# Leading & Managing in the New World of Work

## IS THE FUTURE FLEXIBLE?

The RAW NETWORK

# SUMMARY

The full impact of the Covid-19 crisis will only be visible with the benefit of hindsight.  The devastating effect of the virus itself – in terms of lives lost and long-term illness for some survivors – is the most immediate and terrible element. But the full picture of the knock-on effect on lives, livelihoods and mental health will take considerable time to emerge.

That said, if we're able to take any positives from the main part of the pandemic, they're around the uplifting resilience, resourcefulness and flexibility shown by people around the world. This has led to rapid technological progress, as well as significant changes to business models, as people have developed work-arounds to continue trading despite the restrictions.

It may seem crass to examine a large-scale human tragedy from the point of view of business, but businesses are made up of people. And with small and medium-sized enterprises less insulated against the economic and wellbeing impacts of Covid-19, these organisations represent the individuals and families in our communities.

With that sense of an emerging picture in mind, we were keen to understand as much as possible about the current – and short to mid-term future – picture for businesses in our network. An informed grasp of the challenges and concerns would give us the opportunity to work out how best we could support people and organisations with wellbeing and development initiatives.

Unsurprisingly, the results highlighted that it's been a tough time for everyone. Each business reported difficulties and concerns and outlined many of the ways they set out to tackle and resolve them.

But some are facing more challenges than others. Several reported problems with staffing shortages and difficulties planning workloads because of illness, requirements to isolate ('getting pinged') and problems with childcare.

*The unplanned changes imposed by the pandemic hit many organisations like an earthquake and we're continuing to feel the aftershocks.*

Of course, the pandemic itself is just one factor in this, with Brexit, the climate emergency and other geopolitical and economic events playing a part too.

Although we're in no position to influence the wider economy, the research has prompted us to focus largely (but not exclusively) on a closely-linked issue: the impact on managers.

As well as this, we've also highlighted the role leaders need to play, and looked at the effects of the pandemic on the wider workforce and culture in organisations.

## THE IMPACT ON MANAGERS

Our research unearthed overwhelming evidence that middle managers are at the eye of the storm.

*Middle managers are at the eye of the storm*

Many are exhausted from having to adapt quickly to new ways of working during lockdowns and other pandemic restrictions.

Added to that, as well as their pre-pandemic workloads, they're now juggling extra staffing problems, their individual business's plans to limit or end remote working, or a move towards hybrid or flexible models.

Change is difficult even when it's planned. The unplanned changes imposed by the pandemic hit many organisations like an earthquake and we're continuing to feel the aftershocks.

> The fact that the uncertainty is ongoing and we're still facing alterations to working practices make that change even more tricky. So, it's no surprise that many employees are struggling with wellbeing issues - and responding to these is yet another burden on overstretched managers.

This is a daunting range of extra responsibilities to cope with.

## HIDDEN ISSUES IN LEADERSHIP

Although we found managers to have the main – and most pressing – need, we also discovered less obvious issues relating to leadership.

Generally, respondents who reported very negative experiences of the Covid-19 crisis also talked about problems related to leadership: lack of listening/consultation, fixed mindsets, internal differences of opinion at the c-suite level, a lack of leadership visibility, substandard communication and limited opportunities for staff and managers to share feed back upwards.

By contrast, those who reported a more positive experience during the crisis tended to talk about their leaders having a more flexible, open-minded approach to the future of their businesses.

## UNCERTAINTY AND UNEASE AMONG FRONTLINE AND NON-MANAGERIAL COLLEAGUES

Some of our interviewees talked about tension between operational staff, who have continued to do their day-to-day jobs (with additional safety protocols) and furloughed or home-working staff.

As well as a lack of understanding of each other's challenges, there is fear on both sides about the safety implications of more people returning to the workplace.

Added to that, every business we spoke to seemed to have a different approach to the return to the workplace. And different groups within organisations have conflicting ideas about whether they want to continue working remotely or return full-time to the workplace.

Several businesses have embarked on employee consultation about future ways of working, and/or created opportunities for individual employees to have a say in their working arrangements.

Although hybrid working creates extra challenges for leaders and managers, our research found it's popular with many workers. Generally, people in organisations that are open to continuing hybrid or flexible working reported a happier emergence from lockdown.

> Lack of visibility, disagreements at c-suite level, fixed mindsets and lack of genuine consultation by leaders contributed to the most negative experiences for managers

Elsewhere, though, some employers who have been flexible about issues such as home-working and childcare are now enforcing a reversion to pre-pandemic rules. Trying to put the flexibility genie back in the bottle is likely to lead to dissent and dissatisfaction.

With the right support, development, training and resources, the hybrid model can work for most businesses. We see it as an important part of our 'whole person' philosophy; which involves everyone feeling they have the ability to negotiate, the safety to voice their feelings and influence managers and leaders, and the opportunity to develop, learn and collaborate.

## METHODOLOGY

For this research, we contacted individuals throughout our network. We spoke to 38 people at 16 organisations. Although this is a fairly small number, we were keen to have deep, quality conversations with people who were confident and motivated to share their observations truthfully and fully.

The people we interviewed were business owners, heads of department, HR directors, HR managers, HR business partners, plus operational line managers across specialisms including finance, information, health and safety, operations, marketing, housing, and learning and development.

The interviews took place from 5 July – 28 September 2021 and were conducted as online face-to-face conversations.

We asked about:

- The trends they're noticing and what's going on
- What tactics they've tried – and their success or otherwise
- What they're still looking for and feel challenged by

Our findings identified three key themes that need attention when looking at today's workplace: the situation for middle managers, the role of senior leaders and organisational culture.

We've structured the report into these three sections so you can dive in according to your interest or read cover to cover for more in depth understanding.

We've also added a helpful list of inspirational actions towards the back of the report. These are tried and tested approaches that organisations have put into place in these uncertain times, and which have helped to create places to work where people and performance thrive.

In addition, we've included our own recommendations for how to locate yourself and your organisation on the journey to creating healthy workplace cultures.

We hope you find it useful and welcome all feedback.

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## ONE | MANAGERS

Our research found that managers are facing more varied and deeper challenges than pre-pandemic. At the heart of these is the fundamental balancing act between maintaining productivity for the organisation and supporting employees' wellbeing in the face of unprecedented challenges.

When colleagues were suddenly asked to work from home, the quality of their workspace varied considerably. Some were – and are – working from bedrooms or communal areas. Others were juggling child-care, home education or other caring responsibilities.

And all this new territory had to be negotiated remotely via telephone or often unfamiliar technology.

**Hybrid working**

The single issue brought up most often was how to manage hybrid working. This encompasses everything from suspicions about the productivity of people working from home to worries about how to check in on remote colleagues' wellbeing.

Managers need specific skills to lead teams of different individuals, with different needs – and now in different locations.

The fact that these practical skills were mentioned six times more often than issues around wellbeing and mental health points to a real need to get teams up and running operationally before there's the space to tackle deeper, more personal challenges.

Managers and leaders who prefer to walk the floor, chatting to people informally and checking in on an ad hoc basis, need new skills and systems to enable them to connect with people so they can work with them on handling workloads and finding solutions to changing wellbeing needs. And they're certainly feeling the responsibility of both, more than pre-pandemic.

> Managers are the 'squeezed middle' – facing more varied and deeper challenges than ever in trying to balance productivity and wellbeing. Often remotely

of managing a flexible team, putting the emphasis is on being more open to discussion and trying out different approaches. It's not clear yet whether that has been a successful solution.

**Trust and productivity**

With several of our surveyed employers having taken a more relaxed approach to productivity during the heart of the crisis, they're now struggling to boost motivation and return to pre-pandemic standards. Trust and productivity is a key concern and businesses need new frameworks from top to bottom.

This is a perfect illustration of the 'managers as squeezed middle' issue. They're feeling pressure from above to deliver improved productivity and results, but the reality on the ground is an unstable staffing situation and difficulties monitoring remote workers. The result? Some people leaders are micromanaging, exhausting themselves and undermining colleague morale.

*Trust and productivity is a key concern and businesses need new frameworks from top to bottom*

There are several connected challenges at play here.

Workplace cultures that inadvertently encourage presenteeism are particularly susceptible to a damaging lack of trust. Several respondents said they were trying to establish a mindset shift, focusing on output and not productivity, or that they're keen to support managers to develop trust skills.

While these approaches might help and give managers the tools to feel less 'squeezed', they don't address the fundamental problem: a lack of trust by leaders, leading to an erosion of autonomy further down the hierarchy.

In our research, the only organisation pursuing a mandatory return to the office, with limited flexible working, also reported internal dissent among leaders and a strongly-expressed feeling that remote working must be robustly monitored.

On the other hand, highly motivated teams reported high levels of stress and exhaustion, with managers having failed to take their holiday

allowance in 2020, and colleagues working long hours as they struggle to separate work and home.

One interviewee summed up a common theme, saying managers had 'literally been a lynchpin', but expressing serious concern that the delayed result of shouldering that burden is an impending mental health crisis among managers, as they burn out.

Encouragingly, though, several organisations talked about encouraging a mindset shift, to focus less on timesheets and productivity and more on a colleague-led culture of output, allowing individuals to design their own working day, with the focus more on output than monitoring every minute.

**Managing different needs**

Hybrid working brings its own complexities but it was encouraging to hear that many businesses are looking at the issues around managing the different needs of individual workers.

Younger colleagues, who would normally learn through observation, need to be developed in different ways. Onboarding is more challenging for remote teams. And more consideration of people as individuals, playing to strengths and preferences, and understanding that people at different stages and ages have different needs, may mean better morale and loyalty, but juggling the practicalities falls squarely to line managers.

One respondent said they'd like to equip managers with the skills and confidence to have difficult conversations, an important skill in a world where managers are shouldering additional responsibilities.

Investing in development, as well as bringing in new processes and protocols, will help managers to cope with these challenges.

There are concerns of an impending mental health crisis among managers - burning out as a result of shouldering extra responsibilities, not taking holidays and working long hours in the struggle to separate work and home

**Managing wellbeing**

*Managers need the skills and confidence to handle difficult conversations.. and the time and skills to identify wellbeing problems and signpost relevant support*

Mental and physical wellbeing shot up the priority list during the pandemic and many businesses found themselves poorly equipped when colleagues looked to their employers for help.

*The wellbeing focus is positive and likely to stay – and employees will probably demand better support from their employees*

The wellbeing focus is positive and likely to stay – and employees will probably demand better support from their employers. Employee assistance programmes are offered by some of the organisations surveyed but leaders will need to reassess the need, post-pandemic and in a new culture of care.

As well as the actual provision of support, several respondents called for better signposting, better systems and better training. In an ideal world, much of this responsibility would fall to internal comms and HR teams but the reality is that the line manager is often best placed to spot problems and link people to relevant support.

It's a responsibility, though, that relies on equipping managers with both the time and skills to do so. And that's not a given for managers who are feeling burned out and overburdened themselves.

# The Oasis Perspective

At Oasis, we often find that when there's a crisis, leaders tend to take back more authority, to satisfy their own need to feel in control. This is normal human dynamics playing out in the workplace. Until individuals become more comfortable with uncertainty and acquire skills to navigate change, they will inevitably look to what they know and seek certainty.

The challenge with that approach when navigating unchartered territories such as hybrid working and working through a pandemic, is that old strategies may not be fit for the future we're stepping into. Learning to face the future and cultivating organisational resilience to respond to it as healthily as possible will be key for organisations looking to thrive in what's likely to continue to be a very uncertain time.

We've always been aware that there's a need to look beyond mental health first aid training. While this is great for raising awareness of mental health issues, we've found that it can also leave managers without the resources for handling the next steps. They find themselves alerted to problems but don't know where to send people for help, often taking responsibility on themselves – adding to their own stress. Sometimes they feel unable or ill-equipped to let leaders know that the organisation is suffering from deeper and more complex cultural challenges than can be resolved with a quick fix or an office party. Often there's a sense that something isn't right, and symptoms are recognised but they don't have the resources or tools to address the root causes and their wider impact on employee wellbeing.

**Managers need support in developing their people skills – to confidently support their staff, including difficult conversations; they need tools to sustain their own resilience as well as that of their teams**

In our experience, there's a growing need to support managers with training to develop their people skills. They need tools to help them sustain their own resilience and that of their teams. And they need techniques and the confidence to have difficult conversations and to signpost individuals who need additional support beyond what the organisation has to offer.

We have found that *organisations* **investing in additional support for those leading or managing people have fared better through the pandemic.** Examples include peer support groups, coaching for managers and additional training workshops to support resilience, conflict, communication, and relationships.

## TWO | LEADERS

With all this additional burden on managers, it's not surprising that most comments addressed the need for support and training at that level. But underlying this was a clear call for better leadership in some organisations.

Those who had more positive things to say about their collective experiences during the Covid crisis also tended to point to good leadership.

### Adaptable vs fixed cultures

Businesses that had already started moving to a more agile workplace structure were better placed to adapt to the necessary changes and be more welcoming to the experience of working from home.

Conversely, one organisation reported problems with a 'macho culture' and siloed teams that failed to understand roles outside their own department. There was also a lot of anxiety here about the return to work (a mandated hybrid approach) and a lack of clarity about the benefits of 'freedom versus process'. These issues all point to leadership failings and, sure enough, the interviewee complained that there's no facility to feed back to the c-suite.

### Disagreement in the boardroom

Others reported dissent among leaders, which was hampering progress. Senior staff who didn't agree with certain policies were failing to implement them. Unsurprisingly, these organisations said managers were looking for more clarity from the top, together with better comms to reassure colleagues and managers about the business direction.

In some cases we interviewed, separately, several people from the same organisation. In companies that reported a lack of agreement at the top, we noticed individuals had markedly different responses to the past 18 months. Some had found positives, including managers who 'grew' through by stepping up to face new challenges, while others were struggling. But all reported a lot of ongoing anxiety.

> There is less anxiety and more positive experiences of managing through the pandemic in organisations where leaders are aligned and are open to hearing feedback

Organisations with a more aligned leadership gave more consistent answers to the questions. Even if things weren't positive, at least they were all talking about the same topics and it sounded like they were working for the same business.

Elsewhere, some organisations have CEOs anxious to get everyone back to the workplace, failing to listen to feedback that a more flexible approach is popular with colleagues. This caused anxiety for our interviewees.

*Cohesion at the top is paramount*

The lesson here for businesses is that cohesion at the top is paramount. Unresolved boardroom squabbles are felt throughout the organisation, leaving managers unclear as to who to believe and follow.

As one interviewee asked, "How can we manage this constant state of flux without a clear end goal?"

### Leadership through growth

Although many organisations suffered a catastrophic loss of income during the crisis, others grew rapidly. A challenge even in the best of times, these companies said they need support to understand how to manage that growth in the context of the new world of work.

### Visible leadership

Leadership visibility was clearly important. In one organisation where we interviewed several people, they all pointed to the CEO's blog as one of the best methods of communication during the crisis.

*Even where senior teams are aligned and in agreement, they need to be sure to communicate well*

So even where senior teams are aligned and in agreement, they need to be sure to communicate well. And indeed, several stepped up their approach, increasing the frequency of internal meetings or introducing new ideas such as a weekly all hands video call.

Newsletters and an effective cascade were highlighted several times, although in one case, the team admitted mistakes had been made by

excluding furloughed and operational staff from this enhanced comms. This certainly marks a missed opportunity to keep the business connected and cohesive.

**Compassionate leadership and open dialogue**

One interviewee, whose organisation experienced rapid growth, had noticed less harmony and more confrontation, indicating a need for compassionate, visible leadership to guide them through a period of great change (see also section 3.g, Business growth in the new world of work.)

Organisations with a very top-down cascade, with less visible leaders and limited mechanisms for feeding back up the chain, tended to express more anxiety. One interviewee in this situation said staff had left the business because they were burned out.

Overall, we noticed that organisations whose leaders had a more flexible approach to hybrid or other fresh ways of working made more positive comments and reported fewer concerns.

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Organisations where leaders were willing to work alongside their people, recognising they didn't have all the answers, managed to navigate the pandemic with a more highly engaged workforce. Courage in sharing their vulnerability created more connection, deeper trust and a willingness to come together to try different things.

# The Oasis Perspective

It's clear that the style of leadership of an organisation has an enormous impact on how it copes with change. Hierarchical organisations are more likely to take a top-down approach to communication, rather than a consultative approach.

But the research discovered an increase in listening, and consultation, even in traditional hierarchies. Time will tell whether this will become the norm – and how that will affect the culture of such organisations.

In our experience, organisations that invest in a deeper, more courageous approach to developing leadership skills see a greater willingness to step into a more confident, collaborative space. Such leaders are brave enough to not know the answer, to figure it out with the talent of their team, to ask lots of questions and listen to the answers. They're willing to experiment and get it wrong but take the learning as a win.

**It is heartening to hear that in many organisations leaders have become more visible – sharing personal perspectives, talking through the data, listening to the experiences of colleagues. Such quality of connection can support everyone to have a voice in creating a great place to work, as long as leaders continue to be open to it**

We've seen a significant increase in initiatives that bring more human connection between workers and senior leaders. Leaders have become more visible, talking through what the data shows and sharing personal experiences of what it's really been like for them as they have worked through adjusting to the changes. It's great to think that these initiatives can carry on and become the new normal.

But this approach can feel challenging for those more used to a command and control culture. In such cases, it's not always easy to create an environment where listening happens, every voice matters and challenges are worked through in teams and through collaboration. We've seen in our work a significant increase in requests to support boards and senior management teams in their ways of working.

These organisations, awake to the fact that the future of business is changing, recognise that, as a leadership team, they need to work on their own approaches to collaborative leadership and their response to future challenges.

**Recognising that the future of business is changing, leadership teams are realising they need to work on their own approaches to collaborative leadership to equip them to respond to future challenges**

We've also seen a significant increase in the number of senior leaders joining our collaborative networking forums to share knowledge, challenges and wisdom with leaders from other organisations.

## THREE | CULTURE

## A | A NEW WORLD OF WORK

Naturally, our research captured a particular point in time. At this point, organisations were trying to establish what the return to work might look like – and there were many concerns.

By the time this report is published, many of these concerns will have been overcome, so we're going to focus instead on the support needed for everyone to best adapt to the new world of work.

**Healthy hybrid**

We've already discussed wellbeing and overload among managers, and there seems to be a wider need for distinct training and support for hybrid/remote workers to stay healthy while working at home. In early lockdown, people talked about a steep learning curve to adapt to new technology, adjust to home working, and collaborate and communicate differently.

Recently, we've noticed the rise of new challenges. How do you and your work stay visible when working remotely? How do you handle tough HR conversations on Zoom? How do you manage the boundaries around logging off and work hours when there's no one calling time?

An increase in self-management brings its own challenges and requires new skills and clear boundaries.

**Internal split between front line and home working**

There's also simmering resentment internally, which needs addressing quickly. Several interviewees said frontline workers have been neglected during the crisis. These are the people who have faced into the heart of the Covid challenges. And they're reporting feeling resentful about office workers being 'safe' at home – imagining them lounging on sofas with lighter workloads.

This perception is at odds with what was those home workers actually reported, which was an increase in the hours they worked, caused by factors including back-to-back virtual meetings and a lack of boundary between home and work.

*There seems to be a wider need to distinct training and support for hybrid/remote workers to stay healthy while working at home*

Without the tangible break of a daily commute to and from work, many people reported starting earlier and finishing later. This increase in daily hours worked, often with few breaks away from screens, affected their wellbeing.

Frontline teams pioneered ways of working together safely – something they guard and value. They were reported as being worried that more people coming back into the workplace would dilute this safety and put them at risk.

Conversely, those returning to the workplace are worried about getting it wrong and whether adequate safety measures are in place.

> Distinct work groups emerged as organisations adapted to Covid regulations. It is important to build understanding between groups to avoid growing chasms of resentment between those who can work flexibly and those who can't

It's important to boost communication between these groups, and to build understanding between the various groups, to avoid big chasms of resentment between those who can work flexibly and those who can't.

Stepping up safety protocols, training and signage will reassure returners – and being seen to do this very visibly is important to those facing a fresh influx of people and with them possibly a greater risk of infection).

## B | INFORMING AND LISTENING

Although listening exercises such as surveys and wellbeing checks were generally very clear and structured, the same can't be said for communicating with employees in a regular, structured way.

**Internal comms**

It's impossible to gauge the quality of comms without seeing what's being done, but there does seem to be a connection between the quality of internal messaging and general satisfaction, (albeit a limited connection).

As mentioned above, interviewees from one organisation consistently pointed to their CEO's regular blog as an example of good internal communication.

And where people mentioned a lack of leadership visibility and poor comms, their responses were certainly more negative and anxious. But in one positive organisation at least, no formal comms were mentioned – although there's clearly robust messaging at team level.

This perhaps indicates that while all comms are important, having an actual person identified as the author or owner of the message is overlooked. A lack of leadership visibility was mentioned several times, and it seems many organisations are missing a trick by issuing messages and newsletters that come from nobody in particular – just a kind of amorphous 'voice of the business'. Even in crisis times – especially in crisis times – visibility and personality are the reassurance people are looking for.

**Listening**

Most organisations reported some element of staff feedback or listening exercises during the worst of the pandemic. While this is heartening, it didn't always seem to lead to a positive experience or fewer concerns. There seem to be a couple of reasons for this.

> Empowerment through employee-led wellbeing support such as forums and peer-to-peer programmes appear to lead to good results at a team level, and reduces pressure on leaders and managers to provide all the guidance

The businesses that were generally more positive and upbeat also reported a range of regular listening exercises that appear to have been in place well before the pandemic. Most of these also had clear support mechanisms, such as employee assistance programmes. In some cases, this support was actually led by the employees themselves, in the shape of forums and peer-to-peer programmes. This type of empowerment appears to lead to good results at a team level, and perhaps reduces some of the pressure on leaders and managers to provide all the guidance.

The more negative and worried businesses tended to introduce some kind of consultation during the period – in fact, one said they'd perhaps asked employees to fill in too many surveys.

*Organisations who had already committed to keeping in touch with their employees and – crucially – had a range of support already in place, fared better when the crisis hit*

But some of those who began to commission feedback and inquiry during this time discovered worryingly negative attitudes and unhealthy cultures.

The lesson here seems to be that organisations who had already committed to keeping in touch with their employees and – crucially – had a range of support already in place, fared better when the crisis hit.

Those who introduced surveys and feedback in a hurried response unearthed deeper-seated issues that they're now working to overcome.

And others, who haven't introduced anything formal, relying on the 'vibe' or comments picked up informally about the business, showed much less consistent levels of happiness and positivity among the interviewees. The differences here may be explained by individual personality or some teams being a happier place than others.

## Action

So, although businesses who already knew how their staff were feeling did better, even in organisations that described good listening and survey practices, there were often comments that 'staff don't feel listened to'.

The implication here is that simply allowing HR teams to run listening exercises isn't enough. Leaders need to buy into the whole process. They must be seen to have heard the results and acted on them. The virtuous circle of listening, communication, action, communication, listening, benchmarking really is the best way for everyone in the organisation to be informed and feel heard.

## Empowering better communication

Overall, while managers and leaders were probably deeply involved in important work during the crisis to keep businesses afloat, dropping best practice comms quickly led to a drop in morale.

It's interesting that peer-led support seemed successful – and more of it was requested by some respondents. So although leaders need to invest in and sign off on listening and support, it doesn't always need to be provided directly from the c-suite.

However, it's got to be properly baked in. One organisation said they'd tried running engagement groups but these had fizzled out because of pressure of work. So, while peer-led ventures can be effective, people have to be given the authority and time to make them work. Incorporating these 'extra curricular' activities into people's job descriptions and including them as part of regular assessments and development is the only reliable way to make them stick.

Listening exercises are not enough. Leaders need to buy into the process: listening to the results and taking action on them

Peer-led support was successful when baked in - when people were given the time and authority to make them work as part of their day job

There's no point investing in listening if leaders and managers don't acknowledge the feedback and act on it – whether they like it or not

**Board-level buy in**

When it comes to putting best practice into action in their organisation, at least one interviewee said they'd experienced resistance from financial leaders. Comms and HR teams may need additional ammunition to help them to 'sell' the business benefits of communication, listening and support to senior stakeholders.

Whatever approach feels right for each organisation, employees need good communication around it. There's no point investing in listening if leaders and managers don't acknowledge the feedback and act on it – whether they like it or not. Boards that have a strong and well-held sense of their values – the way they go about their business – and who practice and review those values often, find a way of navigating difficult times more smoothly.

*Boards that have worked on their relationships, developing trust between themselves and their employees to do the right thing, tend to fare better in a crisis*

Now the white heat of the crisis is over, further investment in good communication, engagement and leadership practice and introducing regular processes and review is more important than ever.

## C | RE-ESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS

*A hollow approach to communications based on transmission of information alone, will always fall short of a two-way approach that brings deeper dialogue and has a meaningful objective to enhance relationships*

The focus on feedback, communication and meaningful action is also vital when it comes to re-establishing connections between colleagues, within and between teams. A hollow approach to communications, based on transmission of information alone, will always fall short of a two-way approach that brings deeper dialogue and has a meaningful objective to enhance relationships.

Several reported that the lack of cross-team interaction during the restrictions had led to silos, while another said there was bad feeling and grumpiness. Many expressed a wish for more connection as a way of boosting teamwork, morale and motivation.

**New connections**

This is particularly important for businesses who enjoyed growth during the period. Throughout the whole survey, there were only two meaningful comments about induction.

Businesses moving to hybrid working need to think carefully about the induction experience. A tactic mentioned in our research – introducing a buddy system for new starters – was reported as successful.

**Team spirit**

While one-to-one meetings and check ins were mentioned frequently, formalised activity at a team level also proved successful and important.

Successful tactics included daily virtual catch ups – with a longer chat on Fridays. While 30 minutes seemed to be the norm, even a breezy ten-minute meeting appears to be a good way of kicking off the day. These informal chats included checking in on workload and progress, while also allowing space for general catch ups.

One respondent mentioned that these meetings were operationally vital in the early days of lockdown but are now used, more sporadically, to check in socially. It's a good idea to have an approach that can flex and develop as circumstances and needs change.

Elsewhere, quarterly meet-ups, specifically designed for social and emotional connection, have been put in place.

### Interest groups

Extra interest groups (book clubs, yoga etc) were mentioned as popular but, like peer support groups, unless they are actively encouraged and supported by the business (allowing people time to contribute and celebrating their achievements) they usually rely on the enthusiasm of a couple of members. If those individuals get too busy, or leave the organisation, the group collapses.

### Diversity networks

We didn't specifically ask questions around diversity. There was no proactive mention of diversity networks, bringing people from across the organisation together on the basis of race, religion, gender, sexuality or disability. However, one respondent said they were looking into mental health forums specifically for men and for menopause.

### Valuable initiatives

With some commenters expressing concerns that leaders are looking to drop some of the measures introduced during the crisis, organisations would do well to investigate which ideas have been particularly well-received by colleagues. Scrapping popular ventures might win back ten minutes of productivity but cause a devastating drop in morale.

One organisation created an online 'connection café'. This was open to all employees from across the whole organisation, whether working remotely or on-site and was intended as a place to maintain informal connection and conversations. Employees were encouraged to support each other through the uncertain and changing times, learning together by sharing and hearing each other's experiences, as well as connecting for shared social activities to develop and maintain relationships.

> Regular team catch-ups and informal chats have been an important contributor to team spirit, social and emotional connection

> Scrapping popular ventures might win back ten minutes of productivity but cause a devastating drop in morale

But the rise in remote working calls for businesses to put better processes in place, to make sure teams handing over work to each other don't get into conflict by not explaining the thinking behind their decisions or where they've got to on a job. These little handovers happen automatically in the office but they're often missed when you're not working face to face.

*The yearning for connection might mean we have to have 'organised fun' for a while too, with specific dates ringfenced more regularly than before for social or teambuilding events*

The yearning for connection might mean we have to have 'organised fun' for a while too, with specific dates ringfenced more regularly than before for social or teambuilding events.

Academics have long declared that for teams to be effective, time needs to be committed to three specific tasks; the work, learning together and socialising. The pandemic prioritised the work and tasks for many teams and took away traditional and habitual ways of socialising.

On the flip side, it also offered an opportunity to reflect on ways of working as teams sought to find new ways of responding to the situation. We saw a plethora of alternative virtual socialising solutions from quizzes to community choirs, pubs, cheese and wine tasting, and running groups – according to guidelines.  These unusual circumstances offered an opportunity to be more creative, to consider inclusion (for those less inclined to favour the pub) and to think outside the box.

## D | WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

We've already discussed the specific issue of overburdened managers and burnout but where else are problems cropping up?

**Long hours culture**

Several respondents mentioned that home working had led to a culture of long hours and a lack of clear boundaries between work and home. While extra effort can be expected in times of crisis, it's not sustainable over the long term. It was encouraging to discover widespread recognition of this phenomenon and a drive to help employees to set better boundaries and take their full leave allowance.

**Mental health**

The issue of mental health was mentioned often, with the general feeling that stress and anxiety are higher than pre-Covid. Some talked about colleagues feeling isolated, while others mentioned ongoing concerns about Covid itself.

The challenges were particularly acute for people in customer-facing jobs, such as call handling. It can be tougher to deal with being shouted at by an angry customer when you're at home and support isn't a desk away. Businesses need to make sure employees have proper support in place for these circumstances and are empowered to take a break if they need to.

Other people mentioned exhaustion simply from the pressures of living with uncertainty and frequent change. As well as training on how to live with uncertainty, it's important for leaders to create a sense of shared purpose, to act as a valuable beacon to keep in sight.

> It was encouraging to discover a widespread drive to help employees to set better boundaries between work and home life, and take their full leave allowance

> Not surprisingly, stress and anxiety are felt to be higher than pre-Covid. People need support in learning to live with uncertainty and frequent change

> *Managers need support in developing listening skills and how to signpost without taking personal responsibility for every staff members challenges*

### Introducing extra support

Several of the organisations we spoke to are reviewing their policies and training colleagues in mental health first aid. As already highlighted in the section 1, Managers, we have always believed that mental health first aid training raises awareness. Managers also need the tools and time to deal with this as part of their roles. When people come to them with issues, managers need support to make sure they are able to signpost and support without taking personal responsibility for a staff member's response to challenges. We've seen a signficant increase in the request for resilience training to support managers and leaders.

As noted above, peer forums supporting men's mental health and policies around menopause were specifically mentioned, and it's heartening to see businesses tackling these sometimes difficult issues.

The right advice, support and development can go a long way to breaking down these and other workplace taboos.

### Blurring the lines between work and home

Generally, we heard that organisations were keen to support their employees in more areas of their life than they had been pre-pandemic. There was a clear feeling that employees are seen as individuals with different needs and motivations.

It would seem that bringing issues such as caring, childcare and mental health support out of the shadows during the pandemic has raised awareness that good employees face external pressures or have different requirements outside work. The pandemic has allowed us all to get closer to our colleagues' personal lives by literally seeing into their homes via video calls.

But there was confusion around how to implement the relevant support. Some senior leaders are keen to rescind flexible working practices and go back to 'business as usual'.

> *The burden of keeping everyone happy is largely falling on managers, who are struggling to deal with the twin pressures of being fair and being considerate of different needs*

As mentioned above, the burden of keeping everyone happy is largely falling on managers, who are struggling to deal with the twin pressures of being fair and being considerate of different needs. More support is needed to help them do this.

## E | LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Several interviewees raised issues around learning and development during our research. Some acknowledged that manager development, in particular, had been neglected; something that's even more pertinent given the added responsibilities managers are now juggling.

Others questioned how development – including creative development – could be carried out effectively and excitingly in a remote or hybrid workplace.

Clearly the responsibility for creating engaging learning and development programmes sits with organisations like our own.

Overall, though, it seems that the challenges around development in today's workplace are less around the method of delivery and more around the fact that leaders have been understandably distracted by the day-to-day challenges of running a business during trying times. There has been little capacity to focus beyond the essentials and begin to work out how to support people to develop greater resilience and adaptability to face into future challenges.

As we see it, in difficult times many organisations look to quick fixes for learning and development. This gives people tools and approaches, but no greater awareness of what they need from themselves and others in operating those tools.

As the crisis eases, the onus is on learning and development organisations to create effective and relevant programmes and on HR teams to enthusiastically and unequivocally signal the need for them to senior leaders holding the purse strings.

*Manager development, in particular, has been neglected*

*There has been little capacity to focus beyond the essentials and begin to work out how to support people to develop greater resilience and adaptability to face into future challenges*

## F | CULTURAL CHALLENGES

Cultural issues were mentioned both overtly and obliquely by our interviewees.

One person specifically talked about their organisation discovering they had a 'macho culture' that was proving detrimental. Although a few respondents similarly unearthed a few nasty surprises, they're now taking steps to remedy these issues, often easier said than done.

Less obvious cultural challenges can often be spotted more readily by outsiders, reading between the lines. And a couple of themes emerged as front-runners.

**Lack of trust**

The move, where possible, to working from home, was extremely painful for some organisations. Those with a more controlling culture talked about the impossibility of measuring output and checking up on people's productivity when they're not in the office.

*It might have been painful for these leaders to head up a remote workforce but they're heading for more headaches when they try to erode this self-direction as the crisis recedes.*

We've touched on this already, but it's important to note here that some interviewees discussed moving to a culture founded more on trust and delivery than on presenteeism. Others though, are definitely not on the same page.

Having been empowered to structure their own days while working from home, colleagues are likely to cling tightly to their new autonomy. It might have been painful for these leaders to head up a remote workforce but they're heading for more headaches when they try to erode this self-direction as the crisis recedes.

Having said that, it's clear that hybrid working needs different processes – and having the right systems in place is vital when it comes to connection and communication. But the key is to see these systems as a solid basis for freedom, autonomy and creativity, rather than a Big Brother-style monitoring tool.

**Lack of listening**

As mentioned above, many organisations told us about their established, regular listening exercises. Despite this, we heard recurrent criticism that there's little or no opportunity for upward feedback.

Formal listening exercises are important, and our research showed that organisations that understood the mood and motivations of their workforce were able to respond more quickly and positively to unforeseen challenges.

But we also heard about leaders who'd asked managers to give them informal feedback about their teams' needs. Through the filter of managers wanting to look good and employees reluctant to say anything negative to their direct bosses, these leaders are likely to get a very skewed picture of what's really going on.

In organisations where the only way of communicating with board members is to make a public comment on a blog, leaders might think a lack of feedback means everyone is happy. In fact, they may be simply too scared to put their head above the parapet.

Others told us their support mechanisms include encouraging people to speak up in general or express any worries to their managers. With no alternative person to talk to, no-one coaxing them to share their feelings and no way of expressing themselves anonymously, a quiet workforce may simply be a hornets' nest of less confident colleagues who are getting increasingly disillusioned.

> *As we emerge from the pandemic, leaders need to use this watershed time as an opportunity to establish a more open and considered dialogue with those further down the hierarchy*

A combination of anonymous listening exercises, equipped managers, role modelling, peer support, alternative internal ways of communicating and well-signposted external support is good practice that everyone could be aiming for.

*Organisations that understood the mood and motivations of their workforce were able to respond more quickly and positively to unforeseen challenges*

## G | BUSINESS GROWTH IN THE NEW WORLD OF WORK

While the pandemic has been financially devastating for some organisations, others have thrived.

Accordingly, some interviewees asked how to manage growth – or even just plan for growth – at such a difficult time.

The main point here is understanding that all change can be unsettling. While the boardroom may have an ambition for growth and see it as positive, the impact for people further down the hierarchy might be more work, fewer resources, less communication and longer hours. This is a long way from the exciting, go-getting business that the leaders feel part of.

Many organisations look for excellent leadership and people management and believe it's up to leaders to rally the workforce around a common cause. Employees today are more likely to look for employers who share their own beliefs and values. So leaders need to be clear, confident and communicative about what those beliefs and values are.

Remember the early days of the pandemic when the whole nation seemed to come together with the shared purpose of helping each other? That's an extreme version of the kind of beacon that leaders need to create for their employees.

When it comes to engaging people, managers need to be equipped with the tools and techniques to help their teams understand the important part they play within that bigger picture. Employees should be supported to explore that purpose in terms of their own roles, while giving them an opportunity to share thoughts and feelings. Doing this gives teams a sense of shared belonging and achievement, and the hope is that this may lead to better motivation, engagement and happiness.

> Employees today are more likely to look for employers who share their own beliefs and values

> When it comes to engaging people, managers be equipped with the tools and techniques to help their teams understand the important part they play within that bigger picture

# The Oasis Perspective

'Culture eats strategy for breakfast'. It's one of the most oft-quoted business mantras, but ask someone what culture is, and you'll get several different responses.

Culture is tricky to pin down. It's both an *intention* for how things are done around here and how things are *really* done around here. It has a life of its own and moves with the vision, goals, people dynamics at play and boundaries (or lack of) in such an active way that it requires constant care and attention.

**At its core, culture can make or break an organisation**. It's often left to run the show without direction or containment and it's one of the main reasons individuals leave an organisation.  Alongside poor relationships between staff and their manager.

Enhancing a culture is not an easy or quick fix. It takes time, honest vulnerable conversations and a commitment to an ongoing process of review and creativity.

Businesses often prefer to focus on what's working and play to their strengths, rather than taking an honest and real audit of organisation culture. They lack the willingness to see 'the way things work around here', in terms of both what enables performance and what gets in the way.

**Businesses often prefer to focus on what's working and play to their strengths, rather than taking an honest and real audit of organisation culture. Without unearthing the blind spots it is impossible to address core issues that may be getting in the way of creating a great place to work**

But the reality check is the only way to cultivate a healthy workplace culture. Blind spots are often more easily uncovered and identified with the support of an external facilitator, a critical friend or a support partner. The right support will help you to discover the root cause, and more easily identify what you may have a tendency to overlook. It will also help you to make changes in a way that aligns your resources with your goals.

# FOUR | INSPIRATIONAL ACTIONS

While many of the challenges that impact organisations are caused big picture issues that are either outside an organisation's sphere of influence (such as wider economic issues) or will take time to transform (such as cultural shortcomings), others are easier to address.

Although we don't have scope to explore them in detail, here's a top-level overview of some of the tactics our interviewees cited as successful.

1.  **Visible leadership**
    CEOs, MDs and other leaders need to lead visibly – even in non-crisis times. Blogs, all hands video briefings, and one to ones were all mentioned as effective ways of being seen and spreading the word.

2.  **Peer-to-peer forums**
    Responsibility for actively managing support and listening processes doesn't always have to fall to senior leaders. Investing in and empowering peer-to-peer processes is also effective. But businesses have to do it wholeheartedly.

3.  **Organised fun and connection**
    The phrase 'organised fun' is enough to make anyone's heart sink. Don't worry, there's no need to go overboard on the planning and enforced party games. Simply, in a hybrid workplace, you need to schedule downtime. That could be as simple as ten minutes' informal team time per day, plus quarterly teambuilding or 'everyone in the office' days.

4.  **Regular, formal, anonymous listening – and action**
    Employees need a mechanism to express themselves truthfully and authentically, without fear of retribution. This should be a big event in the organisation's calendar and involve lots of follow up communication about the actions taken in response. It's best supported by more frequent, smaller scale temperature checks and wellbeing support.

5.  **Better engagement**

    While leaders need to convey purpose and shared goals, the business needs to equip managers with the tools and techniques to make those goals relevant to each team. Not all managers are natural communicators, so that includes training, as well as providing materials, such as manager toolkits, to help messages to be engaging and sticky.

6.  **Thoughtful induction**

    Creating an onboarding process that works remotely is useful – buddying up new starters with old hands can ease their way into the team and boost their happiness and feelings of connection.

7.  **Stepping up safety**

    With frontline employees worried about more people returning to the workplace, and home workers worried about going in, it's very important to establish clear health and safety guidelines and be seen to communicate them effectively.

8.  **Good signposting**

    Do your employees really know what help is available and where to get it? Remember that they may not take notice of the support on offer until the day they really need it. Overly complex external employee assistance programmes may need explaining to your teams too.

9.  **Authored communication – get personal**

    Great messaging, in language tailored to your audience, is vital. And it's even better when that communication comes from a specific person; authentically and with their own personality on display. It's even better still when it's done in conversation.

10. **Planned but flexible comms – be there**

    A regular drumbeat of communication – even when there's nothing new to say – reassures colleagues that leaders are in charge and in touch. In times of change, it's important to explain exactly what's going on and why. We particularly loved the idea of outlining what the business is going to start, stop and continue – a clear format to help manage change.

# FIVE | CONCLUSION

As this report shows, the businesses we interviewed in our research are demonstrating a very pressing need for practical, organisational and individual development right across the workforce.

Hard-pressed board members may be inclined to go into 'austerity mode' as a result of the ongoing uncertainty – and that's understandable. But the overwhelming number of comments about exhaustion, burn out, stress and anxiety prove that while practical, business-bolstering steps need to be taken, people need emotional support too.

What this research also shows is that leaders aren't always aware of the added burden on managers. Their impressive efforts and agility when the crisis broke must not be taken for granted. Managers are often trying to cope with staff shortages and an ill-defined move to hybrid working. They're managing pressure from senior leaders to boost and improve productivity – and they're managing resistance from their teams when they try to do this by eroding freedoms granted during the crisis.

Leaders who previously walked the floor, chatting to employees, are more reliant than ever on managers to be the eyes and ears of the business at all levels. Rewarding, developing and supporting them is essential – and it's essential to act now.

Oasis has worked with leaders, organisations and teams for more than 30 years, seeking to create a culture that enables people to be themselves (while still getting the job done). In that time, we've learned that effective and sustainable organisations create a culture where the organisation flourishes because their people flourish, too. This means valuing, nurturing and developing people at all levels and in all roles.

*While practical, business-bolstering steps need to be taken, people need emotional support too*

> As the eyes and ears of the organisation, managers are indeed, the 'squeezed middle' – managing pressure from senior leaders to boost and improve productivity – and managing resistance from their teams when they try to do this by eroding freedoms granted during the crisis. Rewarding, developing and supporting them is essential – and it's essential to act now

> Courageous leaders who want to create a great place to work understand the importance of establishing the truth about day-to-day life in their organisations. From there they will work together with staff at all levels to build a culture where people can flourish

It requires an environment where people feel safe and free to be open and honest about their thoughts and feelings; where it feels safe to learn and grow through testing out new ideas and sometimes getting things wrong, and where open relationships and honest dialogue are the route to working through and overcoming challenges. In such a culture, everyone is a leader, in the sense that all ideas are welcome wherever they emerge, everyone has a voice and can influence change, and mutual feedback is the norm.

In our experience, achieving the openness and honesty that enables such a culture to flourish requires external facilitation, at least in the early phases of development.

It is through external facilitation that the necessary level of psychological safety may be established to reveal the truth, to explore what's not being said, and to explore differences between the way things are supposed to be done and what actually happens on a day-to-day basis.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CREATING A GREAT PLACE TO WORK

### 1. Culture consultancy

This begins with our tried and tested discovery process. We recommend all members of the management team and key players from across your organisation have a chance to explore the nature and quality of what's working. This process helps to identify perceived issues and concerns, and it ascertains if there's enough will to proceed. It's usually a gentle, insightful and creative experience.

**A deeper inquiry**

If the initial discovery process identifies a need to probe further, qualitative workshops, facilitated by experts in the field, help to identify what's really true within the organisation and to build a picture of what's needed, and in what order.

**Choice point**

This stage gives more opportunity to explore emerging questions, before matching resources and will power to what's needed. At the same time, it makes sure key stakeholders are fully supportive and involved in the process.

### 2. Development programmes

We offer a range of two-day programmes which can be delivered online or face to face, tailored to the needs of your organisation.  Examples include The Resilient Manager, Skills for Change, Leader as Coach and Speak to be Heard.

### 3. Leader development

Our approach to developing leaders is deeper and more courageous than many programmes. And it's one that puts the leader at the heart of their learning. Typically, this is a 12-month process, covering five modules. The learning cycle is completed using our unique self and peer assessment process by way of completing the learning cycle.

## 4. Executive coaching

This gives participants a one-to-one, confidential and safe space to explore their own development goals, the sense they're making of their world and the future that faces them. With the guidance of an experienced coach, they'll have an opportunity to enhance the impact they have in their world.

## Join our Resilience, Adaptability and Wellbeing Network

An opportunity to meet with like-minded organisations from a range of sectors and locations to share learning and emerging good practice.

Participate in a deeper conversation about what resilience, adaptability and wellbeing means in your organisation, how it's working and what can be done to improve its overall impact.

To find out more about how Oasis can support you to cultivate a great place to work, call Lise Ribeiro on 01937 541700 or email lise@oasishumanrelations.org.uk

## Thank you

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