



Beyond the Face Mask: A Focus on the Whole Person and Whole Organization When Returning to the Office

By Catherine Bell and Amy Born

We've been eagerly following the latest writing about the changing nature of the workplace and how the eventual "return to the office" will impact organizational culture and individual workers. What have we found? The focus seems to be mostly about the technical mechanics of returning to the office – how to bring people back in a way that safeguards their physical health: take employees' temperatures on the way in, stagger the return of workers, seat people further apart, new cleaning protocols, etc.

Somewhat absent from this coverage are considerations about the whole person and the whole organization as employees return to the office. What about the social and emotional needs that individuals will be facing as they return to the workplace, and the ways this transition will impact organizational culture?

At a time when we are experiencing or anticipating a scarcity of resources, we realize it may seem counterintuitive – even chutzpadik – to recommend putting time, money, and energy into something as intangible as organizational culture. But as research – and our own experience – consistently shows, this is an investment that has huge dividends in terms of team effectiveness and productivity. **We propose that right now, we can't afford to *not* invest in our people and organizational culture.**

Here's why. We are all facing profound change and uncertainty, in our work and beyond. The changes in the world around us are unprecedented, fast-moving, and in some cases, irrevocable. We may experience survivor guilt if we remain employed while others have been laid off or furloughed. With those layoffs and furloughs comes a loss of social support and disruption of positive social dynamics in the workplace – our "[best friend at work](#)" may not be there anymore. We may harbor resentment toward our funders, board members, or colleagues if we feel that they let us down during the crisis; we may feel a loss of connection to the organization and community if we did not feel well-cared for.

Like so many things about this crisis, however, we can see not only challenges but also opportunities for learning, creativity, and positive change. For organizational leaders – for anyone who shares responsibility for supporting the culture of a team or an organization – we offer these suggestions for supporting a resilient and connected workplace culture as we return to the office:

- **Seek feedback from your team** about what people appreciated about different ways of work of the past few months. Based on what you learn, what can your organization keep doing? There are a number of ways to get feedback including directly asking people about their experiences, having managers report back on what they are hearing and/or implementing a quick and easy survey to gauge how people are doing. Leading Edge is currently supporting organizations in offering a [Pulse Survey](#) about their current experiences at work which may help inform your strategy around returning to the office.
- **Support employee wellness** either by subsidizing staff access to wellness programs, or by sharing free or accessible resources staff can use for meditation, yoga, exercise, etc. Praise those who make time for self-care, and support those who are struggling to find time. It helps if leaders and managers can model and talk about their own self-care to highlight it as a priority.
- **Demonstrate a commitment to relationship- and team-building efforts** within the workplace at this time of “rebuilding” organizational culture. This could mean adding more relational components to meetings, creating a check-in or buddy system for people to strengthen relationships, and investing in virtual or in-person team-building retreats.
- **Create opportunities for reflecting on employee growth and performance** so that your staff can best learn and “build new muscle” from the ways they have been pushed to adapt. Due to possible pivots in programs or ways of work, some employees may be leaning into new skills and stretching their skills and abilities. Find ways to recognize and reflect on their progress.
- **Be aware of trauma responses**, and have patience and compassion for colleagues when they show symptoms of trauma such as difficulty concentrating, anxiety, impatience, anger, and fatigue in the workplace. Provide your team with resources for further support (here are a few):

<https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/selfcare.asp>

<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline>

<https://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/mental-health-resources/trauma-disaster>

- **Communicate constantly** by creating more frequent, brief connection points for teams undergoing major structural or strategic change, such as a brief daily “standing meeting”; if this is something you shifted to during remote work, keep it going.
- **Maintain or shift to generous and flexible vacation policies.** Vacation time is important, even at this moment when resources may be more scarce. Not only have employees not been able to work in the office, most people also have not been able to spend time with friends and family, travel, or truly relax and unplug. Your organization might revisit paid time off policies to ensure a reasonable balance of vacation time and carry over based on the needs of the organization and the needs of your employees.
- **Be open to new possibilities** about whether or not it makes sense to “return to the office” or if virtual is working better for all or some of the workforce, now that your team has built more skill in nurturing a remote workforce.

Our frame of “the return to the office” is not universal: it’s specific to those who have been able to retain their work, their livelihoods, while also practicing social distancing, and who anticipate a return to a workplace in the future. This is a privilege that is not shared by the essential workers who have been out delivering our groceries and collecting our garbage, or by frontline healthcare workers – all of whom have been putting themselves in harm’s way to support and care for the collective good. And it’s a privilege not shared by the hundreds of thousands of people who have been laid off during this time. So even as we struggle to meet the challenges of this professional moment, we realize that it is a privilege not afforded to many people. At this time of pandemic, everyone is experiencing trauma and loss on some level – even those who have not personally experienced illness, loss of a loved one, loss of work and income, loss of housing or food security. For those who have experienced these things, the trauma is compounded.

Whatever the extent of their trauma, our people and our organizational culture need attention right now. When we are able to support the full person in these key moments of transition, we not only maintain the strengths of our existing organizational culture but actually develop new ways to encourage a thriving and impactful workplace. Let’s use the opportunity of the return to the office to make our organizations even better places to work.

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