

Maintaining Company Culture a Year into the Pandemic

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It's been a full year since the start of the pandemic. For one year we've been working from home; virtual meetings have become the new normal; and staying connected with one's co-workers has been challenging. According to Gallup's Health and Well-Being Index, adults reported struggling with stress and worry, particularly those working from home while caring for children. Unmarried adults reported increased loneliness. And organizations that rely on team cooperation and innovation faced new challenges.

The New Hybrid Workplace

Yet, for the most part, the 2020 remote work experiment was a success. From the employees' standpoint, most would like to maintain their improved work-life balance and eliminate a daily commute. In Slack's Remote Employee Experience Index based on data from a survey of 9,032 knowledge workers in the U.S., U.K., France, Germany, Japan, and Australia, analyzing perceptions of 4,700 who are primarily remote, the overwhelming majority of 72% prefer a combination of in office and remote work.

As companies plan for the hybrid workplace, the environment will look and feel a lot different than it did one year ago. Increased safety precautions, scaled-back work spaces, and shifting schedules combining remote/in-person work will be the norm. With limited numbers of workers in the office at any given time, and with teams scattered across the globe, maintaining a strong corporate culture is essential to keeping employees engaged and productivity high.

Define, Review, and Strengthen Your Corporate Culture

An organization's culture is its special sauce, what makes it unique, and what attracts (or alienates) employees. It drives engagement which directly affects performance. Culture goes beyond *what* the organization does to incorporate *how* it does what it does. According to Gallup, "It's through the *employee experience* that organizations can sustain that culture, regardless of where an employee may work. And by focusing on creating the virtual and hybrid *employee experience*, organizations will empower and inspire all employees to do their best work." Bottom line – a strong corporate culture is key for business.

In the new hybrid work environment, maintaining your corporate culture requires strategy and planning. First step – an audit: Review where your company is now to understand whether or not your culture is well-defined and communicated. Determine whether the employee experience matches the customer experience, and whether the bottom-line follows. Re-energizing office culture means investing in collaboration tools, innovation platforms, and creative programs. To further strengthen culture, consider the following:

Lead with Values

Values-driven organizations clearly define their purpose or mission, vision, and values. They embed those values in everything they do. Values should be visible to employees – on the website, on social media, on the walls, everywhere. But even more important than displaying your values, is activating them. *Living* values resonate with employees, feel authentic, and are incorporated in programs and processes – from Annual Values Days, to social-distanced community service events, to attention to social purpose practices, to refreshed-for-2021 employee benefits, to regular rituals, to rewards and/or perk programs. In today's hybrid workplace, successful companies will activate their values across the organization, continually reflecting upon those values and evolving them to stay relevant.

If a company's value proposition is really working, customers will feel it in their experience. IMSA Canada Managing Partner David Nirenberg shared a story of his beloved Toronto-based Italian restaurant that was forced to close in March 2020 due to the pandemic. "The owner was committed to maintaining and remunerating his staff in the midst of the COVID shutdown. Living his corporate values of respect and creativity, he took difficult steps that displayed both key values. First, he reimagined the menu to create new take-out friendly options. Then, he offered unique imported Italian wines and all sorts of related food items. Next the restaurant offered suppliers the opportunity to sell their product lines through his online store. He focused on social media presence, sharing ideas frequently and consistently. Employees felt valued, customers responded, suppliers were thrilled, and business survived. FANTASTICO!"

Ask Your Employees

Go to the source when determining how well your culture and values are being communicated and activated. Ask your employees directly: How has the pandemic impacted the company values? Do the values still ring true for you? Are you and your managers acting based on your company values? Then ask yourself: Are you acknowledging and rewarding employees who act on the values? During the past year, have your company perks translated? Have your traditions and rituals translated? Can people still feel the office vibe even when they are not in the office all together?

Ongoing communication is essential. In a hybrid environment, this may take some creativity. Some ideas for enhanced communications include real time collaboration tools, mobile video apps, and webinars with live surveys. Ask your employees how they feel about the tools and activities you are implementing. Are they working? Do they make employees feel valued? What ideas can they suggest to foster connection? Again, go to the source – your employees – to ensure effectiveness.

Give Frequent Feedback, Focus on Wellbeing

According to Gallup, "... employees seek development, purpose and in-the-moment feedback. They prefer 'coaching' over 'bossing.' Data also show that well-coached teams tend to considerably outperform less ably managed teams on engagement, retention, safety, productivity and profitability metrics."

During quarantine, teams that flourished were those whose managers built virtual catchups into the schedule. From monthly All-Hands/Town Halls, to weekly team meetings, to regular one-on-one check-ins, the quick transparent conversations proved most meaningful. Many companies benefited from increased frequency. Going forward, effective management will mean more frequent conversations with employees, especially remote workers, about their challenges, needs, and wants. Focusing on employee wellbeing via understanding each employee's life situation, such as responsibility for children or parents, is now a given when developing effective remote work plans.

Build Camaraderie and Connection

Creating an atmosphere of camaraderie and open communication through virtual team building experiences can be achieved with planning and technology. Events, whether virtual or in person, are a good way to forge connections. According to IMSA USA Managing Partner Mitch Berger, "In our office, we hosted an online Murder Mystery Event that was a fun way to get together virtually. Many of our clients have run successful virtual events from cooking classes, wine tastings, book clubs, and scavenger hunts, to museum tours, and group video games. When we eventually return to the hybrid office, we intend to maintain the virtual components that work for building team spirit."

Leadership is directly responsible for building and maintaining the always evolving corporate culture. As we move beyond the pandemic into a brand new hybrid work world, now is the time to focus on your organization's leadership ability to keep your culture relevant and aligned with your company's values and goals.