movements. That’s what the Atlanta shooting did for Stop Asian Hate. With all three movements, the event that drove worldwide media attention was tragic, but not the whole story. The rest of the story is about diversifying the image of good that our children see; it’s about fighting racism, misogyny, and xenophobia; it’s about supporting socioeconomic mobility for all; and it’s about feeling safe.

There are many intersections among the various movements happening in our society today. Success with one movement searching for inclusion, equity, and belonging creates progress for the others. An organization that can create the right environment for people to thrive has a competitive advantage in the talent market. In this article, I focus on the Asian experience because I have lived it and because it’s one of the least understood.

## WHY SHOULD BUSINESS LEADERS CARE?

Business leaders should care because it matters to their customers and workforce. There are 7.9 billion people on our planet. Sixty percent of the world’s population lives on a continent called Asia. Over a hundred million people of Asian heritage live outside of Asia. The data is clear for global companies: Asians are the largest pool of customers and talent in the world.

In the United States, the numbers are just as clear if not blunt. According to the 2019 Census, people of color make up 40% of the population. Asians made up 5.6% of the population and grew 81% between 2000 and 2019. According to a February 2021 report by CNN that quoted a Nielsen study, the collective buying power of the Asian community was on track to reach \$1.2 trillion by 2022 before COVID-19 hit these shores, at a growth rate of 314%. A May 7, 2020 report by the Pew Research Center states that Asians are the fastest-growing racial group in the U.S. electorate. Exponential growth is worth paying attention to.

Business leaders should also care because the geopolitical landscape is changing. China will become the world’s largest economy by 2028 and is already publicly challenging U.S. leadership on the world stage. Discerning the actions and rhetoric of the “government of China” from the “Chinese people” will be important in fighting hate. The Global Trends 2040 report, produced by the Strategic Futures Group of the National Intelligence Council, predicts “a more contested world” and describes an emerging dynamic of “disillusioned, informed and divided” societies. Tension across and within communities will continue to grow. An organization with a strong culture of inclusion and belonging will be best positioned to navigate the coming turbulence.

Ultimately, business leaders should care because of their north star. It just so happens that caring and taking proactive actions now make a whole lot of business sense.

## WHAT SHOULD YOU KNOW ABOUT THE ASIAN EXPERIENCE?

Start by reading about the “model minority myth” that perpetuates the view of Asians as successful, docile, and without needs deserving societal concern. The result of this myth is a group of people who suffer from prejudice and then suffer again when left out of the conversation on diversity, equity, and inclusion. For instance, a 2020 study by the Ascend Foundation found Asians to be “the only racial group to have a professional workforce representation that roughly doubles their representation in the underlying population.” That sounds great until you look at the details: “Asians and Blacks are the least likely to be executives,” concluded the same study.

“Women have a glass ceiling; Asians face a bamboo ceiling. It’s there clearly in the data,” said Jane Hyun, author of the groundbreaking book *Breaking the Bamboo Ceiling: Career Strategies for Asians* (Harper Business, 2006). “Asian women have to deal with both.”

Meanwhile, the *Harvard Business Review* reported a 19-page diversity and inclusion report from a prominent Silicon Valley company that “never specifically [addresses] Asian Americans.” In a moment of poetic irony, the company’s chief diversity and inclusion officer stated, “If you do not intentionally include, you will unintentionally exclude.”

Some critics have cited numbers showing Asians as overrepresented in the workforce, implying Asians are not systemically marginalized. The numeric reference is correct but lacks empathy. “Income inequality in the U.S. is rising most rapidly among Asians,” said a Pew Research Center report. An oft-cited poll from Harvard School of Public Health reported 37% of Asians had experienced serious financial problems during the pandemic, compared with 72% of Latinos and 60% of Blacks. The headline statistic suggests Asians are doing well until one gets into the details: The survey was conducted by phone in English or Spanish, missing the poorest parts of the Asian community.

## TIME TO ADDRESS MICROAGGRESSIONS

Recognize that the broader point of the movement isn’t just about pandemic-related violence. The movement is about giving voice to a group of people, and it’s about a desire to belong. The message that should be heard is that Asians suffer from inequity, Asians suffer from microaggressions, and Asians are tired of being taken for granted. The suffering did not begin in 2020.

The term “microaggression” was coined in 1970 by Harvard psychiatrist Chester Pierce to describe the indignities that

“People who live in Asia don’t often think of themselves as Asians until they leave the continent, much like Europeans think of themselves as French or Italian or Swedish until they leave the continent.”

occur through brief, ordinary exchanges. Microaggressions do not have to be intentional or ill-willed to give off the signal that you are different, and not in a better way.

Of special note is the intersection of race and gender. “My dad gets verbally harassed, but my mom gets fetishized,” said Chloe Kim in an ESPN interview. Kim is the youngest woman ever to win an Olympic Gold Medal. “When I’m out with my mom, she gets catcalled. Even as a kid, I got nasty messages from grown men who were fetishizing me.” Formal data on the intersection of race and gender are still emerging—but the anecdotes from Asian women, Black women, and Latinx women are alarming.

A final point on the Asian experience: It is not homogeneous. There are more than 48 countries and 2,300 languages from which Asian heritage is derived. What creates the Asian community is a set of attitudes and behaviors directed toward them. People who live in Asia don’t often think of themselves as Asians until they leave the continent, much like Europeans think of themselves as French or Italian or Swedish until they leave the continent.

## WHAT CAN BUSINESS LEADERS DO TODAY?

First, go discover for yourself. The discovery journey starts with being self-aware of your biases. We all have them. Do a web search for articles and videos created by Asians about Asians to build your knowledge base. If you are an executive, hold listening sessions with your colleagues. If you don’t have access to listening sessions, search #StopAsianHate on LinkedIn and join one of the many online meetings. Your discovery journey will take you to a place where you can authentically acknowledge the lived experiences and trauma that are carried in and out of the workplace.

Don’t limit your discovery to the workplace. Ask your Asian friends about their perspective. With a bit of luck, you’ll find yourself in an eye-opening, raw conversation. Maybe land an invite to an Asian home for dinner. If you find yourself being

served chicken butter masala or General Tsao's chicken, know that your host is seriously over-accommodating you.

Second, show you care. Pronouncing someone's name is a good start and as basic as it gets when it comes to identity and dignity. If you are not sure how to pronounce someone's name, that's understandable. Show a little humility upfront and let the person know you want to learn.

Check in with your colleagues to connect on a more personal level. "How are you" is overused and has lost much of its rapport-building power. A better approach is to share something about yourself and let conversational reciprocity flow. If you are a people leader, create time for all your team members to practice self-care, and be sure to load-balance work. Avoid the temptation to assume your Asian employee is robotic: hardworking, without a life, grateful to be there.

Third, practice inclusion. Exercise your influence to broaden the definition of what leadership looks and sounds like at your company. A 2014 study by Seval Gündemir et al. found an implicit pro-White leadership bias. Both White and minority participants reacted faster when White names and leadership traits were paired (compared to ethnic names and leadership traits). If one's mental image of a leader is White, it has implications for how leadership is thought about, discussed, and selected.

In a bit of good news, Gündemir et al. noted that "leadership bias can be weakened when situational cues increase the salience of a dual identity." Situational cues can range from speaking up about the importance of diversity, providing unconscious bias training, and having a diverse set of leaders and role models in a company.

Your company probably has a diversity plan—advocate to have it include all impacted or marginalized communities. Advocate for it to go beyond diversity (who is in the room) and encompass inclusion (behaviors), equity (fairness), and belonging (emotional outcome). According to Hyun, "How are you measuring the success of your diversity initiatives? Does it include the needs and perspectives of the Asian experience? If not, your diversity plans are leaving a lot of people out."

It's important to note that the wrong takeaway is to try to stack rank communities—which group feels more pain, which needs more help, which is more important. Those are false choices. Diversity plans and metrics should include all marginalized and underrepresented groups.

## IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS, WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER

My daily walk takes me from Lenora Street to South Lake Union, Seattle. It's such a well-worn path that some of the homeless in the community started to recognize me. One sent me his resume. During the height of pandemic fear, almost everyone I encountered crossed the street while

approaching or created a lot of distance between them and me. The thought of whether my Asian face influenced some of the separations crossed my mind, but I couldn't make that conclusion. Once, while standing at a crosswalk waiting for the pedestrian signal, I sneezed in my mask and two people—standing about ten feet away—looked horrified. Again, I could not make any conclusions.

One day in late 2020, a stranger yelled at me, encroached into my personal space, and threatened to hurt me physically. His angry rant cited kung flu and Bruce Lee. That was Asian hate.

Years ago, while living in a large city on the East Coast, I was told twice: "Go back to your country." The first time I was in my car and the person didn't like my driving. The second time, I was standing at a crosswalk when a van full of police officers drove by, and one yelled, "Go back to your country!" The fact that he was comfortable enough to do that, not in secret, but in daylight and among his fellow officers, taught me something that would later help me better understand why Black Lives Matter is an important thing to say. In retrospect, the fact that it never occurred to me to complain or file a police report—until someone who read a draft of this article asked—told me something about how not abnormal that was in my own lived experience.

My cousin is a police officer just outside of Atlanta. I believe the vast majority of police officers are honorable public servants. I wish I knew the name of that officer who wanted me to leave my country. I would invite him to my mother's home for dinner—she makes a heartwarming bowl of pho. We could eat together and laugh together.

Marginalized groups—such as the Abilities, Asian, Black, Latinx, LGBTQ+, Women, and the intersectional communities—cannot create sustained change without each other's support. "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained," said Audre Lorde, a self-described Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, and poet.

Fighting racism, misogyny, and xenophobia cannot be achieved without allies. "We stand with our neighbors" read a sign at the Stop Asian Hate rally in Seattle. That sign was held by a White woman, accompanied by her White husband and their two kids.

The United States is an amazing country. Planet Earth is a miracle. We are stronger together. [AQ](#)

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# The Way Back

## Core Values Illuminate the Path

BY MARK W. WILLIAMS

For business leaders willing to learn, there have been a lot of lessons in the past 12 months.

Chief among those lessons is the value of adaptability in the face of change. The best managers are those who can adapt to change on the fly. That has been true in the most challenging days of the coronavirus pandemic, and it will continue to be the case as we recover and move forward.

When facing uncertainty, whether it's the current pandemic reality or another crisis, your focus should be on the well-being of those you are leading. I've faced a number of crises as a business leader (the pandemic and the Great Recession in 2007 being the primary examples), as well as many less challenging but still difficult times in between. In all of these times of turmoil, the well-being of my employees and their families has always been the primary concern around which I have made business decisions.

When your workers are struggling with uncertainty and confusion, it doesn't put them in a good position to serve your business or your customers well. Effective managers and leaders should always recognize that their role is to inspire, encourage, and motivate their employees, through good times and bad. So how can business leaders make that happen in the current pandemic and eventual recovery?

Ultimately, it boils down to having a unified vision that everyone in the company has fully bought into. When your organization has that vision, clearly communicated to and understood by everyone working there, you'll find that the impact reverberates through all aspects of your business.

“When you have everyone in the organization on board and pulling together in alignment with your core values, you have a much better chance of success, whether you’re executing on your annual plan or attempting to navigate the road back from the pandemic.”

### WHAT ARE YOUR CORE VALUES?

At the highest level, this means you need to step back and identify your organization’s core values. These are the guiding principles for the organization, and they should inform every decision you make. For example, one of the core values at my company is teamwork. This goes back to my belief that I must make business decisions that prioritize my employees’ well-being; otherwise, I am neither being a good member of my organizational team nor setting them up for success.

To me, teamwork isn’t just doing my fair share of work on a project. It means actively listening to my employees and their needs, doing what is necessary to address their concerns, and removing roadblocks from their path. That gives them the freedom, and peace of mind, to tackle their day-to-day tasks most effectively. That sort of teamwork is impossible without intentional communication.

### TRANSPARENCY IS PARAMOUNT

How does this apply in our current pandemic-stressed reality? As much as it’s possible and appropriate, I believe in 100% transparency. When you sugarcoat the hard truths facing your organization and team, it can result in confusion. The best approach for managers and business leaders is to communicate consistently, clearly, and transparently.

When COVID-19 caused my company to abruptly shift to remote work, we gave people a clear plan to follow to get set up. In the year since then, we’ve continued to be clear and precise about what our plan is and the expectations of our leadership surrounding working from home versus in the office. With the economy continuing to be in flux and our business seeing ongoing impacts from the pandemic, I’ve chosen to be transparent about our financial situation and about new opportunities that have presented themselves.

### MAKE SURE COMMUNICATION IS OPEN

I look for ways to encourage our employees, emphasizing what we do, why we do it, and why we’re not going anywhere. And the need for communication cuts both ways. I’ve increased opportunities for employees to express their

concerns, needs, fears, and thoughts with myself and other managers through virtual chat times. Especially during turbulent times, people want to be heard, so it’s crucial to give them clear channels to express themselves.

A leader needs to be available and present for his or her people. Whether you’re leading a Fortune 500 company, a mom-and-pop store, or any other kind of business, let workers know that you’re listening to their concerns and that you take them seriously. During troubled times, in addition to transparency, availability and authenticity are two keys to engaging and inspiring the people you lead. When you solicit feedback from your employees (and customers) and then listen intentionally to their responses, you will breed trust and confidence in your leadership.

When you have everyone in the organization on board and pulling together in alignment with your core values, you have a much better chance of success, whether you’re executing on your annual plan or attempting to navigate the road back from the pandemic. And if you haven’t established your organizational core values before, now is the best time to fix that.

### SETTING GOALS

And that brings us to the value, and necessity, of setting goals. I usually recommend going through a goal-setting process on an annual basis, with quarterly check-ins and revisions. With the unpredictability of the last 12 months (and into the future), you’ll likely find benefits in setting goals that can be reviewed and adjusted a little more fluidly.

When you’re setting goals, make sure they always tie back to the core values you’ve established for the company. In the pandemic, we’ve all had to make some hard decisions, and we will continue to face challenges through the end of the pandemic and in the recovery process. But if you’ve gone through the effort of building trust and getting buy-in from your employees, you don’t want to throw it out the window in the name of some short-term gains during a challenging season.

Once you’ve set your goals, especially during any sort of crisis, it’s so important to communicate them. Just like your core values, make your goals clear and ensure



understanding across your team or organization. People need to know what they are working toward, and why. If you can share the purpose behind each goal and get employees to see how they support the core values, they are more likely to become cheerleaders in meeting those goals. And when challenges arise or you fail to meet a goal, own up to it. Let your employees know what's going on and invite them into the process of assessing what went wrong and figuring out where to go next.

After all, your people can offer significant value to you and your company. We've all been forced to pivot during the pandemic, and you may have employees who have discovered new strengths you can tap into. The most effective leaders set their goals not only on the basis of their balance sheets but also with their resources in mind. As clichéd as it might be to say, your people are one of your most important resources. As much as you can, bring them into the process as you set and adjust goals, especially during times of uncertainty. You may be surprised by the benefits you'll discover.

This relies, again, on clear and effective communication between managers and their employees. Business leaders can set the structure and expectations for the overall company, but if they're not in direct communication with everyone in the organization, they need to rely on layers of management to carry messaging from the top down, as well as from the bottom back up.

## THE VALUE OF MANAGERS

Skilled managers can drive a company's vision and business goals forward, despite constant change and bumps in the road. Whether or not individual contributors understand how their efforts impact the company's ability to meet its goals, and whether or not they are in alignment with the core values, is dependent on their managers understanding and communicating those things to them. And for business leaders who are focused more on the big picture of the company's overall direction, there is a necessary reliance on team managers to be the eyes on the ground—seeing what's working, what's missing the mark, and where there needs to be a pivot.

Effective and well-trained managers can make sure that happens, and they can ensure success even in times of constant change. The pandemic may be the most significant crisis your company has ever faced, but it surely isn't the only one. During challenging times in the past, whether they involved missing financial targets or dealing with underperforming employees, you have likely relied on managers to be true leaders, balancing the needs of the organization with the needs of their employees.

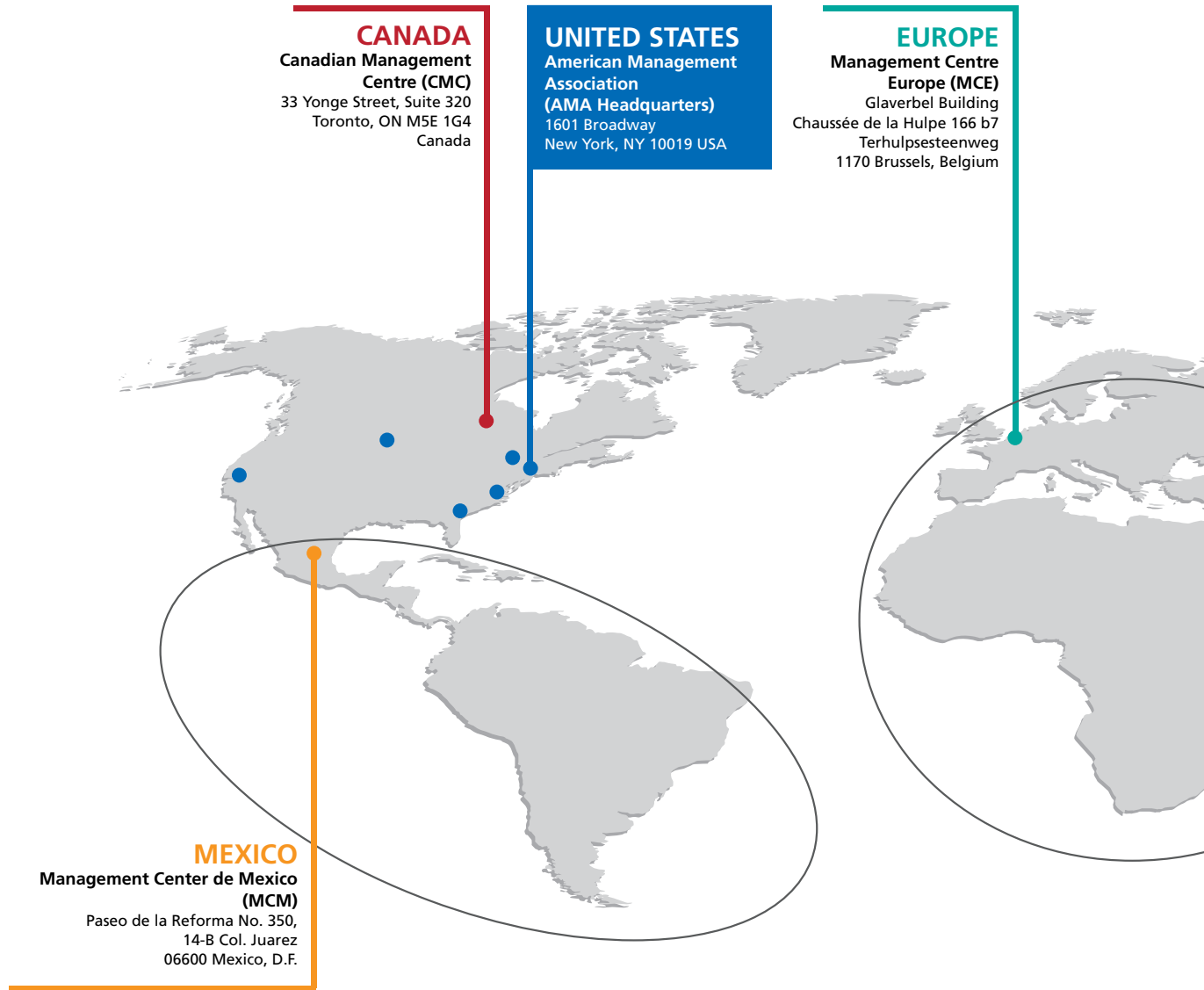
Right now, it's important for managers at any level to be patient. That can be difficult to do, even more so in times of turbulence, but a patient attitude flows from the top down and can help alleviate stress across the board. That goes for dealing with people and in decision making as well.

In challenging times, it may be tempting to make knee-jerk decisions and adjustments, but that will likely result in poor choices being made. Managers and business leaders must take the time to weigh all relevant factors, from broad data sources, before coming to a conclusion—although still in a timely fashion. But if your managers are working to meet clear goals, flowing out of understood core values, and have established channels of communication and trust with their employees, your organization will be well situated to handle the constant change of the ongoing pandemic and the uncertainty of the recovery process.

I'll leave you with one final thought: Don't overlook the value of levity. Finding the positive in any situation and bringing laughter into even the darkest day will go a long way within your organization. Look for ways to remind people that times won't always be so hard. And if you've established a basis of trust within the organization, built on adherence to and application of your core values, you'll help employees weather whatever the day may bring. [AQ](#)

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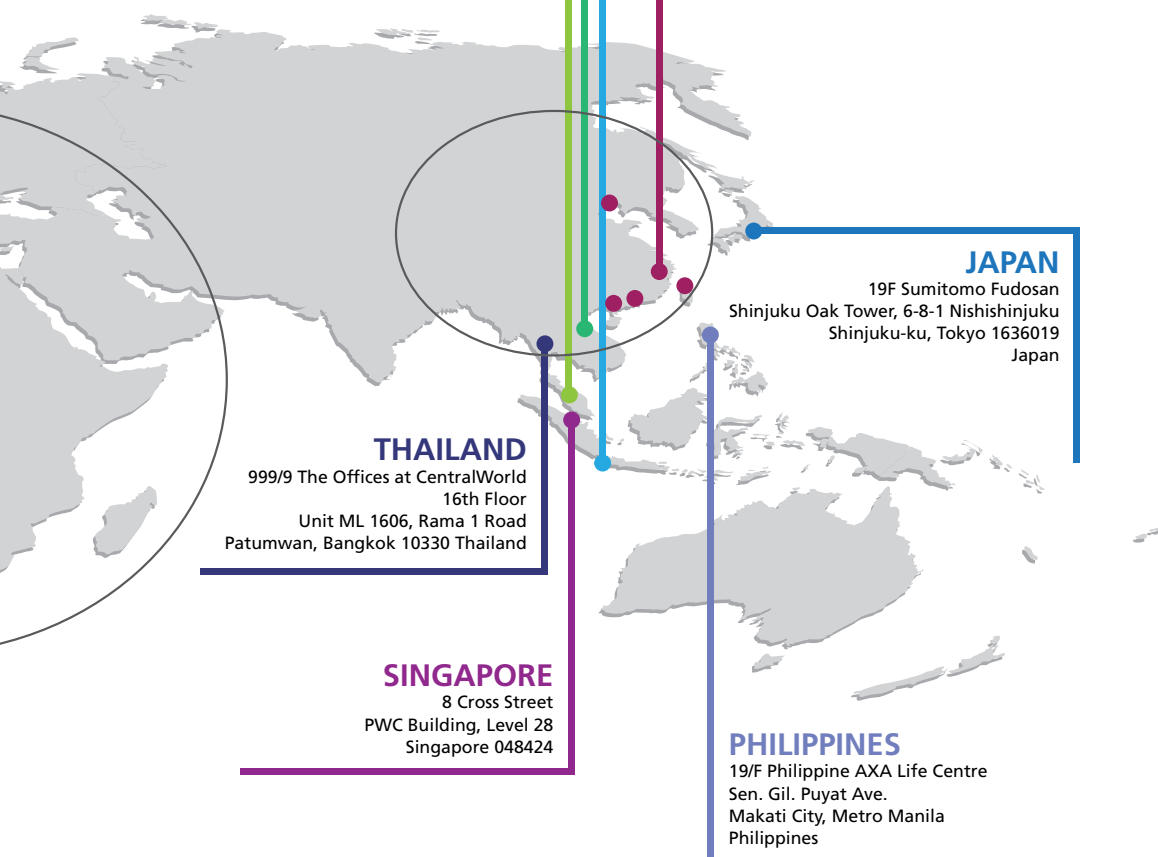


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# How to Lead Through the Pandemic and the RECOVERY PHASE

BY TOMAS CHAMORRO-PREMUZIC

Among the wide range of fascinating insights from the 100-year-old science of leadership, perhaps none are as uncomfortable as the notion of a significant gap between the qualities that propel people into leadership roles and those that are actually needed to be an effective leader.

As I highlighted in my last book, *Why Do So Many Incompetent Men Become Leaders? (And How to Fix It)* (Harvard Business Review, 2019), this gap also explains the pervasive gender imbalance in leadership: When we select leaders on the basis of their confidence, charisma, or power hunger, it should not surprise us that we end up with more male than female leaders. By the same token, these parameters explain why leaders are not typically known for their competence, humility, or integrity, and why narcissistic individuals over-index at the top of any organizational hierarchy or system.

If this was a problem before the pandemic, it is now a disturbing reality, one that accounts for the widespread leadership failures around the globe. Too many leaders are out of depth, exposed, and have nowhere to hide. As I observed in my March 15, 2020 article in *Forbes*, “Why Are Some Leaders Better at Managing a Crisis?”, while many of the key features of the pandemic are not as “unprecedented” as most people think—so yes, the word has been overused in unprecedented ways—there is surely one unique aspect to this crisis: It is a global leadership experiment like we have never seen before. Leaders around the world are being put



through the same test, with unparalleled access to the same standardized KPIs, and the world is watching closely.

Furthermore, since we have never dealt with this virus before, let alone a digital-age pandemic, it has been largely impossible for leaders to rely on their past performance and expertise to mitigate this crisis. Instead, every leader has had to start from scratch, with a blank slate, and work out how best to mitigate the damaging consequences of this devastating virus.

## THE POSITIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF CRISIS LEADERSHIP

As organizations (and indeed societies) prepare to face the next phases of this pandemic, there is no question that leadership will remain a key focus area. With that, it is important to reflect on what we have learned so far, not just from this crisis but also from the robust body of research derived from solid decades of organizational psychology and an increasingly interdisciplinary science of leadership.

**Crisis leadership is just good leadership.** There is a long tradition of research around crisis management, which has identified some of the decisive traits and behaviors to predict how some leaders are much better able to manage crises than others. In my talk at the Global Leadership Network's event in August 2020, "Six Traits Leaders Typically Lack During

Crisis," I outlined that higher levels of intelligence, curiosity, humility, resilience, empathy, and integrity are all critical to improve leaders' performance during a crisis. And as it turns out, these traits also elevate leaders' performance during good times—that is, when there is *not* a crisis. But in a crisis, leadership matters even more: Leaders' right and wrong decisions will exacerbate effects on their followers, raising the stakes to a matter of life and death. So while mediocre leaders may go unnoticed in good times, we pay a high price for leadership incompetence when the challenge is big.

The good news, however, is that we don't need to completely revise our leadership models so they are crisis-proof. In fact, all we need to do is select good leaders. Of course, in a logical world, we wouldn't have needed a pandemic to realize that people are generally better off when their leaders are smart, curious, humble, resilient, empathetic, and honest—or at least show some of these qualities—but in the real world we did. Our only hope is that the crisis reminds us of the importance of picking leaders based on their competence, rather than on their ability to entertain, seem confident, or successfully acquire power irrespective of their intentions or talent. By the same token, we would be suffering a lot less from this crisis if we had made it a habit to pick leaders with these foundational talent attributes, so here's to learning this lesson and improving things in the future.



“In a world where leadership and management roles were assigned on the basis of competence, most people would trust their boss and be inspired by them.”

**Context still matters.** Although crisis leadership is in essence just good leadership, the context still matters. Indeed, according to “When and How Team Leaders Matter,” by J. Richard Hackman and Ruth Wageman (*Organizational Behavior*, 2005) over 60% of well-performing teams could attribute their performance to “someone’s personality or behavior—and that someone frequently was the team leader.”

And as Barbara Kellerman and I noted in our February 16, 2021 article in *Fast Company*, followers matter. This has been clear during the pandemic, as even in the case of high-performing leaders—such as Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand or Tsai Ing-wen of Taiwan—there were some favorable conditions, such as location, technological infrastructure, healthcare system, and indeed good followers, that enabled them to tackle the pandemic with success. By the same token, one cannot fully blame Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro for their country’s poor results, because inequality, size, governance, and the mindset and culture shaping follower behavior independently influenced results. Of course, in the case of the United States we are seeing in real time how much can change when we change the leader, but it is always hard to draw conclusions with an N of 1, and even though Biden’s administration deserves praise for its vaccine rollout, it is also true that the vaccines were produced during his predecessor’s mandate.

**Organizations can change.** A silver lining from this crisis is that incompetent leaders have been exposed (and in some instances also eliminated), which of course came at a high price. One hope is that organizations learn the lesson and start to take leadership selection more seriously. This will require the willingness and ability to become more data-driven in their assessment of leaders. As Jeffrey Pfeffer points out in his book *Leadership BS: Fixing Workplaces and Careers One Truth at a Time* (Harper Business, 2015), and as I noted in *The Talent Delusion: Why Data, Not Intuition, Is the Key to Unlocking Human Potential* (Piatkus, 2017), even before the pandemic there was clear evidence for the idea

that leadership competence is the exception rather than the norm. Indeed, if leaders were chosen on talent, Gallup would not report that only about 22% of the global workforce is engaged (this, in mostly large or leading organizations).

In a world where leadership and management roles were assigned on the basis of competence, most people would trust their boss and be inspired by them. Instead, the average experience people have with their bosses is rather more discouraging, if not traumatic. And we continue to see reports of toxic leaders who derail and whose dark side keeps harming their teams and organizations.

Destructive leadership was rampant before the pandemic, and science-based tools could do much to mitigate it. It is noteworthy that the emergence of artificial intelligence and analytics could help, because the only way to evaluate leaders is to actually analyze how they behave and link these data to organizational outcomes. Yet there is clearly a human tendency to distrust AI and campaign against it as a biased tool. Meanwhile, human biases are alive and well, and they will continue to advance people’s careers on the basis of privilege, nepotism, political influence, and “culture fit.”

We’ve all heard it many times: Crises are opportunities to change, as well as traumatic periods of transition where the old is not ready to die, and the new is not ready to emerge. Our big hope is that our old and outdated leadership archetypes, and our tendency to select people based on style rather than substance or confidence rather than competence, will die or at least fade away with this crisis. That way, we can look forward to a future where our lives are not put in the hands of those who are in it for themselves, or have no capacity to make things better for us, but rather are smart, kind, and honest leaders. [AQ](#)

*Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic is the chief talent scientist at ManpowerGroup, a professor of business psychology at University College London and at Columbia University, and an associate at Harvard’s Entrepreneurial Finance Lab.*

# LEADERSHIP

## During the Recovery

BY JENNIFER MOSS



It's important to remember about the pandemic that there is hope of a new normal. It will take time to achieve.

“Leading with both self-compassion and empathy means being tuned into your personal needs as well as the needs of the workforce. This requires having more self-awareness, asking questions of others, removing bias, and actively listening.”

But what should leaders do in the meantime? In a world where exhausted leaders are leading exhausted teams, it's been a year like no other. With no frame of reference to guide decisions, many were flying blind. It's therefore not surprising that errors in judgment or mistakes were made along the way.

Despite the desire otherwise, leaders are not impervious. Most are balancing many of the same stressors their people face every day. It has been tough on everyone.

The question now becomes, how can we sustainably lead teams today and in the aftermath of the pandemic?

First, it's time to stop acting like it's still an emergency. An emergency, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is “an unforeseen combination of circumstances or the resulting state that calls for immediate action.” And yet, the pandemic is no longer unforeseen. It is no longer a surprise.

Organizations need to assess whether the stopgap tactics that were put in place in March 2020 still make sense. The toothpaste can't be forced back into the tube. The future of work is now and there is no turning back.

The first step is to analyze why some leaders handle the storm better than others—why they understand that the rain can't be stopped, so instead they carry the best umbrella. It most often boils down to psychological fitness.

## MODELING THE BEHAVIOR

Psychological fitness—also referred to as emotional intelligence—is the ability to strengthen the neural pathways that lead to the most accurate and unbiased thoughts. It also requires breaking down existing patterns of behavior to experience and display healthier emotions more regularly than negative ones. The concept was originally developed to help military professionals better handle the emotional burdens experienced during combat. We now see it permeating leadership development in all industries and sectors.

To be psychologically fit, however, leaders need to model the behaviors they want to see in their people. That means prioritizing individual self-care—something leaders are notoriously bad at. Of all the times to reconsider that behavior, it would be now. After a year of chronic stress and fatigue, where one's recovery will enable the recovery of

others, self-compassion will be key. Arguably, it's the only way to mentally get through the next year.

Leading with both self-compassion and empathy means being tuned into your personal needs as well as the needs of the workforce. This requires having more self-awareness, asking questions of others, removing bias, and actively listening, essentially thwarting stress and burnout before it's too far gone, and having the humility to adjust to the moment. In times of crisis, particularly through this last year, making quick pivots was how many companies survived and then thrived.

For anyone who considers empathy a soft skill, note this: It takes intention, effort, and strength to lead with compassion. It's worth it, but it is most certainly not easy. Here are a few suggestions to get started.

## UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HYGIENE AND MOTIVATION

The word “hygiene,” for most, means cleaning your teeth, taking regular showers, and brushing your hair. These are the usual things done to maintain physical health, so routine they become subconscious activities. And yet, if you stopped doing them, you would feel the effects almost immediately.

In the workplace, there are other types of basic “hygiene” needs that must be met. These needs include salary, work conditions, company policy and administration, supervision, working relationships, status and security, and safety. On the other hand, motivation factors include challenging work, recognition for one's achievements, responsibility, the opportunity to do something meaningful, involvement in decision making, and a sense of importance to the organization.

As a leader, it's easy to have blind spots toward the status of these basic hygiene requirements inside your organization. But when corporate hygiene is low, people feel it. To determine whether there is healthy organizational hygiene, expect to consistently know answers to the following:

- Is anyone on the team feeling unsafe at work—either physically or psychologically?
- Are people paid fairly across all groups, particularly those where pay gaps exist?
- Does everyone on the team know what they are supposed to be doing right now?

- Do they know how to do their jobs?
- How many hours did staff actually work this week (not just what was personally witnessed)?
- What other external pressures are they dealing with, such as a new baby or a sick family member?
- Are they battling racism or discrimination?

This abbreviated list suggests the type of questions leaders need to assess in determining whether the organization is meeting employees' basic hygiene needs. When the root causes of the problems that lead to chronic stress and burnout are identified, then (and only then) can well-being optimization begin.

Leading during a pandemic means there are external forces at play that impact well-being at work, and it poses another unique challenge for leaders this year. But there are still myriad ways to support employees in the workplace despite where the stressors are occurring.

## MAKE IT SAFE FOR HARD CONVERSATIONS

Many people have faced grief in their lifetime, but in the last year, the collective grief was unparalleled. Not since the World Wars and the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic has the world gone through so much loss at one moment in time.

In the workplace, grief can cause people to be more disorganized, withdrawn, or anxious. It can also increase "brain fog," a symptom of chronic stress that can make people feel distracted, fatigued, demotivated, and unclear and increase errors in their work.

Unfortunately, managers can miscalculate these behaviors as performance problems. Ensuring that doesn't happen requires a better analysis of whether the late arrivals or less than perfect work is atypical. That means digging deeper. Is there something else? Could there be some external stressor that is causing these behaviors? In a global pandemic and beyond, there may be a few potential scenarios to point to. In other words, if it seems obvious, it is.

With the addition of chronic stress and fear of the virus and months of social isolation, mental health is bound to be affected. And yet, my research, published in *Harvard Business Review*, found that nearly half of respondents don't believe they can openly talk about mental health at work. As a result, 65% of those people experienced burnout "often or always."

Tactics to support more open conversations around mental health can include:

### **Increased check-ins that discuss non-work-related conversations.** Ask the following questions:

- On a scale of 0-100, how would you rate your stress level?
- What, if any, were some of the barriers you faced this week in reaching your goals?

- What can I do to make next week easier?
- You say you're fine, are you sure? I want to be able to support you if you need it.

**Engagement of managers in mental health training.** They should know what resources are available to their staff though human resources, employee assistance programs, and other tools that are offered to support mental health.

**The end of strict grief policies.** It's foolish to suggest that 48 hours is enough to deal with the death of a loved one and then functionally return to work. Rather, offer employees the space they need to grieve so they can return to work effectively. These actions will increase trust, loyalty, engagement, and retention.

Our global survey of 1,500 respondents across 46 countries also found that only 21% rated their well-being as good during the pandemic and a mere 2% rated their well-being as excellent.

This suggests that a large part of the workforce is suffering. And yet, this is not just a pandemic problem. Stigma around discussing mental health at work is a long-standing issue. Leaders need to make safe spaces now, both virtually and in person, to discuss mental health in a crisis and beyond. To nurture a culture of psychological safety, leaders must learn how to be optimal listeners.

## LISTEN AND TAKE ACTION

Active listening is a key attribute of empathy. It means having the ability to focus completely on a speaker, understand the message, comprehend the information, and respond thoughtfully.

Good listening is key in a pandemic and in the recovery phase. Our research found that when describing poor communication from leadership, respondents felt increased "uncertainty, fear and anxiety." This would ultimately put them at greater risk of burnout according to further analysis.

The Workforce Institute at Kronos Inc. found that "only a fraction of employees (20%) felt their organization met their needs during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic." Chris Mullen, PhD, executive director of The Workforce Institute at UKG, stresses that during the pandemic, "instead of looking for trendy perks, companies needed to get back to the foundational needs every employee requires: physical safety, psychological security, job stability, and flexibility."

The same survey found that nearly a third (32%) of respondents yearned for more communication from leadership during the pandemic—both sooner and more transparently—which is a primary regret for more than a third (35%) of C-level leaders.

Here are suggestions for better communication during a crisis:

- Communicate the plan often—especially as it changes.
- Acknowledge and validate uncertainties and share how the organization is protecting physical and psychological safety.
- Spend more time answering questions than sharing scripted information.
- Ensure employees can immediately access mental health support and information related to the crisis.

Old rules around reduced hours/flexible hours, or even paid time off, should be thrown out the window. Remember, this is *not* business as usual. Add more training. Implement more peer-to-peer outreach programs, mental health 101, and manager training for how to deal with conversations related to grief and trauma. Increase check-ins.

When there is empathy, uncertainty is mitigated. With their actions, leaders are saying, “I’ve heard your messages, I am working hard to understand your needs, and I am doing my best to respond thoughtfully.”

## PRIORITIZE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND PHYSICAL SAFETY EQUALLY

When buildings are on fire, people are evacuated. This begs the question, why force people into a space that for them feels unsafe? As the recovery mode begins, it will be important to create hybrid solutions for employees—options that make everyone feel safe.

Workplace experts have long been advocating for more flexible options. When the pandemic struck, it was finally possible to demonstrate that working from home can be equally productive as being in the office. And yet, what if in the past year, the pendulum swung too far to the other side?

In reality, aren’t “work from home forever/only” policies still inflexible? Some people need to go to a physical workspace because they are fueled by those in-person connections. Many respondents to the survey shared how lonely and isolating it’s been to only communicate with their team virtually. To right the pendulum, companies will need to provide employees access to both a remote and an in-person work option.

Fran Katsoudas, executive VP and chief people, policy, and purpose officer at Cisco, agrees that empathy is at the root of strong leadership and healthy cultures.

“We’re a big believer that empathy is a superpower,” Katsoudas shares in an April 2021 interview after a long and stressful year leading through the pandemic. “From a workplace perspective, we’re going to work so hard to help our leaders and teams get proximate to people that are different from themselves and walk alongside them and understand them. We believe that if we do this, we’ll be so much better as a company.”

Some ways Cisco led with empathy first during the pandemic were:

- Increasing transparency in communication
- Augmenting employee check-ins at all leadership levels
- Having more open conversations about challenging topics such as mental health, social justice, and COVID health and safety
- Enhancing existing flexible work options
- Providing more access to health experts
- Putting a bigger focus on campaigns that promote well-being, such as “Day for Me,” a day off in May given to all employees and contractors to focus on employee mental health and well-being, and #safetalk. Already well in place before the pandemic, #safetalk offers mental health resources. Another facet of the program, #safespace, connects like-minded employees to network and support one another. Topics include mental health, substance abuse, neurodiverse employees, gender transitioning employees, and parents who have lost children.

With a keen awareness that these are unique times that require unique solutions, the leadership team at Cisco acknowledge there is more work to be done. In response, they continue to analyze novel approaches to support the mental and physical health of a workforce under chronic stress from a pandemic.

## TRANSITIONING BACK TO NORMAL

In 2020, the workforce was expeditious in adopting safety measures against COVID-19. As the recovery phase begins, the same measures to protect psychological safety must be prioritized equally.

These are important considerations. During a crisis and the subsequent recovery mode, there is going to be a surplus of change. And if leaders lack empathy and emotional flexibility, it will be easy to fall back on old practices that don’t solve new problems. This holds back organizations and teams from flourishing.

In times of crises and recovery, being highly skilled in cognitive empathy is like always having the best umbrella in the storm. That means the workforce is built on trust, healthy and respectful relationships abound, and people feel psychologically safe during times of uncertainty. There is space for grief and mourning and healing. Managers are open and prepared for conversations about mental health, and they actively listen to create more positive actions.

What empathetic leadership isn’t? Soft. [AQ](#)

*Jennifer Moss is an award-winning journalist, author, and international public speaker. She is a nationally syndicated radio columnist, reporting on topics related to happiness and workplace well-being. She is also a freelance writer whose articles have appeared in HuffPost, Forbes, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), Fortune, and Harvard Business Review. Her forthcoming book is The Burnout Epidemic: The Rise of Chronic Stress and How We Can Fix It.*





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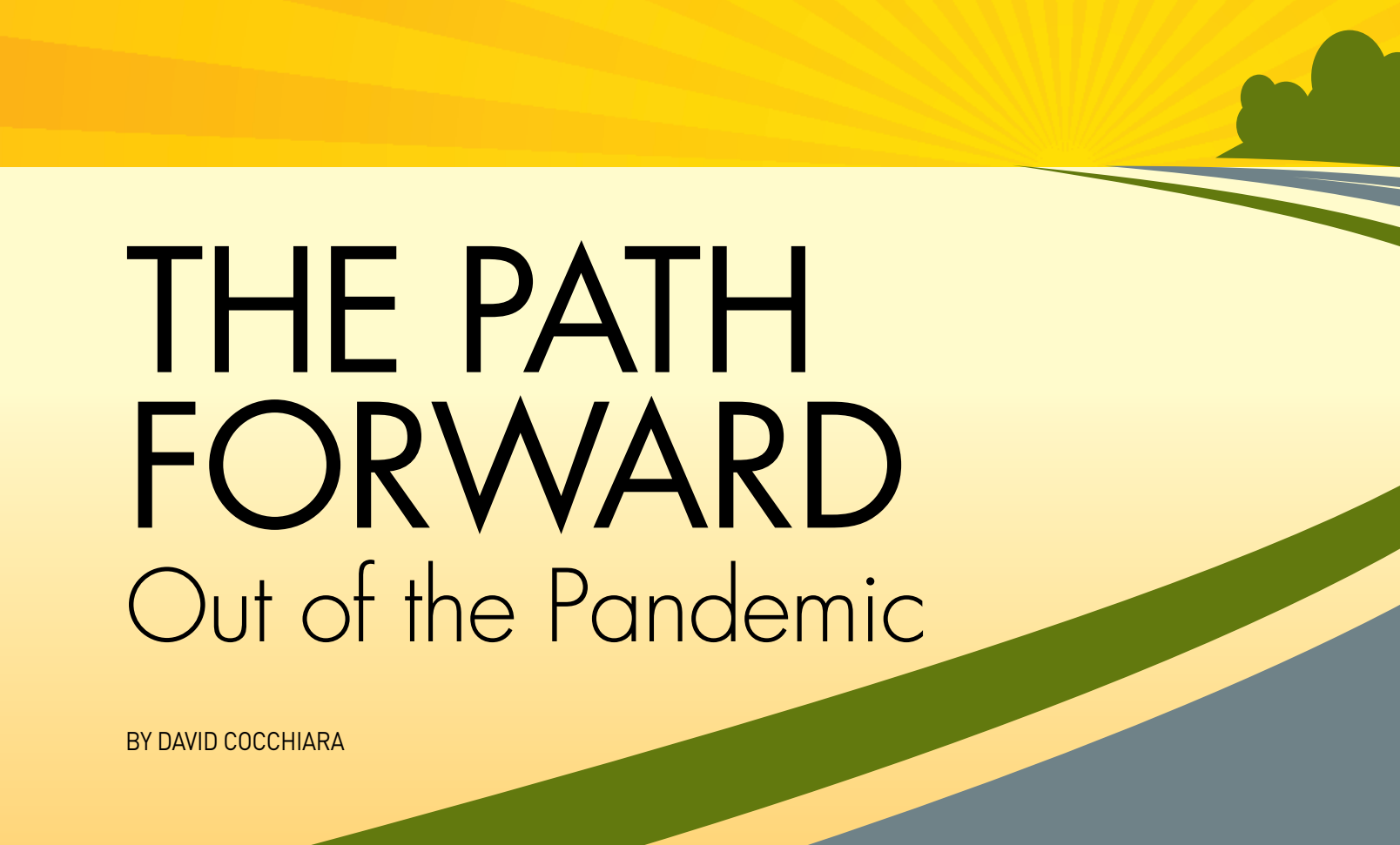
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# THE PATH FORWARD

## Out of the Pandemic

BY DAVID COCCHIARA

It is not an overstatement to say we are in the midst of the most significant workplace shift in a generation—and maybe even in history.

While this shift was a challenge that few anticipated and no one wanted, it's one that companies of every size must address as the world transitions to a new workplace paradigm. Never has it been more apparent how important people are to an organization's success. As we exit the current situation, we need to remember that people are the key.

To be successful, organizations must build employee trust, focus on employee mental health, and measure the value of employees' outcomes rather than time spent working. Even before the pandemic, employees were gaining more control over how, when, and where they work.

The pandemic only brought into sharp focus how the world is evolving. Teams working remotely can achieve great results, but they may miss an opportunity to add value if they are not in physical proximity. We must have valuable and rewarding human interaction no matter how we work—whether it's in-person, remote, or a hybrid of the two.

### A NEW WORKPLACE PARADIGM

I started my current role during the first quarter of the pandemic. Since then, I have focused on the value of the workplace, looking at it from a human perspective.

Moving forward, we cannot assess a space based solely on its physical components—the desks, conference rooms, and collaboration spaces. We must recognize that team members, whether they work onsite or remotely, need human interaction, and determine how to deliver it.

We will get back to a place where people engage with one another again, but it's going to look different.

In the past, many people were required to be in the office from 9 to 5—or longer—regardless of whether they actually needed to be there to get their “job” done. Flexible and even fully remote workers were not uncommon before



the pandemic, but the past year has taught nearly every company that employees can get their jobs done whenever and wherever they may be.

Some companies may see value in requiring the traditional 9-to-5, in-office environment, but most will realize the value in remaining flexible and giving employees more autonomy in arranging their schedules. It can give them a competitive advantage in the increasingly challenging hiring environment of today. Essentially, companies will have a hard time saying “We can’t work that way,” because they have already proven that they can.

As COVID continues and some businesses reopen or consider their reopening plans, many realize that their employees aren’t ready to rush back. Many places have “falsely” reopened, only to find out that their employees pulled back.

The new paradigm we’ve seen as companies have engaged with us at OfficeSpace Software includes a focus on safety and compliance. We’ve also noticed that employees are beginning to view going to the office as a “destination,” a place to get specific things accomplished, so the newly offered flexibility from companies will lead employees to find new ways to engage with their space.

## **MANY EMPLOYEES WANT TO RETURN TO THE OFFICE**

There are employees who want to return to the office, but not to an office that is exactly as it was pre-pandemic. Companies need to address many baseline safety protocols before they consider reopening.

We commissioned The Harris Poll to conduct a nationwide online survey of 1,200 employed adults in December 2020. It revealed that an overwhelming majority (71%) of employed Americans who went into the workplace before the pandemic but were working from home are eager to return to the workplace.

However, they would only do so if the return could be done safely. For many organizations, that might be a big “if.”

Think about it for a moment. If you’re going to come into an office, how do we make sure you can enter while touching as few surfaces as possible and eliminating unnecessary personal interactions? How do we confirm someone hasn’t tested positive for COVID-19, hasn’t interacted with someone who has, and isn’t exhibiting any symptoms? Are there separate protocols for vaccinated versus unvaccinated employees?

Companies must engage with employees and understand their perceptions about the virus and workplace safety as

they pilot their returns to the office. It's critical to recognize that the landscape may remain fluid depending on a wide array of variables, such as COVID variants and, as a worst-case scenario, infected employees.

Globally, the landscape is slightly different, as some countries have returned to different levels of acceptable capacity. We are learning from those experiences and sharing information about what works and what doesn't work.

## COMPANIES WITH TRUST AND EMPLOYEES WHO WANT TO GO BACK

Organizations need to accept that we will not go back to the way things used to be. While I personally go into our Atlanta office a few days a week now, our employees are not required to work from there. They can come in if they feel comfortable doing so, but we've made our policy clear.

Companies that took quick action during the early stages of the pandemic to transition to remote work, including communication campaigns to engage employees and keep them informed, with a focus on mental health, are the most successful ones. In short, their employees trust the organization.

Many companies say they will be shifting to more remote work and measuring outcomes versus time, but some team members are not as keen or comfortable with that approach. We need to remember that time is not the measurement of value—it's merely a more traditional way to measure outcomes.

Consider that new entrants to a company's workforce likely do not understand the company culture, and if they start remotely, they will miss out on opportunities to learn about engagement and conflict resolution. In turn, managers must weigh how to consider physical safety and mental health as they ponder how to develop a dynamic and remote workforce.

## GIVING MORE AUTHORITY, CONTROL TO WORKERS

We are all going to figure out many things together over the next 12 to 18 months. I hope the power of engagement in the workforce will shift from the direct-line managers to the employees, and managers will be hyper-considerate in the way interactions transpire for people who aren't physically there.

But many questions remain. For example, how is the experience for people who aren't in the room? What happens when people have a lunchtime meeting, and all you can hear on the team call is people eating their lunch? These questions existed before the pandemic, but with everyone working remotely during the past year, we were all exposed to the nuances of calls with a hybrid audience.

When it comes to software, we will see the consolidation of tools specific to the workplace: booking a room, scheduling

catering, and determining where someone might sit—whether assigned to a desk in a specific area or booking a desk as needed. Some of our customers book visitors, pay for parking, and confirm food options in a single app.

Perhaps we should take that a step further and integrate the app with badge access. For example, doors could unlock as I approach so that my interaction with the space is much more efficient. That small adjustment can help employees be much more engaged.

In short, companies must make the most efficient use of space for both employers and employees.

## LOOK OUT FOR YOURSELF, BUT MAKE SURE EVERYONE IS SAFE

Generally, success comes down to the trust factor. If you've established trust and can illustrate the safety benefits of any approach or process, teams will be supportive.

Younger workers are increasingly in the driver's seat, and they have an affinity for deploying technology that makes their lives easier and experiences better—whether it's in their personal lives or in the office.

Even before the pandemic, employees were trending in this direction. The pandemic only forced our collective hands to act quicker and more decisively. Despite the positive news surrounding the vaccine, much uncertainty remains around safely returning to the workplace. While businesses and employees alike are ready to return to the office, the common thread we see is that most will not until there are transparent safety measures in place. Hand sanitizer, masks, and social distancing are a fine start, but organizations must also consider other solutions, such as active floor plans with traffic flows and posted occupancy levels for conference rooms, breakrooms, and so forth.

Companies must embrace technology to engage with their employees as they prepare for the new dynamic workplace. When they do, they will find happier and more engaged employees who feel safe and comfortable in the workplace. And when that happens, everyone benefits.

It's a shame that it takes a once-in-a-generation pandemic to force organizations to act in a way that benefits everyone. But perhaps we can consider this the silver lining of the dark cloud that's hung over our heads for the past year and learn from this experience as we move forward. [AQ](#)

*David Cocchiara is CEO of OfficeSpace Software, the creator of better workplaces helping companies navigate workplace disruptions and manage workspace dynamics. He was previously the chief operating officer and chief financial officer of Lancope, a network security software company, where he built the finance and operational functions and a customer-first culture.*

# How to Continue to Build ADAPTABILITY AND RESILIENCE

BY KIMBERLY S. REED



The global pandemic followed by a remade virtual nation and workplace have created significant challenges for leaders at all levels in industries across the globe.

The organizations that can evolve, adapt, turn challenges into opportunities, and maintain an optimistic culture will be the ones that thrive in our “Remade Nation.” To make it through the current crisis and get to our remade normal, you and your team will need to be resilient. The encouraging news is that leaders can help create the conditions that make this possible.

In nature, resilience and adaptability are salient traits for survival.

Indeed, when Charles Darwin said “survival of the fittest,” he did not mean the quickest, the strongest, or the smartest life forms; rather, he was referring to those that had the greatest potential to adapt to their environmental conditions—demonstrating the art of a chameleon in its truest form.

That principle is also true in business. The most resilient and adaptable teams succeed more often than those that are

rigid and unwilling to change, even if the more rigid group boasts better talent and innovation.

## WHAT IS RESILIENCE, AND WHY IS IT VITAL?

Resilience is the ability to adapt in the face of challenging circumstances, and it is a crucial characteristic of high-performing leaders. Resilient leaders have the ability to cope with disruption, changes in direction, and adversity, without engaging in dysfunctional behavior. They have the ability to adapt under immense pressure, all while maintaining their high energy and continuing to instill confidence in their employees and customers.

It is often forgotten that one must turn inward and lead oneself before standing up to lead others. Business is constantly changing, and if you want to succeed in the global business world, you must be resilient. You also must adapt to maintain a competitive advantage in the ever-changing world. Adaptability means being flexible and maintaining an optimistic attitude.

As organizational leaders continue to face the pandemic, an extended virtual workplace, and disruptions in the global economy, I recommend the following actions to respond when leading through a crisis.

**Commit to transparent communication.** Transparent communication is key when leading through a crisis. Information is the oxygen that keeps the heart of the organization pumping strong, especially during significant change and crisis.

Transparent communication is vital because it:

- Demonstrates to employees/teams that their leaders are engaged, compassionate, concerned, knowledgeable, and on top of the situation
- Decreases fear and emotional distress caused by the unknown and/or hearsay

Always communicate with your employees and teams face-to-face first through your organization's virtual platforms or socially distanced office team meetings. Focus on essential information and embrace brevity. Share what you know when you know it. Do not wait for "the moment." Also, be truthful. A crisis is not the time to equivocate and fall back on corporate lingo.

**Stay connected to each other.** Have informal check-ins often. Notice when someone is not there. Notice when someone isn't his or her usual self. Ask people to use video as much as possible to pick up nonverbal cues better. Share good news and make sure no one is left out.

Keep feedback lines open—top to bottom, bottom to top, and side to side. Encourage sharing of what's working and what isn't, and be open to suggestions to make things better from everyone. Inclusivity is also the fuel to resilient teams.

**Understand that perfection is an illusion.** No one is perfect and has all the answers right now. Acting like you are, and do, will damage your credibility and your ability to connect with your teams and employees. Be transparent and truthful, and embrace the ambiguity of the situation. People will appreciate and resonate with honest, direct communication.

**Share what your organization is doing.** Time is of the essence. Often, leaders have to begin tackling issues before they have a clear understanding of what's happening.

When you have the responsibility of leading people, be proactive, take charge, and take the initiative. Make decisions and take action when leading through a crisis and communicate your actions truthfully.

When you pivot or respond to changes, keep people "in the know," remember that your employees are living through a crisis that is giving them a unique lens on how they view the world and how it is affecting them. Also keep in mind that no one will have a complete picture of what's happening.

**Be optimistic.** Optimism is the fundamental belief that things will work out even when they're not going according to the work plan.

First, leaders have to expand their concept of "optimism." It's not just about thinking good thoughts. Optimists look at adversity as temporary, external.

Optimistic leaders are resilient and able to succeed because they look for opportunities within the crisis. And even when they see problems, they're able to identify solutions. Leaders are dealers in hope and optimism. Even in an extreme crisis, an upbeat, optimistic attitude keeps people going.

**Embrace adaptability.** Now is the time to harness your inner peace to reach new heights of openness and flexibility. Your team may be juggling stress, childcare, worries about health, and/or support of a spouse or loved one. As such, they will need your understanding and patience with deadlines, quick pivots, and schedules. Try to model an attitude that sets your team up for resilience: energetic, optimistic, and open. Cultivating a growth mindset across your team will help the members stay creative and continue to develop despite the stress of pandemic-related uncertainty and fear.

In conclusion, on an optimistic note, I urge leaders to begin thinking now about how your organization will deal with the demand for your product and services in a post-pandemic world. The worst may not be over, but there will be a very bright future for those who survive and position themselves to bounce back. [AQ](#)

*Kimberly S. Reed is the author of Optimists Always Win!: Moving from Defeat to Life's C-Suite (Health Communications Inc., 2021) and the chief transformational officer, diversity, equality and inclusion strategist, Reed Development Group.*

# BIG WINDSHIELD

## Looking Forward, Small Mirror Looking Back

BY EVERETT "BUD" HENDRICKSON



One of the bedrock truths supporting my career is the need to approach life from the viewpoint of the driver's seat, with a "big windshield looking forward and a small rearview mirror looking back."

“Looking back over 2020, are the identified ground rules being followed? If not, what is the next action to create a better environment for everyone? Awareness and small changes, with appropriate follow-up, could be the forward navigation that steers away from future chaos and team division.”

This truth has gained more relevance considering the challenging year we all have endured. To effectively lead entering the summer of 2021, we need to recognize key learning points from 2020 and early 2021. Looking back will help us better navigate going forward.

Studies have been conducted on the productivity of employees and how well people have adapted to remote work, hybrid work, or working safely in person. Data also exists that shows how effective some employees have been in being self-directed and autonomous in their work.

These successes should be celebrated! I recommend that all teams and individuals document the positives that have emerged from changes in the way work was done in the last year. Develop plans and actions so that all can be purposeful in retaining crucial lessons as we move forward.

Numerous studies illustrate how employees have adapted well to using new technology to work from home while maintaining the quality of content and productivity. As with all results of studies, there are other lessons to learn when data is approached from another direction. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers, while 55% of employees would prefer to be fully remote or at least remote three days a week once pandemic concerns recede, those with the least amount of professional experience want to be back in the office, with 30% preferring to be remote no more than one day a week.

Can your team perform at its best long term if newer employees are struggling in the new work environment we've had to create? Further, is there anything new we can learn from what didn't work with the vast changes made to how work was done?

Our issues fall into three buckets: Some people have challenges with learning new technology; some lack the skills to be self-directed or autonomous; and many people miss relationships or simply not being connected to others.

Whether employees are working remotely, cannot visit family or friends with health issues that limit the ability to be together, are struggling with restrictions on travel or entertainment, or are grappling with additional problems affecting our world, many feel isolated and possess a deep need for connection. Focus on building relationships, since history has shown that when people feel connected, they perform their best and feel their best.

As leaders, what are some purposeful alterations we can consider as we move forward? Life and work have dramatically changed and, in some cases, have altered permanently. The lessons we have learned about connection with each other and focus are even more important now, in the remote/hybrid work patterns and in the home-life environments in which we find ourselves.

## THE COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATION

For centuries we have discussed how important communication is. Tools have changed, the speed at which communication occurs has increased, and the distance covered is much greater today than ever before. But the fundamentals have not changed. In effective communication, and in moments of stress and challenge, the fundamentals are as important as they have ever been.

Communication is composed of three components: words (what is actually said); tone of voice (how we say the words); and body language (gestures, postures, and facial expressions that communicate nonverbally to others).

With modern technology, are we missing key communication attributes because we are not “in person” when we communicate? Further, with the expanding use of email, virtual meetings, and remote work, are we missing important information about the health and well-being of our team?

If we are not purposeful in our use of technology and being emotionally present, we risk missing much key information.





The answer is to be diligent and notice people's gestures, facial expressions, and comments that are out of character. You may need to connect with someone privately if you think he or she could benefit from some assistance or support. Are the ground rules current for effective communication, or do they need to be updated and revisited by your team? Looking back over 2020, are the identified ground rules being followed? If not, what is the next action to create a better environment for everyone? Awareness and small changes, with appropriate follow-up, could be the forward navigation that steers away from future chaos and team division.

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

Professionally and personally, technology has been used to enhance communication when we cannot be there in person. Data show how productive most have been during the challenging times of 2020. But we don't talk much about the loss of connection professionally and personally.

Many people work from home, and limits have been imposed on visiting family members who live in care facilities. We've been restricted from seeing other family and friends either because they live far away or, even worse, were hospitalized. In the latter case, visitation is either strictly curtailed or prohibited altogether.

As humans, we are designed to connect and be social. But in everyday life during this pandemic, we don't see many faces because they are covered with masks. We miss facial expressions, which are key elements of communication.

I encourage you to look in your past and identify events or activities that brought connection to your team members. From your "being present" efforts to better communicate, ask if you have gathered information about the communication issues that are having negative effects on individuals or your team.

Being proactive in identifying ways to connect employees socially and emotionally can help ensure the health of your team on a personal level. You'll help them to interact with others at work at their highest levels of engagement.

## SHOWING CARE

We all know how much better we feel when we know someone cares about us as people. When we are happier and feel safe, we become more resilient, energetic, and innovative. We need these qualities not only in ourselves but in everyone with whom we interact.

To help with this connection, allow for some open time for people to share something about themselves not related to work. Schedule an event to donate money and/or time to a worthy cause valued by the team members. Adopt attitudes of service to others.

## BUILDING COMMUNITY

There are great needs in all of our communities today. What better way to connect with others than to work together for a common good?

Focus. Keep looking through the windshield during these challenging times. Our shared experiences last year could provide information to help you and others navigate better as we move forward to better times.

The efforts you make personally to better communicate, connect, care, and be a more vibrant part of a community will build a better you. Building a better you is key. These efforts could form the catalyst for others around you to do the same. [AQ](#)

*Everett "Bud" Hendrickson is the author of Enjoy Your Journey: Ten Bedrock Truths to Improve Everything About You (Creative Team Publishing, 2016). A performance-driven manager who strives to build an environment for all team members to be successful, he previously worked for Owens Corning.*

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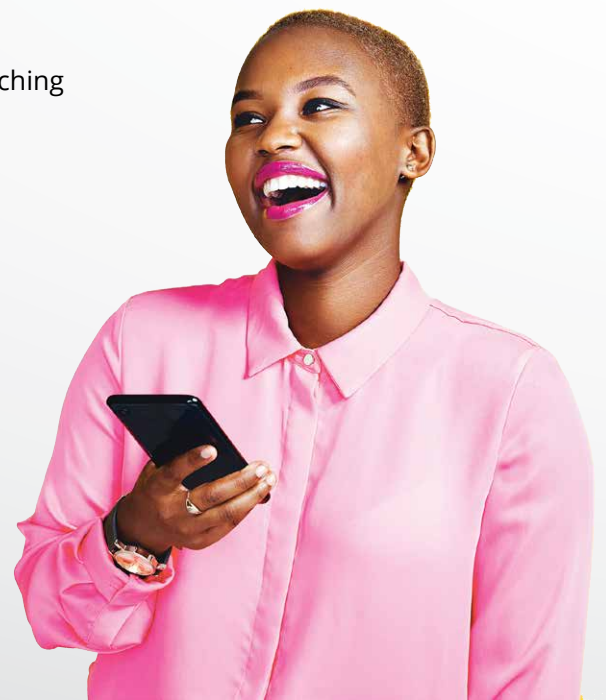
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