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February 3, 2022 · 4 min read

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How to strengthen workplace culture in 2022 and beyond

What exactly is a positive "workplace culture"? Opinions can vary depending on the type of workplace and industry, but there are certain commonalities all can agree on. That is, it's the culture's responsibility to obsess over meeting customer needs, increase employee engagement, and decrease employee turnover.

According to a [PWC 2021 Global Culture Survey](#), 66% of C-suite executives and board members believe culture is more important to performance than the organization's strategy or operating model, and 72% of senior-level management report that their culture helps support and implement successful change initiatives.

So how can forward-thinking organizations that have endured the COVID-19 pandemic, and new workplace dynamics, strengthen their workplace culture in 2022 and beyond to create a positive work environment? They should seek to create psychologically safe working environments, facilitate hybrid working models, and improve the transparency of communication.

Create an environment of psychological safety

Psychological safety is the belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.

It's a critical driver of high-quality decision-making, group dynamics, interpersonal relationships, innovation, and execution within organizations. It was a popular topic before the pandemic, and it still is due to its relevance to agility, diversity, inclusion, and [remote work](#).

According to a [Deloitte Insights study](#), for employers who invest in mental health, the ROI after year one was found to be \$1.62 for every \$1 invested. As well, a [2017 Gallup report](#) found that if organizations increase psychological safety, it makes employees more engaged in their work, leading to a 27% reduction in turnover, and a 12% increase in productivity.

To learn more about how you can implement psychological safety in your organization, you can consult [online guides](#) from the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) or take [leadership training courses](#) from the likes of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA). In Canada, we also have the [Psychologically Safe Workplace Awards](#), a national, evidence-based annual competition that highlights outstanding employee experience with respect to workplace mental health. The organization also offers a wide range of useful online resources, such as [How to become a psychologically safe leader](#).

Studying what makes some teams better communicators than others can also prove valuable. In [Patrick Lencioni's](#) Five Dysfunctions of a Team, the author reveals why teams, even the best ones, often struggle. He outlines a powerful model and actionable steps that can be used to overcome these common hurdles and build a cohesive, effective team.

While the book is a worthy read, it can be summarized in the five key points below.

1. Absence of trust, seen as an unwillingness to be vulnerable within the group
2. Fear of conflict, manifested by seeking artificial harmony over constructive passionate debate
3. Lack of commitment, demonstrated by feigning buy-in for group decisions, creating ambiguity throughout the organization
4. Avoidance of accountability, a ducking of responsibility to call peers and/or superiors on counterproductive behavior which sets low standards
5. Inattention to results, a focusing on personal success, status, and ego before team success

Creating a high-functioning and psychologically safe work environment isn't easy, but should be looked to as a bedrock for any organization hoping to strengthen its productivity and workplace culture.

Improve your quality of communication

[Transparent communication](#) is the act of both good and bad information being shared upward, downward, and laterally throughout an organization, in a way that allows all to see the why behind the words. Naturally, it's a good practice that facilitates accountability in any organization. With the onset of the pandemic and companies switching from in-office to remote work, there was a significant boost in transparent communication that greatly helped facilitate the change, one that workers benefited greatly from as well.

A study by the [MIT Sloan Management Review](#) saw the average culture rating across Culture 500 companies experience a sharp jump between March and April 2020. In the early months of the pandemic, one theme that stood out was the quality of communication from leaders. Employees of Culture 500 companies gave their leaders much higher marks in terms of honest communication, transparency, and ethical behaviour during the first six months of the coronavirus pandemic compared to the preceding year.

Employees were twice as likely to discuss the quality of communication by top leaders in positive terms during the early months of the pandemic than they were at the same time the year before. In fact, employees were 88% more likely to express positive sentiments about leaders' honesty and transparency. Employees also had a more positive view of transparency (42%) and communication (35%) in general.

Now that remote working has been normalized, the challenge is to maintain these increased levels of communication. To ensure optimal productivity and satisfaction, remote employees require increased touchpoints with management and fellow team members.

Results-Only Work Environment (ROWE)

Results-only work environment (ROWE) is a human resource management strategy that rewards employees for results rather than number of hours worked, with more control over where and how they work. Its creators, [Gali Ressler and Jody Thompson](#), co-authored the best-selling book Why Work Sucks and How To Fix It in 2010.

The core concept of ROWE is that each person in the organization is entirely accountable and autonomous, meaning all employees have clear objectives and measurable results.

The four pillars of a successful ROWE strategy are:

1. Employees understand what their role in the company is
2. Employees understand what they're responsible for
3. Employees understand how results are measured
4. Employees understand the repercussions of failing to meet results

The system was designed to increase productivity while eliminating constraints that reinforce the idea that people can't be trusted with complete autonomy. This is what the ROWE system identifies as "sludge", which can take the form of gossip, cliquiness, passive-aggressive banter, employee squabbles over requests for time off, office distractions, and more.

Naturally, a ROWE is a good fit for remote workforces. For companies with hybrid or in-person work environments, this management strategy can also be a solution for presenteeism. Thanks to the increased flexibility that ROWE provides, employees can more easily work around appointments and other duties. As a result, they use fewer sick days and take less time off.

While ROWE might not be suitable for every organization, many companies could benefit from borrowing concepts from this strategy to manage a remote workforce.

Competitive advantages

Whether considering implementing ROWE, pursuing a team-optimization plan using Lencioni's model as a reference point, or embarking on a discovery project to improve your team, some overarching key points can be leveraged to strengthen workplace culture. A recent roundtable talk that was hosted by [Slack and the Financial Times](#) unearthed these insights:

- Bake flexibility and openness into your processes and systems so that everyone's voice can be heard
- Remind leaders to encourage staff input to build trust and open the floor to innovative ideas to help boost productivity
- Embed your corporate culture into every part of your business, from staff hiring and onboarding to continuing professional development
- Stay curious. Try new technologies, or use existing ones in different ways.
- Get inspired by how other fast-moving companies have adapted corporate culture to fit a radically different working environment

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many organizations to shift their offices to remote or hybrid work environments. While the initial shift to home offices resulted in a boost in transparent communication that employees have benefited from, maintaining these efforts as the pandemic drags on has posed a challenge.

To strengthen their workplace culture and maintain productivity, organizations may need to pivot their management style and experiment with new team-building approaches to nurture and motivate employees. As always, delivering innovative, high-impact employee benefits can make a big difference in enhancing company culture and supporting employees to help them deliver results. Adding a quality virtual care program to your benefits, for example, can improve retention by helping your team members save time and reducing stress.

If you'd like to speak to one of our experts on how to bring your employee benefits to the next level, please reach out. We'd be happy to share our insights with you as Canada's leading provider of virtual care.

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