REMOTE WORKING: MOLD AND PRESERVE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE UNDER THE NEW NORMAL

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Abstract

The year 2020 has been extremely challenging and by far the most dramatic year with the Covid-19 outbreak. The situation demanded unprecedented actions across the world to limit the virus spreading, leading to put restrictions on many human events such as travelling and unnecessary human gatherings. The biggest hit of this, however, was on organizations as they were forced to rethink the way they function business activities and the way of working. With the requests made by governments worldwide to work remotely, businesses had no other option left with other than converting to virtual platform embracing it as the new normal. However, the impact this shift has on organizations seems to be varying from minor to extreme as well as positive to negative, due to the differences among organizations. The main affected point has been the culture of the organization, as it was highly depended on the how the organization is working which emphasizes the physical interactions between various organizational features including employees. Accordingly, this paper will be looking at the extent to which the culture of an organization could be affected by this new normal of working remotely and how it could be used to mold and preserve the culture in a better way to achieve the success, the organization always wanted to thrive. Based on past literature, both positive and negative implications this pandemic

situation has created on organizational culture have been identified along with the potential ways in which this cumbersome situation could be handled being in line with the new normal. The analysis emphasized that more than working physically; changing the mindset towards culture would have to be tackled at every level of the organization. Identification of the work types to be facilitated virtually, maintaining a better relationship with employees even through virtual platforms with the involvement of senior management and reconstructing existing work arrangements or reinventing new ones while paying considerable attention to all the stakeholders have been identified as the crucial factors which might help achieve the success of the organization through a sustained, yet practical culture.

Keywords – Covid-19, Pandemic, Remote Work, Virtual Work, Work From Home

Introduction

Before the Covid-19 outbreak, conservative perception was that office/workspace was a critical factor to achieve productivity, sourcing best talent and etc. Further office life becomes expressive as it helps sustain organizational culture with belief, values and practices that reinforce how people work together. With the Covid-19 outbreak in the first quarter of January 2020, lockdowns were imposed all around the world disabling operations of all industries. Remote working or working from home became crucial for companies to survive regardless the culture that existed within the organizations. The outbreak, which is still spreading all around the world and is now officially a pandemic, creates the need for remote working for both employers and employees to sustain and be safe. However, there are impacts on the organizational culture due to remote working, which generates space to either adapt to new culture or improve the existing culture of an organization. As considering the individual level, employees overnight crooked in to work from home employees whilst some are ranked as essential workers. Further, economic closure and government response change some fundamentals of the industries, while creating openings for new opportunities for emerging industries happening during the natural disasters.

According to Boland et al. (2020), the unprecedented time that is caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has been excruciatingly challenging to the wellbeing of human beings. Organizations all around the globe have acted efficiently to mitigate barriers and secure their employees

through means that were not envisioned. Boland et al. (2020) also suggests that reimagining how each role will be executed remotely and changing the attitude to working from home have been in an experimental stage during the early phase of the pandemic.

Prive (2020), states that companies have adapted to remote working three times more during the past 15 years, but it failed to become a common occurrence. With the outbreak of the virus made "work from home" a common notion and employees enjoyed the idea of remote work as it came with freedom and flexibility (Prive, 2020). Prive (2020), further explains that with time, a certain amount of fatigue took over the initial desire to work remotely, particularly for employees with children. Evidently, remote working has not been easy for organizations regardless the industry and the culture, however it is believed that remote working does impact on a company's culture.

Organizational Culture

An organizational culture is referred to the values it holds (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983). Davis (1984) on the other hand explains that the organizational culture is all about the beliefs, norms and ideas shared within as organization. Although these definitions and clarifications are from previous decades, they still apply appropriately even in the modern context. Organizational culture is now widely defined as shared beliefs and values which holds an organization together (Fakhar et al., 2012). The culture of an organization is more often reflected in the vision, mission and values which eventually becomes a belief system that guides employee behavior and attitude to make up a functioning culture (Ghosh & Srivastava, 2014). Gofee & Jones (1996) states that the organizational culture is the glue that keeps all stakeholders together ensuring its effectiveness and performance (Goffee & Jones, 1996). Thus, an organization's culture defines how work is done within the organization and it slowly builds an image which becomes the identity of an organization. In a nutshell, culture is a manifestation of what attachments to things and people actually mean. It is demonstrating in behaviors, physical space and processes (Hawksworth, 2020). Pre Covid-19 culture was relied on tangible elements in office spaces like conferences, tea breaks with colleagues and other recreational events. With remote working, cultural anchors and measure will have to take a massive turn with the physical elements being omitted.

Impact on Organizational Culture from Remote Working

It is apparent that the pandemic Covid-19, caused most organizations to facilitate remote working in order to ensure the safety of all employees while maintaining their productivity. According to Herway & Hickman (2020), the organizational culture is one of many valuable assets that is in a vulnerable position during these unprecedented times. The day-to-day practices, both formal and informal, act as building blocks of a culture. These are practiced over a period of time as a result of human interaction in the form of training, frequent events and face to face communication (Suar & Khuntia, 2010). The tangible interactions and physical presence of people are major factors that contributes towards the sustainability of the culture (Kerr & Slocum, 2005). As culture can be identified as how things are done as Herway & Hickman (2020) suggests, with Covid-19 the *"how"* has been put into question. Remote working has changed how things are done as it eliminates a huge part of the norms that is already in existence disturbing the established culture.

Heskett (2020) elaborates that studies reveal that the success of remote work depends on the work culture fostered by the senior most employees, as they embrace the idea of remote working. On the flipside, remote work can also facilitate a toxic culture in the organization if the management fails to be attentive.

In addition to this, Prive (2020) reveals that the loyalty and engagement of employees are also impacted with working remotely. Rath (2006) uncovers facts on workplace friendships stating that people make a best friend at work who is also engaged in their job. These kinds of friendships create feeling of having family at work with meaningful relationships and connections. Linking to this, Prive (2020) discloses how employees feel lonely when working from home regardless gender, marital status or family background. Being stripped away from the bonded connections at work and working remotely in isolation has impacted the mindsets of employees.

Ramarajan & Reid (2013), rationalize that employees are often in a dilemma and find it extremely challenging in balancing work and life. Maintaining boundaries between their work and non-work activities has been challenging regardless remote work or not. With remote work and the confinement during the pandemic, this issue has been further amplified (Kevin et al., 2020). Kevin et al., (2020) discuss that despite remote work eliminating certain burden such as daily commute and related expenses; it still disturbs the productivity and mind space of employees which impacts the organizational culture.

Molding and Preserving Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is a holistic force that draws guidelines for behavior, interactions and actions in the workplace (Antonakis et al., 2016). Hawksworth (2020), explains that employees often see the culture of an organization, for what it is once they became spectators instead of participants. Switching companies, location or even the job role may give one the opportunity to be a witness of the company culture bringing it all to realization. Remote working is one of those instances when employees get to see that culture as a witness. If the culture of the company is hostile and toxic, remote working will be a blessing in disguise (Howard-Grenville, 2020).

However, preserving the existing values and molding up to new culture under the new normal is crucial in order to sustain organizations and retain all stakeholders of the business. Prive (2020) suggests that investing on various activities that would contribute to bringing the teams back together on regular basis instead of focusing only on work will develop the culture. Prive (2020) further elaborates on this by recommending the involvement of managers to connect with the teams in a personal level to motivate and enhance positive organizational culture. Enforcing video meetings so that employees rekindle with each other, refresh their connections and pushes employees to even groom in order to present themselves will boost the mindsets as it removes employees from their mundane routine. Videos also keep employees accountable in addition to enhance the feeling of being connected. According to Katzenbach et al., (2012) *"At the end of the day, culture isn't a place, culture is a mindset"* and facilitating this kind of mindset will mold a remote working culture while preserving the existing values of the workplace.

Boland et al., (2020), suggest reconstructing how work is done in order to mold the culture in this new normal that Covid -19 has handed over to the world. Most companies have transplanted processes that already exists in the physical working context to the remote working environment. While this may work for some companies, majority will not survive without reconstructing processes. Boland et al., (2020) emphasize that identifying the key activities/ processes and envisioning them with fresh pairs of eyes; involving employees and entertaining their suggestions to fit the remote working context will bring about more practical solutions. This will not only ensure smooth functioning of operations, but it will also give employees an opportunity to interact and communicate leading to preserve the existing relationships and culture.

Valet (2020), suggests that companies should encourage employees to have some "alone" time or stay in their private space taking care of themselves. Staying away and disconnecting from devices and online activities will give employees time off to refresh to get back to the online

space and connect with their colleagues. Valet (2020) also highlights the importance of employees focusing on their personal relationships when not working.

In order to preserve the existing culture, Hawksworth (2020) states the importance of knowing the culture and leveraging it. There is no better opportunity than what is presented now to learn the key characteristics that needs to be preserved and work on those to fit the remote working context. This also helps in eliminating anything toxic in the workplace, thus molding the culture towards a brighter pasture. Although it is obvious and similar to the suggestion made by Boland et al., (2020) Hawksworth (2020) also supports the listening factor; taking time to listen to employees to find the best fit in terms of working processes in the remote working context will support mold the culture.

Boland (2020) further suggests on the following:

"Decide 'people to work' or 'work to people'".

This explains on employers deciding which roles require to be physical present, to what extent and which roles can add value working remotely. The concept is elaborated as follows.

"Fully remote (net positive value-creating outcome)

Hybrid remote (net neutral outcome)

Hybrid remote by exception (net negative outcome but can be done remotely if needed)

On site (not eligible for remote work)".

The virtual work arrangement's success has major 02 components. Effective culture adaptation by the c-suite who take the grip of the concept of remote work and on the other hand remote work can be a better solution to a negatively impacted office environment (toxic environment) consequential of management desertion.

As per Armando Del Bosque, "Organizational culture helps us find what we love, love what we do and then we can overcome many barriers, including social distancing with our colleagues from our work teams.". Further Melanie Roberts state , "Charles Handy … refers to culture as the soup we all swim about in, and that soup is thin when the 'here' is not a location and people are working asynchronously and perhaps not sharing a common 'way to do things". Employees who are currently engaged in virtual work arrangements show their interest towards the concept through the degree that they become more loyal, which may develop the organizational culture.

Moreover Betsy Dickson , Managing Director Benjamin F Edwards & Co , mentioned as her employer allowed to work from home, the autonomy, flexibility and productivity enhancement helped out to handle problems which in previously, in the shared office situation, would have been gone already. Virtual work set up gives many opportunities for the organization culture.

With reference to the Harvard Business School , Joan De Souza stated that working virtually helps some functional departments to perform better as they can ditch toxic work environment. Yet some departments stimulate employees just going to the cafeteria or a coffee such as sales, marketing, admin etc. Joan De Souza recommended remote working for her company and her customer organizations, with a warning sign. The concept is suitable on certain industries and departments. It is quite challenging to execute supple flexible approach to extended value chain as not every organization is ready to embrace the same. Adrian Zicari noted that challenges of outspreading the culture into a virtual work employee are not the matter of technology. As he suggested organizational structures, procedures and culture are not yet ready to keep distance work as the new normal. It is not a technological issue, but a managerial one. The technology more or less exists today. What we don't have yet (in many cases) is the new mindset". In any condition, a strong, tight and flourishing culture keeps employees happy and more efficient. (Heskett J. L., 2020)

Also creating the organization culture which influences all employees while getting connected virtually is more challenging. Human Resource department needs to nurture the environment to be efficient and fitting, so that it can pull the whole team together, even though members are scattered and not meeting physically. Since the c-suite and senior managers are aware on the esenssiality of the organizational culture for its business success, many best practices are carding out to maintain and foster company culture within virtual teams. As per the survey done by TELUS International (global customer experience and digital solutions provider), a mainstream of participants (52%) felt less linked to their organizational culture when working virtually. Incorporating organizational values for day today activities, establishing peer to peer recognition, establishing clear communication norms, building camaraderie and organizing companywide initiatives such as virtual gatherings, training sessions as well as using disruption to bolster the culture core help organizations to sustain a culture (Kevin Kniffin, 2020).

Conclusion

The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to all organizations to reassess their existing culture. It is an opening that allows studying and analyzing the factors that are inefficient and toxic to the workers and the workplace. It is important that companies eliminate practices that slow down the productivity when having to work remotely. As discussed,

processes that work well in a physical environment might need revisiting and alteration to guarantee that they merge well in the remote working context. Focusing on the positives that remote work can bring about for the company; are as such empowering employees, making them more responsible and accountable of their KPIs while allowing them to work freely in a space of their choice. In addition, communicating effectively and strategically to make sure that employees feel entertained while having occasional online events to spice up the working environment could help with building the virtual team bonds. Through these strategic activities, organizations will pave new avenues in molding the working culture to fit the new normal that has been introduced with remote working; and ensure that the existing crucial elements of the culture is preserved and retained. Frequent communication from the senior management will help preserve values of the prevailing culture. It will be a reminder of all the elements that defines the organizational culture and help preserve it within the unprecedented conditions. Dispensing the habits and systems that are outdated, reinventing employee roles to optimize their functionality and create a better experience can be executed along with the remote work protocol. The change requires transformational leadership and thinking involving all stakeholders. Not all organizations will appear stronger from the current pandemic and the devastating health, economic, and social impacts it is unleashing. Yet managers and leaders with a firm sense of what their organizational culture is — a common tool kit that enables their employees to act, and the beliefs and commitments brought forward by acting in certain ways — can help their employees navigate the current environment in a way that is authentic to the organization's history yet flexible to the realities we all face.

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