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## Is Your Company Culture Helping You Survive This Chaos?



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The big question on every business owners' mind now is: How do we survive as a business during these very uncertain times of the COVID-19 pandemic?

By now, businesses have already taken most of the measures they can in cutting costs – either by suspending various non-essential expenses, or by letting go of staff or negotiating down salaries. And in an attempt to answer the big question: how do we survive as a business? It is not at all surprising that the energy and center of attention of business owners and leaders is focused squarely on strategy.

But, remember the famous quote by Peter Drucker (the father of modern management): “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”! That means that the center of attention for business owners must also include their company culture as a priority – not as an afterthought.

There are numerous studies that show the direct correlation between a healthy, productive culture and a company's bottom line, still, the majority of companies spend very little time and attention on their culture and all their focus and effort on their business strategy.

Your company culture is your best ally that will help you do great things and survive through the tough times while keeping you out of trouble.

Let me first clarify exactly what I mean by that intangible yet crucial thing we call a company culture. While any company culture is the sum behaviour and attitude of the people working there; the people's behaviour is also driven by the place. In other words, the people create the place, but they are also a product of the place where they work. The systems and processes and the behaviour and attitude of the top leader – together communicate the message: this is how things are done around here.

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the way we work and is expected to have a lasting effect on the behaviour of employees, customers and clients. The majority of us scrambled to introduce a variety of new tools and technologies to enable us to continue working from the safety of our

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homes. A lot of these tools and changes will become part of our new normal of conducting business. However, adopting these technologies and tools without introducing a change in culture will cause a lot more harm than good.

### **Workplace trends**

Flexi work:

Flexible working allows for more bespoke work patterns – agreed between employer and employee – to tailor things such as hours, location (i.e. working from home) and job sharing.

Remote work:

Working from a location away from the office. This can be within the same country or overseas.

Activity-based working:

A workplace model which offers employees the flexibility, choice and autonomy to work in the best setting for a specific task, whether in or out of the office. From collaborative and open settings for team-based tasks, to focus booths or closed meeting spaces for individual tasks.

Agile work:

This was first used by the tech industry where Agile teams were meant to work together in close proximity, in keeping with the idea that "the most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation".

Today it is used to describe ways of planning and doing work in which it is understood that making changes, as they are needed, is an important part of the job.

Most companies will have a mixture of one or more of these working styles combined with in-office working staff. The challenge becomes: how do you maintain or build a company culture in such conditions? The old style of management will no longer work. Even the traditional role of the HR manager will no longer work. The skills that are required of a leader of such a work force are completely different from before.

### **Start from WHY**

Your people need to rally around a common purpose. The reason why your company actually exists. Every person and company know *what* they do and *how* they do it - but very few know *why* they do what they do. As Simon Sinek says; "People don't buy *what* you do, they buy *why* you do it." While the day to day stories may change, your *why* is constant.

This is the time to refine that story and to remind your people why you started doing what you are doing. Tell that story frequently, consistently and clearly. During the tough times, it tends to be forgotten yet it is among the most important messages that unites a team. According to Gallup – even under more certain circumstances, only four in 10 employees strongly agree that the mission or purpose of their company makes them feel their job is important.

Just as important as communicating your purpose or your *why*, it is imperative to demonstrate that it is being brought to life through the company values. The *how* is your values or principles that guide how to bring your cause to life. Your values have to be the verbs – the actions – that bring your purpose to life. So instead of saying "integrity is one of our values", say "we are always

doing the right thing.” Instead of “innovation”; “we are always looking at the problem from a different angle.”

- ★ Did your organization live up to its values during this crisis? Or were they totally forgotten?
- ★ Are the top executives in your organization aware of how they are living / communicating those values?

### Changes in culture

With the big shift in how we are working and the adoption of a mixture of workplace trends, managers need to establish new practices, systems, rituals, partnerships, and ways of communicating and collaborating. Changes may include everything from hiring and onboarding, to how you run your meetings. Managers need to proactively establish new structures that can include such things as virtual team lunches and celebrations, brainstorming sessions, and video-based check-ins to encourage more collaboration and connection. Showing employees that you care about them as a person, and not only as a producer of work, is critical.

- ★ How are your people feeling? Are they returning to work feeling appreciative of how the company took care of them? Or are they discontent and holding a grudge?
- ★ Having gotten used to the casual setting in dress codes, behaviour, and attitude, how will they adjust back to formal business?
- ★ How have their needs changed and what are their biggest worries?

Culture helps guide organizations during times of change, and there is no better test for the strength of your culture than a challenging, chaotic and uncertain time. Making the effort and time to consciously and intentionally create your company culture is one of the crucial elements that will help your company weather the storm. And it is one of the few things that are actually within your control.

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Rana has launched a series of “[When in the Arab World](#)” videos that she started during the quarantine. The intent is to bring the [book](#) to life with these snippets of insights, guidance and stories to build more bridges of understanding between our different worlds. For example, now that we are forced to communicate online, it is a challenge for Arabs in general who prefer face to face and an indirect style of communicating:



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