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Career Compass No. 95: Use Return-to-Office as Your Opportunity to Reset Culture

Instead of "returning to normal," leaders must look to the return-to-the-office transition as a rare opportunity to reset organizational culture and become more effective than ever. Here's how.

By Dr. Frank Benest | Apr 4, 2022 | ARTICLE

Dear Frank:

I'm the HR manager in a northwestern city. I serve on a team led by the HR director with representatives from all departments. We are tasked by the manager and executive team with designing our return-to-the-office approach as the pandemic becomes more manageable. It is clear that we will be offering some kind of hybrid model of work, allowing work from home part of the week. However, the team is struggling with a whole array of other issues, such as
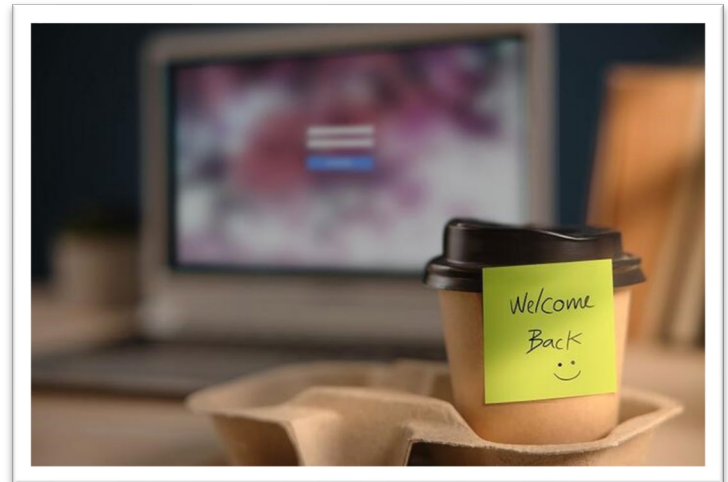
- *Who decides which days of the week people can work from home?*
- *Should we do away with vaccination mandates and other safety protocols?*
- *What about those who can't work from home? How do we support them?*
- *What are better ways to manage employees whom a supervisor may not see (except virtually) most of the week?*
- *How do we enhance collaboration among teams in a hybrid situation?*

As we look to develop return-to-the-office policies, many of our managers are pushing us to "get back to normal." Just as employees feel frustrated and exhausted, managers, too, are feeling discouraged and overwhelmed as they try to maintain productivity and deal with workers they don't see in person. As we transition back to the office, a certain number of managers are basically telling employees to "just deal with it."

Can you give us some guidance?

Your manager and executive team should task a cross-functional group to look at these key post-pandemic organizational questions. As local government employees transition back to the office, senior management certainly needs to "zoom in" and focus on running the business. At the same time, senior management must also "zoom out" and ascertain how to transform the business as they confront new realities.

While new policies and protocols, such as safety measures and scheduling are important, I suggest that the bigger issue is using the return-to-the-office as an opportunity to reset organizational culture.

What did management look like during the shutdown?

For many local government agencies, managing remote teams was difficult. While some managers became more detached, many managers reverted to traditional management practices and behaviors. For instance, some managers

- Became more directive and controlling of team members and their work.
- Focused on analytic and task-based work.
- Demonstrated less enabling, coaching, and support of team members.
- Did not facilitate collaboration across silos.
- Provided fewer opportunities for professional development.

(See Julian Birkinshaw, "[Managing in a Virtual Workplace—Making Use of All Possible Levers of Influence](#)," forbes.com, July 27, 2021.)

What is the business case for post-pandemic culture change?

The big issues for organizations in all sectors are post-COVID talent challenges. Local government organizations cannot address their internal and external adaptive challenges without talent. The problem is that talent is mobile—it can go anywhere, anytime.

We have all become aware of the "Great Resignation." Talent is fleeing organizations in the private, nonprofit, and public sectors. The MissionSquare Research Institute recently surveyed state and local government employees and found that 52% were considering leaving their government agencies in the next 12 months. (See MissionSquare Research Institute, "[2021 Updated Survey Results: Public Sector Employee Views on Finances and Employment Outlook Due to COVID-19](#).")

In response to talent retention issues, most senior leaders are trying to retain employees with a transactional approach of enhancing compensation and benefits. Given inflation and a desire by employees for more flexibility and other benefits that are more family-oriented, enhancing compensation and benefits makes sense. However, on the whole, employees are focused on relational issues (i.e., do I feel that I belong) that influence whether they stay or go. (See McKinsey & Company "'Great Attrition or 'Great Attraction'—The Choice Is Yours," McKinsey Quarterly, September 8, 2021.) This is a big disconnect that will undercut an organization's talent retention efforts.

> "TALENT IS MOBILE—IT CAN GO ANYWHERE, ANYTIME."

In the past, it was all about what employers wanted from employees. Now it is all about what employees want and need. In most organizations, senior management has not made the shift in mindset.

In a recent Work Trend Index report, 60% of 30,000 employees surveyed felt that top management needed to prioritize positive culture as employees return to the office. (See "The Next Great Disruption Is Hybrid Work—Are We Ready?," Work Trend Index, microsoft.com, March 22, 2021.) In the past, building an engaging culture was a nice, discretionary thing to think about. Now it is a key business necessity if local governments are to survive and thrive in the post-pandemic.

What is "organizational culture"?

Culture is perceived by most of us as a fairly squishy concept. Culture is simply defined as "the way we do things around here." Culture is built through a commitment to certain beliefs expressed in a set of behaviors practiced by organizational members. (See Dan Rockwell, "Solution Saturday: Culture in Two Words," Leadership Freak blog, April 16, 2016.) Culture is basically the underlying operating system of the organization.

The current culture—the way we do things around here—is built over time. Likewise, to change and enhance organizational culture requires sustained effort one step at a time. Positive culture change requires a sustained "long march" (Jim Collins, Great By Choice, 2011).

What are the key elements of a vital, energizing culture?

In a post-pandemic environment, employees want a culture characterized by "connection." (See Michael Lee Stallard, "To Cope with Labor Shortages, Raise Emotional Compensation," SmartBrief blog, July 9, 2021.) Each employee wants to feel that

- My work matters.
- I belong here.

- The organization and my team-mates care about me.
- My contributions are valued and recognized.
- My family commitments are not disregarded.
- I am learning and growing.
- The organization aims to help me advance in my career.
- I have flexibility and autonomy within certain guide-rails.
- My well-being is important to the organization's leadership.

(See Career Compass No. 85: To Thrive in Post-Pandemic, Enhance the Employee Experience.)

What are the benefits of a great culture?

A great culture has many benefits to an organization. A great culture:

- Promotes talent attraction and retention (people want to join a local government and stay).
- Fosters productivity and performance.
- Generates employee engagement and commitment.
- Creates trust between management and line employees.
- Promotes collaboration and innovation.
- Helps create employee satisfaction.

To create a more vital, energizing culture and accrue the benefits identified above, consider the following approaches.

Make on-site the new off-site

In developing a hybrid work model, your team must think through the advantages and disadvantages of remote vs. office work.

Most studies indicate that productivity for remote workers has remained the same or has increased during the pandemic. For many employees, there are fewer distractions at home and more ability to focus. Others with children or elderly parents at home might want to return to the office because they cannot focus on work at home.

> *"POSITIVE CULTURE CHANGE REQUIRES A LONG MARCH."*

What has suffered with remote work is collaboration across silos. Research from Microsoft indicates that cross-functional collaboration has decreased by up to 25% (See Ron Carlucci, "Rebuilding Relationships Across Teams in a Hybrid Workplace," hbr.org, Nov 10, 2021.) No one team or department can address, much less solve, a big adaptive problem, such as public health, affordable housing, or traffic congestion. During the

pandemic, most communication and collaboration have been within team or division or department silos, not across silos.

The other big problem with remote work is "weaker ties" with others outside the team and a general lack of connection with the organization. Good managers with people-oriented skills have been able to maintain communication and connection within the team, but it has been difficult to forge a sense of connection outside the unit.

Consequently, an organization should not want to bring people back to the office to do computer work or other individual work that can be done remotely. Rather, on-site should become the new off-site (See Erica Keswin, "In the Hybrid Era, "On-sites Are the New Off-sites," hbr.org, Jan 6, 2022.) Pre-pandemic, organizations used off-site meetings for team building, culture-building, strategic or creative thinking, and alignment across units. Bringing people back to the office should focus on purposeful on-site activities that generate new ideas across units, promote creative thinking and collaborative problem-solving across silos, and build a sense of connection and identity for the whole organization.

> **"MAKE ON-SITE THE NEW OFF-SITE."**

The goal is creating an environment in which employees look forward to going into the office.

Think about office architecture

Local governments do not have a lot of extra money to significantly reconfigure their offices. However, as employees return to the office, agencies must be thoughtful about tweaking the configuration of offices in order to promote communication, collaboration, and innovation. While people need individual spaces to do focused work, there needs to be communal spaces for people to "bump into each other," interact, and share ideas. These informal spaces may include kitchenettes, small eating areas, coffee/tea stations, patios, or other spaces for people to sit and talk.

Focus on people-centered leadership

To build over time a culture of connection that is engaging, the big issue is re-skilling managers so they exert people-centered leadership. Old-school management ("my way or the highway") will just exacerbate the exit of talent who seek a sense of purpose, desire to feel that they belong and are valued, and want more flexibility, autonomy, and growth and development.

In resetting organizational culture, the key relationship is between the manager and his/her direct reports.

Positive change happens (or does not) in the middle of the organization. In building a better culture, the role of mid-managers is paramount.

To re-orient and engage mid-managers in this post-pandemic challenge of resetting the culture, top management must

- Discuss with mid-managers post-COVID talent challenges.
- Collect information from employees on what they need and want and share this data with managers.
- Train mid-managers with a focus on "soft" people skills, including coaching.
- Encourage managers to conduct "stay interviews" with direct reports.
- Identify role models among mid-managers and reward and celebrate them.

Redefine productivity

Pre-COVID, managers could directly supervise employees in-person. Productivity was often defined by "bottoms in the seat" with an emphasis on completing certain tasks. With remote or hybrid work, managers cannot easily supervise in an over-the-shoulder manner. Productivity must be redefined to focus on outcomes and results, allowing employees the autonomy within certain guide rails to "figure it out" and produce the desired results. Productivity should also include positive participation and contributions on teams and support of others.

> *"EMPLOYEES WANT DIRECTION, NOT DIRECTIONS."*

Employees want direction, not directions. (See Lazlo Bock, "5 New Rules for Leading a Hybrid Team," hbr.org, Nov 17, 2021.)

Conduct "stay interviews"

To help retain talent and in the process enhance organizational culture, managers should be trained in how to conduct "stay interviews." A stay interview is a one-on-one interview between a manager and an employee. The purpose of the interview is to learn what will keep the employee working with you and elicit what would entice the employee to leave you.

Here are some typical stay interview questions that elicit key information from the employee:

- What do you like most about your work?
- In your work here, where do you find meaning and purpose?
- What keeps you here?
- What would entice you away?
- What do you want to learn this year?

- What makes for a great day at work?
- What do you wish you had more time to do?
- What brings you down on the job?
- Is there anything you'd like to change about your job to make it more meaningful or rewarding?
- Do you feel recognized for your accomplishments?
- What strengths or talents do you have that aren't being used?
- How can I or the organization help you reach your career goals?
- What are things you are doing that you would like to stop doing or delegate to others?
- If you could wave a magic wand, what changes would you make in the work environment?
- What threatens your peace of mind, your health, or personal fulfillment?
- What can we do to ensure we keep you with us?

Take some initial steps to reset culture

Under the auspices of your city manager and department heads, your team can guide the organization as it moves to reset or enhance the culture. With your guidance, your agency might want to consider a variety of steps.

1) Start conversations with employees

With some training and support from top management, managers must explore with employees the pandemic experience. Managers can ask:

- What are you proud of accomplishing during the shut down?
- What was difficult and challenging, both professionally and personally?
- What did you miss from the pre-COVID work experience?
- What practice, protocol, activity or micro-innovation would you like to continue as we return to work?
- What are some pre-pandemic practices that we should now jettison?
- In respect to your work, what do you need and want from me as the pandemic becomes more manageable?

> *"OFTENTIMES OUR MEETINGS PRODUCE INFORMATION OVERLOAD AND POINTLESS INTERACTION."*

Managers need to acknowledge some of the positive lessons learned from work-from-home (i.e., we solved problems in different ways) as well as the loses (death of loved ones, the loss of connections), both professionally and personally. We need to celebrate and grieve.

To surface and acknowledge the emotions and feelings of employees, it is important that you share some of your own experiences, challenges, and resulting emotions during the

shut down. By showing some vulnerability and demonstrating empathy, you create connection with others.

Once you have engaged most employees at all levels in these conversations, summarize what you heard and identify themes that can be addressed. Share the summary with all, including the governing board as appropriate.

2) Publicly declare your intention to help build a better culture

Employees want to know that top management is committed to building a better organizational experience for all. Therefore, senior leaders must state their intent in many ways and forums. Being intentional and public about its commitment will make top management more transparent about its efforts and more accountable. By helping people see progress along the way, the organization demonstrates that employees are valued and that management cares.

3) Conduct a return-to-the-office reorientation
With the active engagement of top management, including the chief executive (and perhaps the mayor or chair of the governing board), the organization can conduct a culture relaunch or re-orientation for all employees. As part of this relaunch, you can:

- Acknowledge the work and family challenges of the pandemic.
- Celebrate some of the micro-innovations achieved, such as new online services or creative support of small businesses.
- Honor those who died, including family members.
- Share stories of pandemic "heroes" and "heroines," including field workers and public safety staff who could not work from home
- Highlight employee safety protocols.
- Discuss upcoming stay interviews.
- Identify efforts to ramp up professional development opportunities.
- Offer mental health resources, such as an employee assistance program.
- Preview the new focus on the employee experience and culture of the organization.
- Provide a "welcome back" kit with sanitizers, masks, some agency swag, such as a welcome back coffee mug, and/or a gift card from a local cafe.

(See Herman Trend Alert, "Post-COVID Re-Orientation," June 2, 2021.)

It is important to do a formal reset.

4) Respond to what you hear

Some responses to what you hear require top management and/or governing board action (such as paying for remote work expenses or providing childcare benefits). However, many responses can be accomplished on an individual or team level. For example, individual managers can:

- Provide more flexibility in terms of when or where work is done.
- Get to know individual employees on a more personal basis.
- Express more appreciation for the contributions of team members.
- Conduct professional development conversations with each direct report.
- Reform meetings (see below).
- Focus on outcomes achieved vs. time on task or individual activities in order to evaluate performance.

All of these actions build positive culture, one behavior at a time.

5) Discuss the costs of doing nothing

Good change agents help people consider the future if nothing changes. Ask employees: What kind of organization will we have in 6 or 12 months if we do nothing? If nothing changes, how are we interacting together? How are we feeling? Are we making the positive difference that we want to make? (See Dan Rockwell, "[4 Steps to Defining a Win](#)," Leadership Freak blog. Feb 12, 2022.)

6) Explore what success looks like

After exploring the do-nothing option, you must help people see what will be different if you all work together to enhance the culture. Ask employees: What will success in 6 to 12 months look like? How will be people be interacting? What will people be feeling? What added value or positive difference will we be making?

7) Reform meetings

Typically, we in local government spend a lot of time in meetings. With the shut down, we have spent even more time in meetings and are now experiencing Zoom fatigue. A recent Work Trend Index report substantiates an increase in the productivity of knowledge workers that masks an exhausted workforce: 82% of surveyed employees indicated that they were more productive. At the same time, 54% of employees reported that "I'm overworked," and 39% of employees "feel exhausted." Oftentimes our meetings produce information overload and pointless interaction.

> *"LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ARE AT AN INFLECTION POINT."*

To make matters worse, the Work Trend Index indicates that while communication within silos has increased, work has become more siloed. Shrinking networks across silos have undercut collaboration and innovation.

(See "[The Next Great Disruption Is Hybrid Work—Are We Ready?](#)," Work Trend Index, microsoft.com, March 22, 2021.)

Meetings have three possible functions:

1. Information-sharing
2. Critical decision-making
3. Creative problem-solving

To reform meetings, local government managers need to intentionally reduce the number of meetings and refocus the remaining meetings on key decisions and idea creation. Information-sharing can easily happen outside of meetings via email or other online platforms.

8) Focus on immediate opportunities

To immediately take some positive steps with others, ask: What tangible steps can we all take as we return to the office? How do the frequency and function of our meetings change? How can we all start the day in the office (i.e., with a brief team "huddle") to enhance our culture? What learning or development opportunities can we all make happen?

Another check-in session or sessions with employees about "how are we progressing?" can be conducted in 3-6 months from the relaunch.

9) Align all systems

To support a stronger, more energizing and engaging culture, top management must work to align all organizational systems, including:

- Recruitment: What kind of employees with what kind of capabilities, aptitudes, and values do we need to support our desired culture?
- Management training: What kind of re-skilling do we need for managers so they help create the culture that we desire?
- Performance evaluation: How do we define good performance so it supports organizational culture?
- Employee recognition and rewards: How do we recognize and reward those employees who exemplify and model culture-building behaviors?
- Professional and career development: How do we actively support professional growth and career development for all employees?

As part of this effort to align organizational systems with the desired culture, senior management needs to root out inconsistencies and resolve them (i.e., don't reward managers who do not conduct development conversations with direct reports).

An inflection point

The world has changed. Local government organizations are at an inflection point. We can try to return to an unsustainable old normal or confront new realities. To help our agencies adapt, local government leaders must focus on what employees need and want, enhance the employee experience, and retool systems that shape organizational culture. This transition back to the office is a rare opportunity for leaders to intentionally reset culture and make us more effective.

Sponsored by the ICMA Coaching Program, *ICMA Career Compass* is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's liaison for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com. Read past columns at icma.org/careercompass.

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