



Culture lessons from the pandemic

The pandemic forced a massive cultural experiment on many businesses. Now leaders need to capitalise on the lessons learnt.

The pandemic brought leaders face to face with the contribution culture makes to business performance.

Successive lockdowns forced businesses to do without the typical office-based means of conveying cultural norms and to experience what it was like to work with a 'diluted culture'. It provoked conversations about what was harder with 'less culture' and blew the whistle on long accepted norms that actually turned out to be dispensable.

This period created a two-tier cultural system. On the one hand there were colleagues who had past experience of the informal ways in which their employer operates, and all those unspoken expectations. The second group were those who did not.

New joiners became the placebo in this forced experiment, revealing what was lost when you remove traditional onboarding experiences and those informal hallway conversations where bonds are built, and relationships forged.

Many businesses have acknowledged the challenge of maintaining a culture remotely. More still are voicing the desire to strengthen culture as a result of their pandemic experience.

In reality, there has never been a better moment to do this because 2020 and 2021 have been a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on culture. Leaders need to bank the insights generated from this discombobulating period and use them to deliver a smart cultural reset.

Reassessing the contribution of culture

The ongoing debate around the future of work has provided a helpful platform.

It is a chance to revisit the optimum work arrangements, employment proposition and culture each business needs to have to deliver its goals.

It is a rare opportunity to review culture, strategy, talent and operations in the round, and to agree what is essential to survive and thrive. A key part of this is defining what aspects of your culture really make a difference, and discarding, in a hard-nosed way, those things that were simply warm corporate window dressing.

Let's look at some examples.

One global law firm realised how vital their culture was to delivering complex cross-jurisdictional work. Trust and collaboration had suffered with less travel and face to-face contact. For them, the pandemic revealed that their highest premium work was directly dependent on having highly interdependent work practices and leaders who trusted each other.

Some consulting firms say the pandemic has clarified how essential their culture is in helping them deliver coherent client practices despite the disruption to teams and travel.

Call centres often say it is their culture that energises teams around repetitive work and helps newcomers quickly learn the ropes.

These businesses are pinpointing how their culture helps them to perform, based on their freshly-minted pandemic experience. This means they can focus on how to strengthen this edge, rather than relying on generic culture initiatives.

Pinpointing your cultural insights

Margaret Wheatley argues that the critical act of leadership is to help an organisation think and learn from experiences. If she is right, then leaders should be exploring the cultural insights from the pandemic with their teams. This means asking

1. Which aspects of our culture helped us survive and keep delivering during the pandemic?
2. To what extent did our culture get weaker as a result of people not working together in person? What were the warning signs?
3. What elements of our culture were most difficult to maintain remotely? What went wrong that might not have happened in a face-to-face environment? What worked well?
4. What are the tangible costs of a weaker culture for us - for instance in collaboration, risk management, operations, agility, morale or retention?
5. What do we now know helps fortify our culture?
6. How does our culture need to evolve to help us meet the business challenges ahead?

Translating insights into action

These questions generate tangible data businesses can use to reset their culture for the future. These insights give leaders the chance to pinpoint the critical aspects of the organisation's culture in action.

If you have identified the cornerstone behaviours and beliefs of your culture, then you can showcase what they look like in practice, so they become tangible, recognisable and repeatable.

But of course, culture isn't just about business at its best. Culture helps regulate and normalise behaviour within an organisation. Therefore, it can also help mitigate undesirable behaviour. If we are looking at the value add of culture, then surely it is also about providing informal guardrails that discourage wrongdoing. Your business context is more powerful than any rulebook. The right culture can discourage certain behaviour long before it is picked up by any formal regulatory or compliance team.

Culture is a lens through which you can look at the unhealthy aspects of the workplace and how you influence predictable risk. By predictable risk I mean, for example, the line hard driving businesses have to balance between achieving stellar results and delivering at any cost.

Or it is the tension heavily relationship-based businesses need to watch between playing old school favourites and fair access to opportunity. These shadow behaviours are part of the reality of the workplace. We often don't like to name them, let alone include them in our thinking about culture. This is missing a trick.

Ambitious leaders will want use culture as a lens for examining situations that have gone wrong and pinpointing where a more active culture might have headed issues off.



So, let us use culture to shine a light on what our business looks like at its best. Leaders need to name those critical acts of culture they want to share, encourage and reward. Equally let us be open about how we want to regulate ourselves and catch behaviour we don't want.

No one can manufacture culture. But you can reset your cultural roadmap and rigorously align your practices. With enough collective intent, the right culture can become a powerful part of your business's muscle memory.

Promoting culture to the Board agenda

But don't stop there!

The gold standard will be achieved by clear-sighted businesses that really pick up the ball and connect cultural practices with their Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Board agenda.

Every business needs a narrative that conveys their purpose - their what, why and how. Increasingly businesses are taking the time to articulate their business purpose as part of their strategy complete with actions, measures and timeframes. Aspiring Boards will want to detail their cultural work in that mix.

That means defining indicators that track and probe the health of your culture. For example, companies who say their culture is collaborative, need to find ways of tracking collective work and the value it creates.

With so many investigations citing systemic cultural failures, Boards need to be equipped to have substantive culture discussions as part of their day-to-day agenda. Such conversations are rare at an executive level but needn't be.

Smart business leaders and Boards will use this pandemic to ask more demanding questions about the type of culture their business needs and how it is being managed. Leadership is the management of culture. If we learn from the pandemic means we can all be better equipped to play this role.

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