June 1, 2020

Guide to Returning to the Workplace: Organizational Effectiveness (Phase 2)
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Guide to Returning to the Workplace: Organizational Effectiveness (Phase 2)

This article focuses on Phase 2 of our Returning to the Workplace series. Last month’s Phase 1 article provided a practical guide for the logistical and administrative considerations associated with a physical return to the workplace. This article will focus on the longer-term, strategic considerations for the future of your organization’s health and effectiveness.

Introduction

Business leaders are currently grappling with the challenges (and opportunities) associated with bringing their employees back to the physical workplace. In Phase 1 of this series, we provided practical guidance for these logistical and administrative considerations. Now that many of these decisions are being put into practice, we recommend leaders begin thinking strategically about the future of their organization’s health and effectiveness.

Crisis leadership experts found these types of situations are often “over-managed and under-led.” In other words, most leaders spend too much time reacting to and managing the immediate crisis at the sacrifice of planning for the post-crisis environment. Therefore, it is important for leaders to find the balance between the immediate administrative needs associated with returning to some semblance of operation and maintaining a strategic eye on what they want the future of their business to look like for employees, customers, stakeholders, and communities. The tips and considerations below are intended to support executive, mid-level, and Human Resource leaders in planning for the future.

Ensure cohesion of your executive leadership team

The first priority when developing your long-term strategy is to ensure the cohesiveness of your executive leadership team. Cohesiveness is about having a team that can relate with one another directly, authentically, and constructively while ultimately being in full alignment with each other.

According to Patrick Lencioni’s Five Behaviors of a Cohesive Team, the following elements are key to a successful team:

![The Five Behaviors of a Cohesive Team Model](image-url)
• **Trust.** The foundation of a successful team is vulnerability-based trust. Once there is a true level of trust, then team members can feel safe to engage in dialogue and express their perspectives through productive conflict.

• **Conflict.** Productive conflict allows all ideas to be voiced without taking feedback personally.

• **Commitment.** Once all ideas are safely on the table, the team can move towards clarity and closure, which manifests through commitment. Once a decision is made, each team member stands aligned about what has been decided.

• **Accountability.** After the team commits to decisions, they can have direct and constructive conversations with each other to minimize politics and maximize the health of the team.

• **Results.** With all the above elements in place, the team will be able to achieve the desired results.

In order to achieve success with the Five Behaviors of a Cohesive team, it is helpful for the team to first build awareness of: (1) the behaviors of the team collectively, (2) each individual’s own needs and preferences; and (3) their peers’ needs and preferences. Tools that assist in building such awareness include a Team Assessment, *Everything DiSC*, and Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Once these awareness-building activities are complete, then the team can embark on the important work of strengthening their success with each of these five key behaviors. A healthy and cohesive executive leadership team is crucial to finding success in the steps below.

**Revisit your vision**

A company’s vision represents their reason to exist - it’s their “why” or their “north star.” Having a crystal-clear vision is essential for ensuring the organization is continuously moving in the desired direction, even during a crisis such as COVID-19. For instance, in March, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella wrote a letter to employees highlighting the importance of vision during this crisis: “It is in times of great disruption and uncertainty that our ability to stay grounded in our sense of purpose and remain true to our identity is of the utmost importance.”

If it feels like you are spinning in circles and not making headway, it may be because your vision is not clear. In the COVID-19 environment, it may be because your vision is no longer relevant or feasible. Therefore, we encourage you to ask yourself the following questions:

- How clear was your company vision before COVID-19?
- Can you easily explain why your company exists?
- To what extent does your vision drive daily functioning and decision making?
- Do you revisit your vision frequently to ensure all activities are in alignment?
- Does your vision need to adapt to be relevant in a post COVID-19 world?
- Do you need a temporary vision? (e.g., clothing companies making masks)

If you do not have a clear company vision, then now is a good time to focus energy on this goal. However, if you have a clear vision but are now worried it is no longer relevant, then take the time to reevaluate why you exist as a company and whether this has changed as a result of COVID-19.
Evaluate what you have learned

Once you have revisited your vision, it is helpful to explicitly outline what you have learned through the COVID-19 crisis. Conduct a thorough current state analysis and determine what has been disrupted and strengthened. What have you learned about your operations, business model, reason to exist, customers, leadership, and employees? The questions below can help facilitate this process:

- What assumptions were you making before COVID-19? Why were you making them? Were they accurate?
- What elements of your business have been negatively impacted?
- What positive changes or outcomes have you experienced?
- How have your customers, employees, and leaders been reacting?
- What were the critical roles you needed to focus on and how did you do this?
- How have operations been disrupted?

Outline your short- and long-term future

In addition to revisiting your vision and understanding your current state, it is also a good practice to specify your ideal short- and long-term future. If everything went as planned, what would this look like? This is different from a vision as it is more pragmatic and tangible. The questions below can help you think through this process:

- To what extent do you see COVID-19 altering your business in the near and long term? In what ways?
- What will change and what will not change?
- What are your new assumptions? What are safe assumptions and what are riskier?
- What will it take to get back to full operation?
- Do you have clarity around organizational priorities?
- How will your company continue to create value for employees, customers, and community?
- What are the new demands of the economy?
- How will customer demand be affected?
- Will you need new methods of delivering products and services?
- Are there new safety concerns to address?
- Do we want to go back to the way things were or are positive things emerging we want to continue?

A quick word of caution when planning for the future in this time of uncertainty and crisis: be careful not to overdo it. The rhetoric of these times involves a “post-Covid-19 new normal” with the assumption things are going to be fundamentally different. This is likely true in many ways, but in what areas and to what extent? There is a reasonable likelihood things will not change as dramatically as we expect. Therefore, as you revisit your vision and business model, exercise caution when considering dramatic changes. What if this crisis subsides and you need to go back to the foundations of your core business? There is risk in overly adapting, so consider whether you require a wholesale change or a series of micro (perhaps temporary) changes.
Adapt your strategy and stay agile along the way

“A vision without a strategy remains an illusion” – Lee Bolman

Now that you have thoroughly considered your vision, current state, and future state, it’s time to reevaluate your strategy. In other words, you know where you are going, so how are you going to get there? Even if your vision has not changed, there is a good chance your strategy will need to pivot in this new environment. The considerations and questions below are intended to help you adjust your strategy as necessary.

“A pivot is a change in strategy without a change in vision” – Eric Reis

Evaluate the extent of your pivot

- To what extent did your vision need to change as a result of COVID-19?
- What is your existing short- and long-term strategy and to what extent does it need to change?
- Do you need to make simple tweaks or is it a whole scale change?
- What elements of your current strategy need to stay the same? Why?
- What needs to be altered or removed completely?
- What temporary modifications need to be made?

Role of next-level leadership

Next level leaders play an essential role in communicating the vision and inspiring employees to execute the strategy. They must work cohesively, efficiently, and communicate to employees with a unified voice. Employees rely on leaders for confidence in direction and finding ways to contribute to this new direction.* Find HEC’s tips for leading through uncertainty here.

One of the first steps when adapting your vision and/or strategy is to ensure the alignment of next-level leaders. This hopefully starts with involving them in the process, but if this is not possible, be sure to clearly explain the rationale for the new direction and plan. This clarity allows them to communicate with their teams and obtain their buy-in. Clear and consistent communication about the reason for the new direction helps build alignment across the organization and ensures everyone is working in the same direction.

This also presents a unique opportunity to focus on the development of leaders. Development in this case doesn’t necessarily mean “training,” but on-the-job learning through unique assignments and responsibilities. For example, making a leader responsible for cross-department assignments can create different ways for them to collaborate with other leaders across the organization and learn about different aspects of the business. There are likely stretch projects they can manage which will involve different skills and responsibilities. Continue to trust and lean on your leadership team while also helping them realize the developmental nature of these opportunities. This will involve continuous coaching and helping them see how they are contributing to the bigger organizational goals.
Employee engagement and communication strategy

As mentioned above, next-level leaders play a critical role in communicating with and engaging employees. This involves explaining any updates to vision/strategy, clarifying how they can contribute, setting clear goals and expectations, and holding them accountable along the way. In times of uncertainty, leaders need to connect with employees frequently, with a continued focus on coaching, mentoring, and development. Leading with compassion is key.

Unfortunately, these best practices may not be common. According to a March 23rd Gallup poll, only 39% of employees “strongly agree” their employer has communicated a clear plan of action and just 48% believed their supervisor is keeping them informed about what is going on in the organization. With an adapted game plan, employees need to be clear on the what, why, when, who, and how. They are seeking ways to contribute and look to leadership for these answers. They want to be part of the solution and may disengage if they don’t see where they fit. How this is handled directly contributes to whether employees are adaptable and proactive.

Therefore, it is recommended to develop a specific plan for involving your employees, prioritizing projects, and identifying areas for each employee to contribute. This will likely involve new goals, expectations, and performance needs. Be transparent and explain why this is happening at every stage. A few tips to communicate and connect include daily emails to the entire company, daily meetings with department heads, weekly town halls/happy hours, 15-minute check-ins and check-outs at the beginning and end of the day, and scheduling time on the calendar to connect with people.

Staying agile along the way

In this time of uncertainty, leaders must keep a daily pulse of any changes that require a shift in vision and/or strategy. Agility is essential in the best of times, but when our world continues to change on an hourly basis, leaders cannot afford to be rigid in their planning. It may be a challenge for leaders to plan for the uncertain future with any confidence. Therefore, one approach is to develop three or four plausible futures and loosely plan for each. Prioritize them in terms of likelihood, find common approaches to achieve each, and focus on those commonalities first. Deprioritize the actions that may lead to the least plausible future. Have a process for monitoring the situation, assessing how it impacts your operations, and formally review your strategy on a consistent basis. This may seem like a burden now, but it will help you stay sustainable in the long term.

Reimagining critical roles and required skill sets

Depending on the extent to which you pivot your strategy, there are likely new roles and skill sets required for the short- and long-term. Perhaps it’s time to break from the traditional organizational structure and develop a more matrixed workforce. In the short term, for example, certain projects may take priority and employees report to project managers instead of department managers.
To help make these decisions, you can first identify all critical roles and break them down into specific tasks and required skills (i.e., task analysis). In parallel, conduct an employee skill and competency analysis across the company and identify transferable skills. With all of this information, you can begin to match people to roles from anywhere in the company. This can also involve identifying employees to backfill critical positions as necessary.

With these shifting role requirements, employees may feel anxious because they don’t have the necessary skills to contribute or succeed. According to the same Gallup poll referenced above, only 54% of employees strongly agree that they feel well-prepared to do their work considering the recent impact of COVID-19. Clearly outline the requisite skills to thrive in these new roles and provide development for employees to acquire them. Asking yourself the questions below can help start this process:

- What were the critical roles required to keep your business functioning during the COVID-19 situation?
- What are your key customer services and touchpoints?
- What skills need to be learned for the immediate and ongoing future?
- What needs to be in place for cross-training and cross-departmental learning?
- How can you help different units work more collaboratively?
- How can you empower leaders and employees to collaborate and build teamwork?
- What is the role of our leaders in this process?
- What development needs to occur to up- and re-skill your employees?

**Continue focusing on learning and development**

With all the emerging needs outlined above, it is essential to continue developing your employees and leaders. Unfortunately, during economic downturns, learning and development budgets are often one of the first to be cut. Luckily, there are ways to maintain and even boost learning opportunities by reimagining methods of delivery. For example, during the 2009 recession, a study of 78 employers – covering over 950,000 employees – found that 65% of companies ramped up their efforts to develop employee skills and competencies despite a reduced training budget. Specifically, 59% reassessed their training methods to minimize costs.

As this study illustrates, although the reality of financial strains may require cutting costs, leaders can still find creative ways to invest time and resources for the development of their employees. A simple example involves translating in-person training to a virtual environment to save on travel and logistical costs. Another is sourcing the talents of existing employees who can teach others around the company. This kind of cross-training serves as a learning opportunity for both the recipient and the teacher.

Below are a few reasons why leaders should keep a strict focus on development during these times of uncertainty:

- *It’s good business:* A study of 575 companies by the Association for Talent Development (ATD) found those with formalized training programs have 218% higher income per employee and 24% higher profit margins than companies without such programs.
• **A lift in morale:** Positive employee morale is an essential component of an organization’s culture and performance capabilities during the best of times. Unfortunately, morale can easily become strained in times of fear and uncertainty. When employees are at their most vulnerable, focusing on their development communicates to them you care about their well-being and that they have a future with the company. According to a study of **100 HR managers**, over half reported a boost in employee morale as a key reason to conduct training.

• **Enhance engagement:** Put simply, **engaged employees** create more value for their company and the well-established use of development to enhance engagement is critical during uncertain times. As James K Harter, PhD, Gallup’s Chief Scientist of Workplace Management and Well-Being states:

> “In good times, employee engagement is the difference between being good and being great. In bad times, it's the difference between surviving and not. In good times and bad, low engagement reduces performance and profit. And under the current circumstances [2009 recession], many companies can't afford to let those drop.”

• **Retain your employees:** **Engaged employees** are more likely to stay with their company, speak positively about their job, and strive for success. This results in higher productivity and lower turnover. In addition, focusing on development helps to reduce expenses by contributing to retention. According to “**The Financial Impact of Education and Training**” report, employees without access to learning are 300% more likely to leave their employer within a year.

**Appealing to the new expectations of work-life balance**

Beyond the continued focus on development, how else can your company strive to retain your best employees? Prior to COVID-19, we were experiencing historically low unemployment and a shifting focus on the employee experience as a critical strategic differentiator. Having an exemplary employee experience enhanced a company’s ability to recruit and retain the best talent. Now as we likely shift to an employer’s market with more challenging economic constraints, how can companies maintain a focus on their employee experience?

**Shifting from work-life balance to work-life blend and the rise of remote work**

One of the key drivers of employee experience is work-life balance and well-being. This pandemic has shone a light on many of the assumptions we were making about the ability to work remotely. In other words, it has forced us to accept it is possible! Now that employees have experienced working from home, there is a likelihood many will expect to continue this arrangement. There will also be some eager to return to the office.

More generally, we have been witnessing a shift to the idea of work-life blend. The notion of “work-life balance” assumes “work” and “life” are two separate compartments that need equal, or balanced, attention. The emerging trend of “work-life blending” makes a different assumption
and often appeals to newer generations of workers. This new idea shows how people don’t expect their lives and work to be separate. They are living and working towards a common goal and the boundaries between work and home life are blurred. We have been forced to see this in action as a result of COVID-19. Our employees, leaders, and celebrities have been humanized. Our home life is now our work life. We have a view into our co-workers’ homes, meet their kids and pets, and hear the noises of their daily lives.

Emerging from the COVID-19 work-from-home mandates, it is important to recognize employees will have different expectations about what it means to “return to the office.” It will not be a one-size-fits-all solution and it is therefore important to assess your employee’s expectations, your organization’s capabilities, and willingness to offer alternatives. Begin strategizing about the best ways to customize your arrangement to accommodate the new expectations of flexibility and telecommuting. There is a common view that work from home is an all or nothing situation, but this does not have to be the case. There are many ways to get creative with this new-found capability.

Authors of a recent HBR article share their vision of the future: “Let’s get past the shock of remote work. This has been happening for a long time, so let’s embrace it. We need to get over “where” people are working and focus now on “what” work needs to be done and “how” it will be performed.”

**Conclusion**

We are all saturated with media talking about the “new world of work” and “new normal.” The changes prompted by COVID-19 are requiring us to think differently, develop new ideas, and determine how to maintain continuity of personal life and business. As business leaders, it is essential to think strategically about the specific elements of this process: evaluate the new economy, revisiting why your business exists, adapting your strategy as needed, and keeping employees involved the entire time.

When transitioning employees back to the workplace, leaders are encouraged to avoid simply reverting to business as usual and instead mindfuly focusing on employee well-being and flexibility while achieving the organization’s goals. As the authors of a recent HBR article suggest: “We have the opportunity to emerge from this crisis with both healthier employees and better performing organizations. Now is a time for companies to step back and reexamine which traditional ways of working exist because of convention, not necessity. [Hopefully we can] choose quality work over quantity. Value creative ideas rather than putting face time in the office. Stop rewarding faster response over the better response or the longer workday over a more productive workday.”

As always, HEC is here to support you and we’re excited to offer specific solutions for many of the topics outlined in this article. For example, we can facilitate sessions to enhance team cohesion, help you revisit your vision, clarify your current and future state, develop a strategy, and engage your employees. Additionally, to assist with making resources more accessible for you, we are pleased to offer Employment Training Fund (ETF) for many of our upcoming programs. Please reach out to Traci Manalani, Director of Organizational Effectiveness at HEC, to explore these options further.