Only Connect

Reinventing Organizational Culture in the Covid Era

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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND LOCKDOWNS have been affecting us both individually and collectively and have had major consequences on the way we work, and companies operate. It seems apparent that there will be no "back to normal" any time soon, and that the COVID-19 crisis will give way to a new era in which remote work and virtual workplaces will remain widespread. As Alumni of the INSEAD Executive Master in Change (EMC) program, we gathered to analyze the effects this could have on organizations and, more specifically, on organizational culture as the glue that holds organizations together and drives behaviors and performance. How is widespread remote work affecting the values carried by organizational culture in both its content and the way these values are produced? Will organizational cultures have reduced significance or become more important than ever? How will pre-existing organizational cultures be reinvented and/or reinforced? What part can we play?

Impact on individuals

On a personal level, the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns have had a major impact on our lives as they directly affected our work-life balance and pushed us to reassess our priorities. Confined to our homes, we have seen the boundaries between our private and professional lives fade away. Some experienced this as positive: liberated from hours of daily commute, they could finally dedicate more time to their family or other non-work-related interests and began to question the way they lived their lives before the crisis. Others felt even more pressured as they had to fight for time and space and make do with competing work and family commitments, taking meetings from the bathroom and acting as their children's stand-in teacher. Remote work also meant new online tools to master and a work social life stripped to a minimum. The technical challenge was easy to deal with for some, not so much for others. The focus on purely planned and intentional work relationships was a relief to some who, by breaking free from office politics and water-cooler conversations, felt released while others dearly missed social events and interactions with friends and colleagues.

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Adding to these contrasting emotions, the uncertain perspective of the end of the pandemic had most of us on an emotional roller coaster which affected both our levels of energy and motivation. During the emergency phase, many of us managed to keep up our spirits, driving on adrenaline. As social distancing becomes the new norm, people's energy and motivation now seems to wear off as we enter into an unknown and uncertain territory.

Impact on organizations and teams

On an organizational level, the COVID-19 crisis has also given rise to unanticipated challenges. We will here focus on three of them: managing new and deepening fault-lines, maintaining and developing bonds, and keeping up energy and motivation.

The COVID-19 crisis and lockdowns have deepened old divides and created new fault-lines within organizations. These invisible lines, including between on-site and off-site workers, exposed and non-exposed ones, essential and non-essential staff, high risk and low risk individuals, or collaborators with and without family, have the potential to set workers against one another and threaten organizational cohesion if not managed properly.

Maintaining and developing bonds may become another growing challenge. While many teams managed to maintain their levels of work productivity, and even creativity, they did so by relying on trusted relationships built up over time through day-to-day real-life interactions. As people no longer meet, won't such ties loosen? How will new recruits be incorporated into teams without a physical, both formal and informal, on-boarding process? How will new team members learn about the organization's do's and don'ts?

Managing people's energy and motivation appears to be yet another challenge. Many people managed to stay motivated during the first phase of the lockdown. But as we move out of the emergency phase and remote work becomes commonplace, how can organizations and leaders foster motivation and inspire staff when they can no longer rely on personal interactions and face-to-face meetings?

The role of organizational culture

In the 'old normal', organizational culture was the glue that kept it all together: fault-lines, bonds and motivation. Organizational culture-guru Edgar Schein defines organizational culture as a pattern of basic assumptions, invented, discovered or developed by a group to deal with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration. The assumptions that work well enough, are—explicitly and implicitly—taught to new group members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems. As Schein explains, the strength of a culture is a function of the stability of the group, the length of time the group has

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existed, the intensity of the group's learning, the mechanisms of that learning and the clarity of the assumptions held by the group's leaders.[1]

It appears that the COVID-19 crisis has impacted not only the content of the assumptions held by groups, but also the ways in which these assumptions develop, evolve and transfer. It does appear that, with remote work, the stability of groups declines, the intensity of learning decreases and traditional learning mechanisms erode. As for group leaders, they might themselves question the clarity of their assumptions, and have in any case a harder time to convey them while operating from a distance.

The future of organizational culture

Does this mean that organizational culture will disappear? Do we still need it in a world in which work becomes more fragmented and individualized? To us, organizational culture now appears more essential than ever if organizations want to overcome the new fault-lines, foster the bonds necessary to collaborate efficiently and keep up morale and inspiration, all indisputable impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. Nevertheless, not any organizational culture will do, and the question we should ask ourselves is rather what kind of organizational culture we want to foster and how to foster it.

The importance of trust

How can we reinforce organizational culture and leverage it to overcome the disruptive impacts of isolation, confinement, social distancing and the restrictive measures enforced to fight COVID-19? In the short run, productivity does not seem to have suffered too much. But in the long run – and we are not talking years here, but months – we expect a snowballing fall-out, due to stagnated collaboration, deepening fault-lines, increased silo-thinking, falling motivation and loosening alignment. The pivotal word to help organizations to meet these challenges, seems to be trust. Mutual trust is a key contributor to team performance as genuine and productive collaboration is possible only when people really know and trust each other.[2] As a consequence, we believe that the effort to reinforce organizational culture in our new remote reality, should primarily focus on the topic of trust. On an individual level, trust may be created by adopting behaviors such as sharing one's vulnerabilities, expressing empathy, following through on one's promises, or striving for clarity. On an organizational level, it may be built by fostering such behaviors, and more generally by encouraging all team members to bring their authentic selves to work.[3] But how can we nurture trust among people who work mainly remotely, communicate by telephone or video, and distribute their attention between work and home?

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New mechanisms and artifacts to fuel trust

Organizational culture appears most visible in the artifacts of organizations[4], that is the habits, behaviors and objects. Today, many of these artifacts need to be reinvented as the primacy of the physical space gives way to that of the virtual one, and social exchanges need deliberate planning. What artifacts can help us build trust remotely? It seems to us that it is about re-introducing intimacy, socialization, and the possibility of a collective experience. Here are some concrete ideas based on our collective experience:

- Have the leadership team organize weekly video calls to offer an update on the business and take up questions from employees.

- Create a blog or internet community for teams to share their emotions and concerns about the new work organization (remote work, work-life balance, struggle for energy and motivation). Lead by example and start by sharing your own reflections and issues.

- Set up small casual meetings, breakfasts or lunches to randomly connect people across the organization. These can be in person (when possible) or virtual.

- Start your team meetings with broad check-ins, with room to reflect and share personal experiences to keep everyone connected on a personal level. Don't rush, so plan double the time you used to book, and do it frequently. More frequently than you used to and introduce it into every team meeting.

- Together with your colleagues, organize similar meetings with adjacent teams. Again, combine personal interactions with business issues, but don't let the latter overrule the former, a common trap.

- Have an open zoom channel for your team all-day long, so people can jump in and have a chat, a coffee, a reflection or a question to share. Make sure no one feels lost and alone and break down barriers to reach out as much as possible.

- Plan social meetings with people from other teams.

- Use the rare physical meetings you have for matters you cannot easily handle remotely. Use them as quality time, investing in your team's strategy, future, values, objectives, learning, and pride. Don't spoil this time on assessment, performance and targets.

- Organize regular off-site meetings where business and leisure are combined.

- Have your one-on-one's on how people are feeling and doing. Do they still understand the strategy, what is their purpose, is there still alignment between their assumptions and those of the organization? What are

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they missing in their interactions with you and their team members? Help them to identify personal challenges that are meaningful to them and valuable to the organization and that - with your support - they can work on in order to grow.[5] Use your time well.

- Encourage people to interact remotely, on work and on private matters. Be an example by reaching out to everyone before and after the weekend, on specific occasions related to work or private life, document the highlights so you can refer to them on another occasion, ask about their interactions with their peers.

- If people underperform or show signs of disengagement, start enquiring about their physical workplace, which often impacts work satisfaction and performance. How are their chair and desk? Do they use a footrest? Are their keyboard, mouse and monitor ergonomic? Is their Wifi connection effective enough? Help fixing the problems you found.

- Appreciate people's personal time constraints, accept their uncertainties and be tolerant to deviations from what used to be thought of as normal. Discuss the problems they perceive working from their home, with family at the back. Give space for people to recuperate and stay connected to what is happening to them and how they feel, more than how they perform day to day.

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Finale

Obviously, there is much more to say about the future of organizations and organizational culture in the post-COVID-19 era. For this moment our plea is to focus on fostering trust as the basis of collaboration and a stepping-stone for every organizational culture. We hope these reflections and suggestions can be helpful to you to show up to the new challenges of cohesion and collaboration you are facing. Essentially it is all about trust. To build trust, show people you really care, don't judge but ask, reach out and have faith in the capacities and good intentions of your staff. And keep investing, more than ever, in the creation of purpose, team spirit and commonality. Not only with your team, but also with your own peers and their teams. ∎

Notes

[1] Edgar H. Schein, Organizational culture, in: American Psychologist, 45, 109-119, February 1990

[2] Kets de Vries, M.F.R. (2018). The Authentizotic Organization: Creating Best Places to Work. SSRN Electronic Journal. doi: 10.2139/ssrn.3168680

[3] Kegan, R., Lahey, L. L., Miller, M. L., Fleming, A., & Helsing, D. (2016). An everyone culture: Becoming a deliberately developmental organization. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

[4] Schein (1990)

[5] Kegan and Lahey et al (2016)