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COVID-19 employee experience study

Summer 2020 cohort

An introduction to our study

With COVID-19, organizations have been thrown in the deep end of uncertainty and change. Almost overnight, companies shifted to a remote-first mindset with their employees, if they could. Many of the companies we've worked with have done a great job enabling their people to work from home; their employees have access to tools that connect them to the information and data they need to do their jobs.

What we heard, though, is that now that the initial rush to accommodate sheltering-in-place is over, companies are unsure how their people are really doing. They know it has been a struggle for teams to get on emotionally solid ground with such deep change, but they don't yet understand how it's impacting their culture and employee experience. And they've been so focused on adapting and troubleshooting, they aren't aware of the short and long-term opportunities and risks.

At Habanero, we've been working with organizations to create great employee experiences for over 20 years, using empathetic research to uncover the hidden, yet essential insights that empower companies to lean into the right opportunities and take practical action. As we watched COVID-19 dramatically transform workplaces around the world, we wondered how this rapid change was affecting the ability of employees and leaders to feel confident, connected, productive and able to support each other. We wanted to engage with leaders and employees to understand the biggest challenges and opportunities they faced in adapting to this new reality.

This study represents our ongoing efforts to help organizations understand and shape the future of their culture and employee experiences. Using four- to six-week sprints, we conducted research with leaders and employees, leveraging our human-centred research tools, like interviews, surveys, workshops, listening labs and collaborative analysis.

The findings from this study provided participating organizations with deep insight into their employees' current experiences, benchmarks that gave them a sense of how they were faring in comparison to the other organizations in the study and suggestions for practical action to support their people and find opportunities to thrive.

We learned that the study's value extended beyond its findings. Employees who participated in the study expressed that they benefitted from a cathartic and grounding exercise that raised their spirits and made them feel valued by their organization. Leaders valued the time they were able to spend with their peers, discussing their own experiences and the ways in which they needed to show up for their people.

We're excited to now share these findings with like-minded leaders and organizations who are committed to evolving their employee experience. We hope you'll find valuable takeaways in this study — whether it's an affirmation of your own experience or a sense of clarity that allows you find movement and opportunity in these uncertain times.
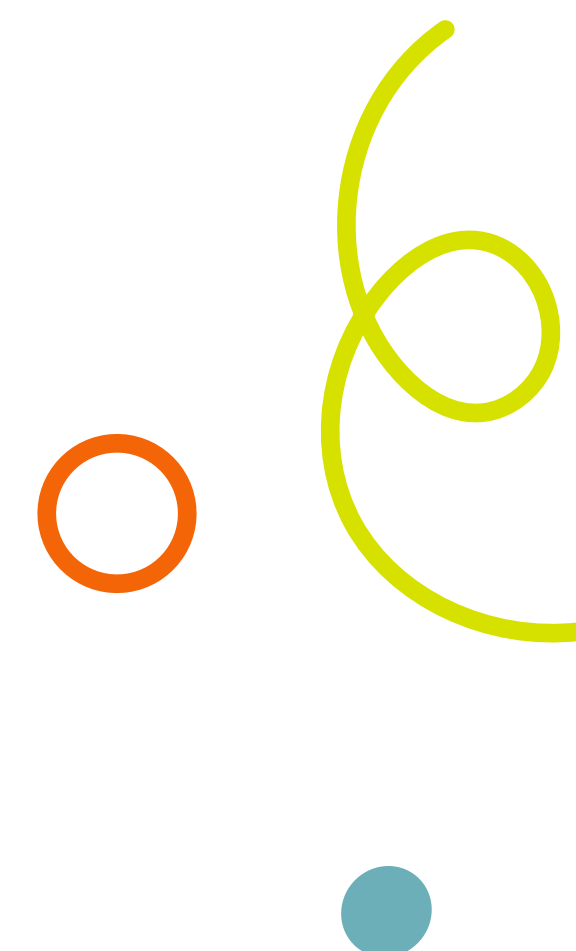
Summer 2020 COVID study cohort

Organizations that participated in our Summer 2020 cohort were selected by Habanero in part because they exhibited above-average workplace health. We wanted to work with organizations that could commit to taking action to evolve their employee experience as a result of the study and foster a community of like-minded leaders and organizations. While results among participating organizations varied, the average findings reflect their attention to and investment in employee experience and organizational culture prior to COVID-19.

WHAT IS A LISTENING LAB?

For this study, we interviewed and observed employees directly in explorative, lightly scripted sessions, called listening labs, that enable employees to freely explore what interests them. By observing and prompting interviewees, our researchers learned things they could not have known to ask about otherwise. Listening labs exposed key priorities, deepened our understanding employees' personal experiences and helped pinpoint potential opportunities.

7
companies

49
countries

5,300+
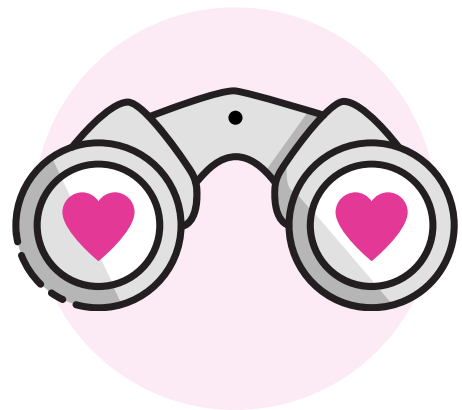survey responses

185
workshop partcipants

16
key support interviews
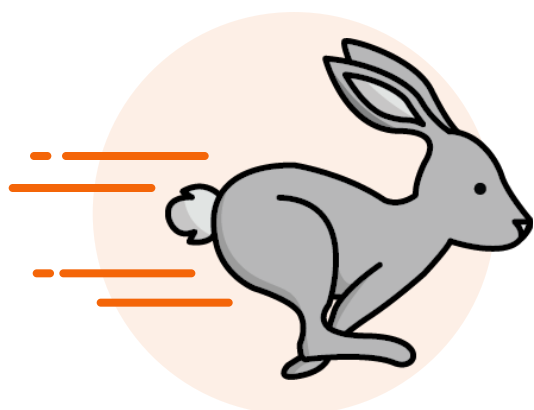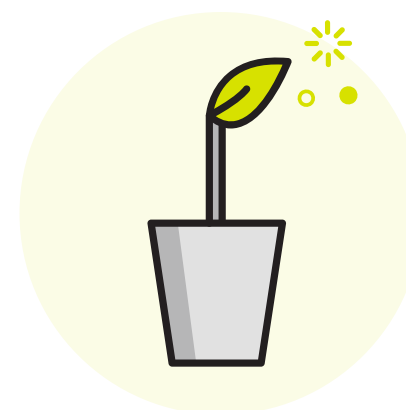
58
listening labs
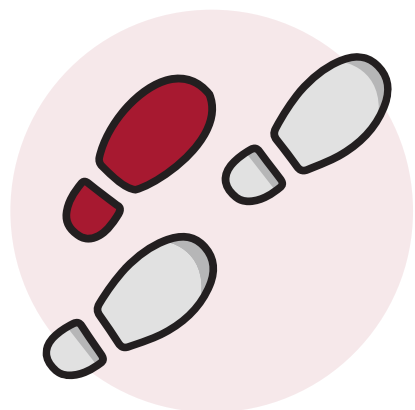
Study goals

Take an empathetic view

Find the bigger lessons

Move quickly

Shape the future culture and employee experience

Surface actionable steps

Getting to the heart of employee experience

Once you get past the basics of technology and job function, how do organizations know how their people are really doing? The only way to know is to ask questions, listen and observe.

In this study, we used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research activities.

Quantitative research, like pulse surveys, gives an overview of how employees are doing and helps validate your ideas. It provides:

- An immediate snapshot of how your people are doing

- Historical data to measure against as situations continue to develop

While surveys can provide direction and insight, they lack context and rich empathetic information. We wanted to help organizations understand how their employees were experiencing their new world of work and how it was affecting them. This depth and clarity of insight only comes from adding the dimension of qualitative research, which explores employees' mindsets, emotions and instincts.

Qualitative research, like workshops or listening labs, help to uncover the stories behind the data. They bring the survey results to life by giving you a deeper understanding of why you're seeing the data that you're seeing, which can help you to take actionable steps. Quantitative data tells you the answer is "6." Qualitative data helps you understand if someone arrived at that answer because "3 + 3" or "10 − 4."

Pair quantitative *and* qualitative research for the greatest insight

QUANTITATIVE
Research with **100 people**
to **validate 10 ideas**

QUALITATIVE
Research with **10 people**
to **uncover 100 insights**

Key themes

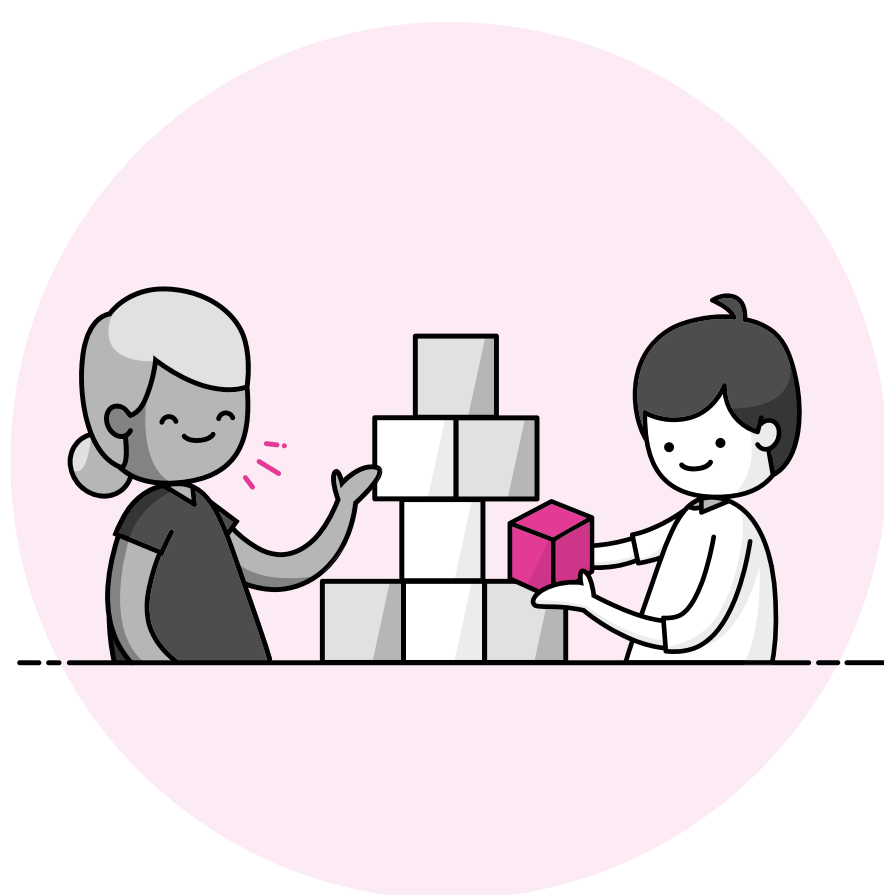As we began to uncover employees' personal experiences of the workplace impact of COVID-19, themes started to emerge. In all participating organizations, we witnessed an acute need for human connection and collaboration, a heightened sensitivity for empathetic leadership and an amplified importance of strong organizational culture.
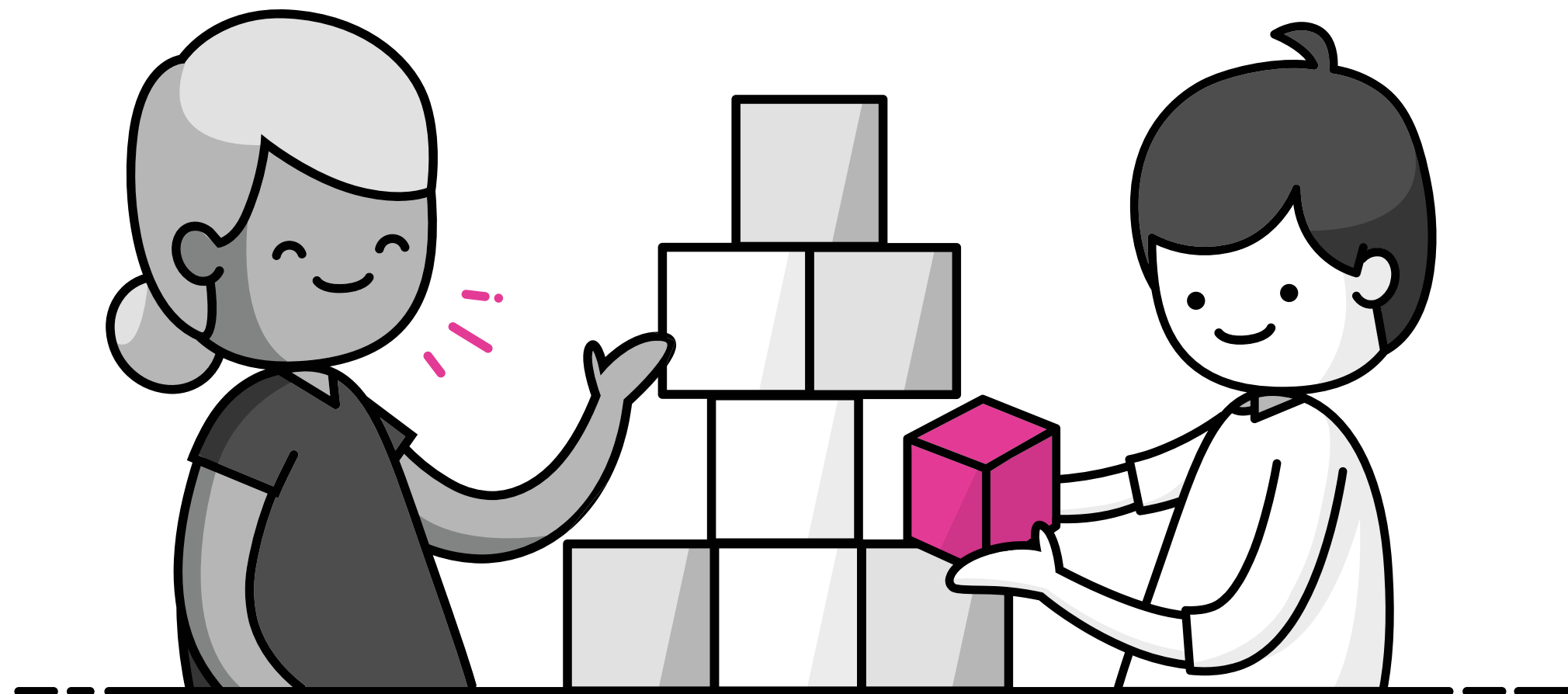
Collaboration

Leadership

Culture

Collaboration

Our ways of connecting and collaborating are evolving

Collaboration is at the center of the way people work at all of the organizations who participated in this study. The workplace disruption due to COVID-19 demanded a rapid transition to a new way of connecting without any map to follow or time to prepare. We are all still finding our footing and exploring new ways to nurture relationships across physical divides. Overall, we learned that people are feeling connected to their immediate teams but missing in-person interactions and struggling to find ways to collaborate effectively.

Amid the ongoing change and uncertainty, small displays of gratitude, understanding and empathy have been critical. They have given employees a higher sense of confidence and increased feelings of positivity within their organizations.

> **People seem to be caring about others beyond the professional level. We are very focused on our families and health.**

In listening labs, many employees described how they've bonded with their colleagues as a result of going through this time together, and it's a closeness and trust they want to keep. Video calls are like windows into their colleagues' lives, so people are getting to know one another on a more personal level.

Employees at one organization shared some of the benefits they've seen:

Team trust has increased

People are even more supportive of each other

They feel a sense of camaraderie

It's okay to be vulnerable

Relationships have deepened

> **While I can't say there is nowhere I'd rather work while going through this, I can say there is no team I'd rather be working with.**

> **There's a real sense of community and closeness around this thing. If I had to do this again, I'd want to be with [this organization].**

Bringing life to work®

In a survey, employees were asked whether they felt isolated from their teams or organization. The aggregated results show that the majority people weren't feeling very isolated, but when we look deeper into the data and consider the results in concert with employees' experiences, a more nuanced story emerges. This question produced the broadest range of responses within every organization, which indicated to us that employees are not in a steady state of isolation. Their state of mind and perception of connectedness can change from moment to moment. If they had a great one-on-one interaction or team huddle, they might be feeling less isolated than if they had just spent a week with their heads down, working to meet a project deadline. This has always been true, but with the current disruption, employee mindsets are more volatile and less predictable and consistent.

Employee experiences and feelings throughout a work day

Employees' sense of connectedness can fluctuate throughout the day, based on their moment-to-moment interactions and experiences.

Percentage of employees who felt isolated from their teams, on a scale from 0 to 10.

very isolated

0	0%
1	2.85%
2	4.83%
3	7.13%
4	4.35%
5	10.93%
6	8.46%
7	13.14%
8	19.02%
9	12.05%
10	17.23%

not isolated

Intentional connection is necessary now

The COVID-19 crisis has provided new opportunities to connect. People are more attuned to the need for interaction, social connection and collaboration. It's not something organizations can or should take for granted, though. Connection requires effort.

" My team seems to be a bit more tight knit. There is more communication happening and a strong desire to grow. People are making the effort to check on each other, which has been a nice way to continue building trust and connection.

Strategies for connecting varied across organizations and many took a multi-pronged approach. Leadership and managers created structured ways to connect, like scheduled one-on-one meetings with someone they've never met to get to know them better. This proved helpful for those employees who struggle to reach out to people unless they have a work-related reason.

" We make the time to stay connected even if it is virtually. I love the staff happy hour and fun team games that had everyone involved.

People appreciated hearing about other people's experiences, whether through stories on the intranet, a special newsletter, a webinar or a lunch and learn session. Employees also organically explored their own ways to socialize. Friday happy hours, coffee talks and games nights were some common ideas.

Not everyone likes the structured bonding of virtual social time, however. For some employees, it felt forced, or added pressure to their already packed days.

" I don't really like mandatory 'hang out' sessions by the way. Seem like a waste of time.

OPPORTUNITY

Be intentional about team building in an online environment and work collaboratively with employees to explore how they can contribute to it in ways that are meaningful to them.

## Employees are missing those watercooler moments

In many organizations, informal conversations at the office were a glue that helped teams bond. Employees missed spontaneous friendly interactions and the organic sharing and learning that normally occurs in a workplace. They also worried that they will have fewer opportunities to connect with any new team member who joins their organization.

" There's so much less daily interaction, less collaboration – our team sits close together, and we can't bounce ideas off each other like we used to.

Through all the study's activities – from surveys and workshops to listening labs – we found that there really is no replacing in-person interactions. There were some people who adapted, but others really missed connecting in person and were excited to be back in the office for this reason.

Remote teamwork has introduced a new communication etiquette for some employees that has challenged their collaborative culture. When working together in an office, they were used to having easy access to a thinking partner to bounce ideas off of or get quick feedback. Now that they are working at home, they have to check to see if the other person is busy before calling them. In listening labs, employees shared that they were very conscious about respecting their colleagues' boundaries, calendars and time.

" The lack of in-person collaboration can be challenging. [Microsoft] Teams helps a lot, but it's not everyone in front of a white board, or in a room sorting something out.
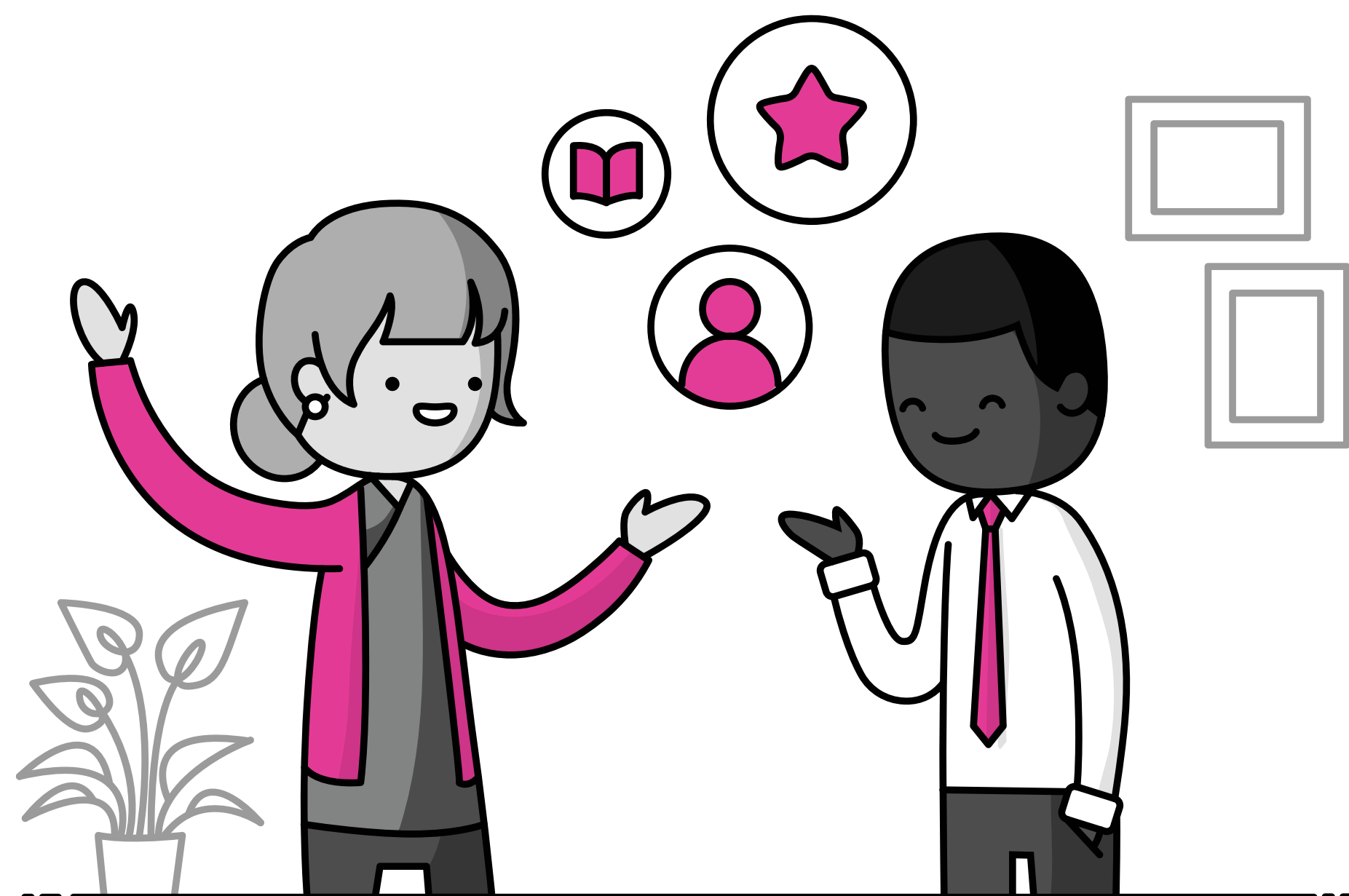
For those working on physical products, getting feedback from a colleague on a prototype was especially challenging. Instead of being able to see or hold the item, they had to take photos or videos and include a long explanation of their process and thinking.

" On a complicated design, it's sometimes difficult to explain everything over email or even Skype, but I noticed I am getting better at it over time.

With fly-by collaboration feeling more difficult, some employees have found themselves in a new position to make decisions on their own, where prior to COVID-19, they would've consulted at least one other person. While this has felt uncomfortable, it has also presented an opportunity for them to grow confidence in decision-making and leadership.

I miss the casual conversations with colleagues that open doors or support me in whatever I may be working on or feeling challenged by.

Teams and groups are forming along new lines

With COVID-19, many organizations have seen a shift or restructuring in the lines of connection formed between employees and groups. No longer anchored by proximity, employees now have the most contact with their project teams.

In listening labs, we learned that this has had multiple cascading effects. Employees cited the inclusivity that remote working has allowed, now that collaboration and communication isn't limited by location anymore.

" There is so much connectedness. People are jumping in to support cross-functionally where there are business needs.

In some organizations, employees' roles and responsibilities changed, which affected the way individuals work together. Some teams started working together more, while others were no longer working together at all. This altered the way that employees experienced teamwork and productivity.

" I'm not connecting with other departments as much – there's less connection and joking together.

While employees reported engaging in lots of in-team communication, they also noted that silos are forming between smaller teams, and they now feel disconnected from those with whom they don't work directly. They expressed a strong desire to remain connected with their peers outside of project teams and the work they were doing and to break down departmental silos.

OPPORTUNITY

Watch for new silos developing and find ways to promote cross-departmental sharing and teamwork, through multiple channels, like quarterly reviews, townhalls, Yammer networks and video updates.

Technology that enables connection comes with learning and culture curves

Many of our participating organizations already had a modern collaboration tool — primarily Microsoft Teams and, in some instances, Slack — in place prior to COVID-19, but technology adoption rates soared after the abrupt transition to remote work. People started using Microsoft Teams not only for video calls and communication, but now for collaboration too.

In many cases, the crisis fast-tracked company-wide adoption and teams began using their available tools more effectively. The transition was not seamless for everyone, though. The rate of change proved overwhelming for some IT teams, who struggled to support the vast number of employees seeking tools to connect and collaborate. Many employees started requesting support and coaching on how to collaborate online using tools like Mural.

" [Microsoft Teams] will be helpful for us to have and improve communication with others. We got together as regional managers and shared best practices.

" Slack has been the single most instrumental tool for me during this time. Not only does it allow our team to communicate easier... it also lets me keep some semblance of normalcy by still communicating with my coworker friends that I would typically see on a regular basis.

OPPORTUNITY

Encourage successful teams — like those who have pre-COVID-19 experience collaborating remotely, or those who are gaining a reputation in the organization for doing it well — to share their experiences, ways of working and tips and tricks with teams who are behind and struggling with adoption and training.

Employees valued the technology and tools that allowed them to continue to do their work during COVID-19. Many employees shared that using video for calls and meetings helped them feel more connected to their teams. With these new ways of interacting, they recognized the opportunity to explore and better understand communication etiquette. In interviews, some employees shared their experiences of heavy video communication fatigue and wanted to know if and when it's okay for them to turn their video off.

In some organizations, employees felt they had too many tools to choose from and so they struggled to be effective in any one of them. In listening labs, they shared their frustrations around not knowing how to use tools effectively when on external calls with customers. It lessened their sense of professionalism and competence when they were not able to use their tools in front of clients and customers.

OPPORTUNITY

Explore the idea of technology huddles to surface issues and opportunities for employees. Leverage your intranet or Microsoft Teams channels to support training and learning-specific tools.

> Video has never been a thing here, so we've been pushing that – the team's embraced it far more than I thought they would. They're comfortable with each other – they can wear a hoodie with no judgement.

Our research clearly showed that people need more than technology to connect. Successful collaboration in this new environment requires a shift in cultural behaviours and norms that employees are still in the process of figuring out together. Organizations can support this ongoing change by leveraging key supports: team managers directly affect how much connection there is between teammates, while platforms like Yammer and Microsoft Teams give employees an outlet to share their knowledge, learn and support each other. They will also need to continually monitor and evolve both their collaboration tools and behaviours and norms to meet employees' changing capabilities and needs.
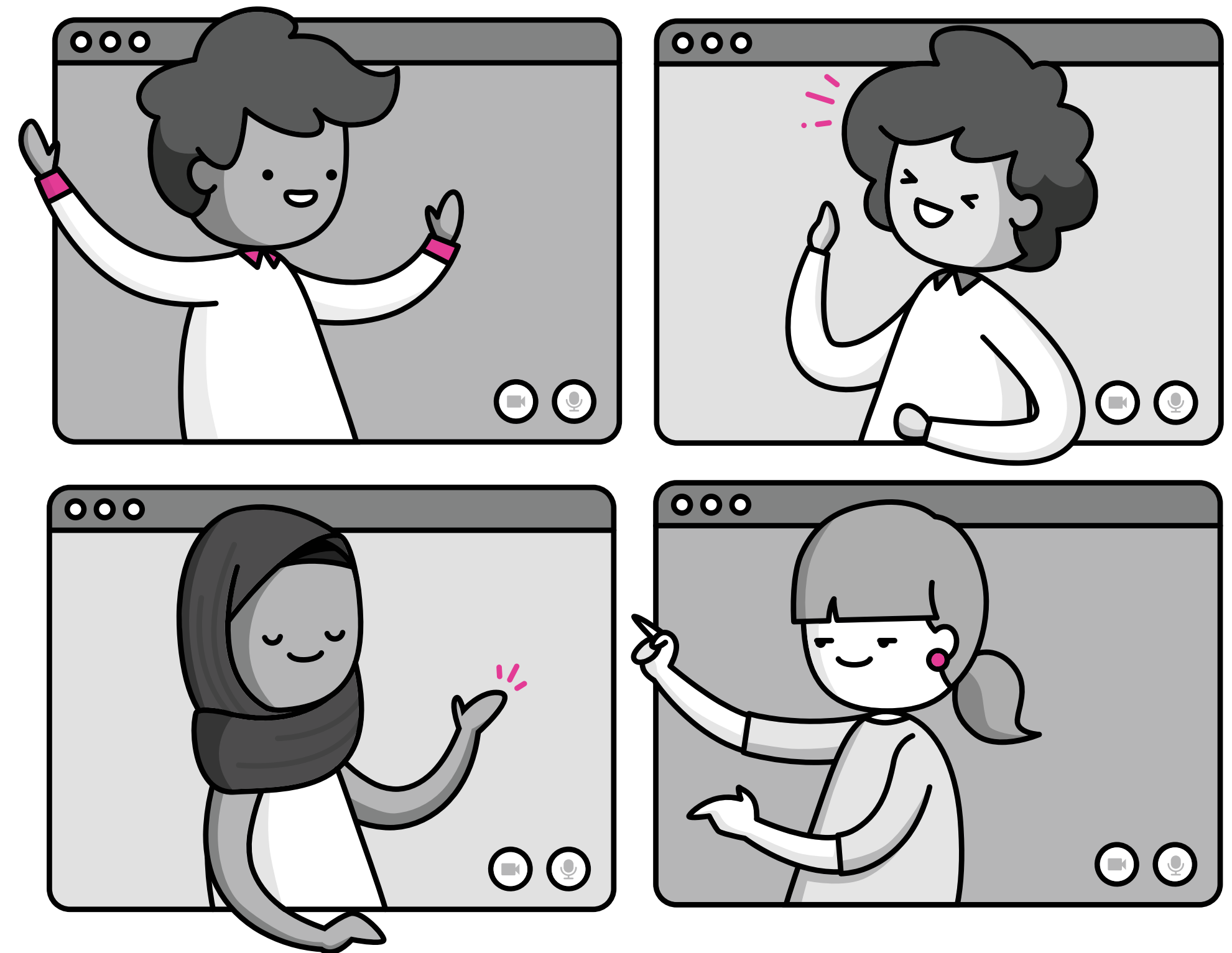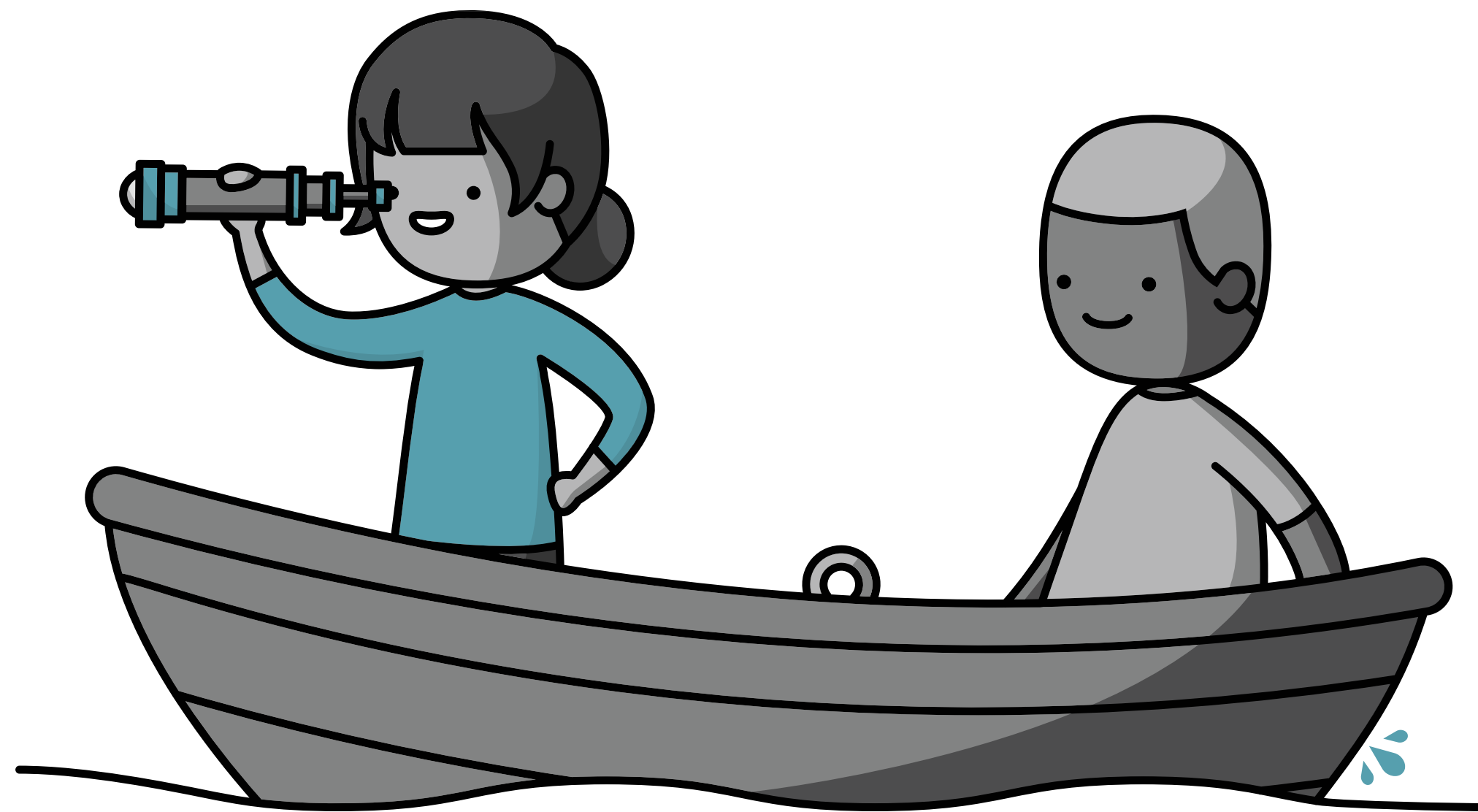
Leadership

Leadership that is authentic, accessible and human is critical now

With COVID-19, leaders are facing rapidly changing and uncertain conditions for which they have no blueprint. They are feeling the call – and sometimes pressure and strain – to step up and be both strong and vulnerable to support employees and their organization.

In our qualitative research with employees at all levels, we saw that they valued leaders who were empathetic, adaptable and caring. Humanistic interactions and communications – those that they considered honest and real – were helpful and grounding.

They also craved vulnerability from leaders. From the stories employees shared, we learned that they wanted not only for leaders to treat employees as people first, but to drop some of their own work personas and be human too. When leaders showed up on video messages or meetings, sitting in their kitchens or surrounded by kids and pets, it evened out the playing field in many ways.

The majority of the leaders in our study showed up as more approachable and accessible than ever during the early days and weeks of COVID-19. The quality of leadership did not go unnoticed by employees; in our qualitative research, many people expressed a desire to keep and build on thoughtful, high-touch leadership going forward.

As our study focused on organizations with a demonstrated interest and investment in good leadership and strong culture as prime drivers of their organization's success, these results would likely not extend to the wider world of workplace leadership.

"I already had a high opinion of leadership, but now I feel more connected on a human level to all of the leaders. It has been humbling to share this experience with them, and they have all been wonderful.

OPPORTUNITY

Authentic, open leadership has always been critical. Ensure your new approach to leadership is sustainable, so you can continue to show up authentically and provide clarity and direction to employees, even in uncertain conditions.

Empathy belongs in the workplace

Employees appreciated leaders who were able to understand and make space for what's going on in the world and in their lives. In interviews, we heard stories of how real, genuine empathy fostered a sense of connection between employees with their leaders and the organization as a whole.

This showed up in the tone and language used by leadership, the frequency of communication — from corporate-wide video messages from CEOs to team huddles and one-on-one phone calls — as well as practical considerations, like flexible workloads or schedules and increased autonomy.

" My husband and I have to split the day 50/50 since we have small children and no childcare. My manager was super understanding and allowed me to restructure my day, making up the extra hours flexibly when I can.

When employees sensed a lack of empathy from senior leadership, especially related to layoffs, workloads, salary cuts and social justice issues, they felt taken advantage of and questioned the motives of the organization.

Some employees had hoped for clearer and more timely responses on issues, such as a return-to-work plan or the Black Lives Matter movement. Many employees acknowledged that these are unprecedented and difficult circumstances, while others struggled with a major lack of trust in the motivation and end goals of their employer.

Empathy has been a challenge for our leadership. They haven't shown the empathy I would have liked to see, showing that they really understand the situation.

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Two of the organizations in our study transitioned to a shorter workweek to avoid layoffs. However, employees didn't always feel that this translated to a reduced workload. When leaders asked them to get something done on their days off, they felt the added pressure. For many, the expectations were unsustainable and indicated a lack of empathy and support from their organization. They wanted their managers to lead by example and set expectations around work-life boundaries.

" I hope managers are setting an example in not expecting people to work more than their four-day work week.

" Less hours but more work is absolutely a thing – we just keep hearing, 'it just needs to get done.'

OPPORTUNITY

This crisis has challenged leaders and employees to develop a shared understanding of what others are going through. Our research shows that this increased empathy has been meaningfully important. Leaders who continue to let empathy guide their communications and the level of understanding and flexibility they bring to their relationships with employees will reap the rewards.

What led to higher scores

Communication from leadership was vulnerable and empathetic, deepening relationships among employees, teams and managers.

What led to lower scores

Leaders, especially at the local and team manager level, failed to lead by example or demonstrate the same levels of empathy and care displayed by top leadership.

We're all in different boats in the same storm

While workplace disruption due to COVID-19 is a global event, it has affected everyone differently. In listening labs, employees expressed their appreciation for leaders and managers who recognized their individual circumstances and showed an understanding of the variances in people's situations.

Pay cuts offered an especially clear example of these disparities. At one organization, employee salaries were cut by the same percentage, regardless of role. Those with lower salaries felt the impact more intensely. As a result, they were left feeling that leaders and their organization were out of touch or didn't care about their wellbeing.

" I'm looking for an acknowledgment that we are having a shared experience, and we're all having it in vastly different ways. There's tendency at [the] top to say, 'we're all going through this together,' [but] your problems and my problems are different.

Check in, don't micromanage

During this time of physical distancing, we heard from employees how crucial it was that leaders check in actively on both managers and reports, especially if they were starting to burn out.

Employees appreciated when managers were mindful of their workloads and empathetic to their needs. One-to-one conversations made them feel valued and cared for.

At the same time, employees want to feel trusted and empowered to do their work. Leaders need to be comfortable with autonomy and creating results-driven environments.

❝ The biggest thing for me has been the consistent understanding and space for flexibility from everyone across the organization.

❝ We're all leaders in our own ways. Taking leadership over our schedules and our work, making certain decisions, having more flexibility.

OPPORTUNITY

Find ways to ensure that employees can maintain their newfound autonomy as your organization evolves its ways of working, including returning to office work.

What led to higher scores

Employees felt trusted to work autonomously. During check-ins, managers took the time to ask how they were doing, instead of focusing only on the status of their work.

What led to lower scores

Managers who struggled to manage remotely tended to micromanage their teams. Managers themselves also reported feeling like they spend most of their work days in calls and meetings, communicating and coordinating with the team and individual team members, rather than focusing on their higher value work or what they enjoy most.

Transparent communication builds trust

When leaders were open and transparent about their company health, sales and other plans or updates, it helped build a sense of trust with employees. Many employees wanted to feel that they were in the loop, even when leaders couldn't provide definitive answers or when the news was difficult. They didn't expect leaders to have all of the answers for every update; what mattered to them was honesty, transparency and clarity.

In many organizations, senior leaders published personal videos or briefings to help employees stay informed. These communications bolstered employees' confidence in leadership. When leaders communicated in a way that made their decisions and actions clear, employees could understand and get behind those decisions.

" Taking the time to provide the bigger picture around certain tasks and work is so much more important now than it was before.

Unsurprisingly, job security loomed large in the minds of most employees. Organizations that addressed the question early and with transparency scored higher in areas of leadership. Qualitative interviews with employees gave us a more detailed picture of the effects. When one company declared early on that there would be no layoffs, employees described a sense of relief; the elimination of that uncertainty allowed them to focus on their work instead of worrying about job losses. In organizations where layoffs did occur, communication was key. When leaders took time to call everyone on the team, explain the situation and encourage them to reach out, employees felt a sense of trust and reassurance. This was a huge contrast to team members who found out about colleagues being laid off through LinkedIn or by chance, with no acknowledgement from leadership around what happened and why.

Some leaders were very good at sharing the challenge of workplace disruption with employees and team members. People felt in-the-know and were more motivated to help their team navigate the challenges, which helped them feel like they were contributing and doing meaningful work.

What led to lower scores

When an organization's actions did not align with leadership communications, especially related to job security, employees felt a sense of betrayal and lack of loyalty.

What participants said

"The communication from leadership has been vague at best. No clarity on decisions. There was a discussion that we would avoid layoffs, then layoffs happened two or three weeks later. It has been awkward and uncomfortable, and I do not feel any loyalty."

Frequent, consistent communication is a lifeline

Employees shared that a frequent and consistent rhythm of communication from their top leaders was critical. Getting a sense of the big picture or leadership's vision helped them connect to the organization and feel more secure and motivated in their work. Town halls, webinars and videos from CEOs provided clarity into an organization's approach, and employees appreciated leadership's time and attention.

" Appreciate hearing from our CEO more often. Even if there is nothing critical to share, the updates give a sense of family. It conveys the feeling that our CEO appreciates us enough to spend a few minutes talking to us about what is happening.

Some employees experienced a decrease in trust in senior leadership, but an increase in trust with their direct leader, with whom they reported having frequent and open conversations.

In some smaller organizations, leaders reached out personally to individuals for unofficial check-ins via phone or video. Employees spoke of these experiences as being very personal and meaningful.

One-on-one communication was especially supportive when it came to lay-offs. Some leaders reached out personally to team members to inform them of who was being laid off, which relieved them of having to figure out themselves who was gone.

"Communication is 100% better – there's a united network between management and employees."

OPPORTUNITY

Use tools to scale leadership interactions. Your intranet is the perfect place publish insights, messages and videos from leaders to their teams in a transparent way that can also serve as an example for other leaders looking for guidance or ideas on how best to proceed.

What led to higher scores

Clear, consistent and frequent two-way communication. When leadership established new regular rhythms of communication, it became the new norm for employees, and they knew when they would be hearing from leadership.

Bringing life to work®

Leaders need support too

Leadership has been a key support for employees during this time, but for some the pressure may be difficult to carry. Managing remote teams required a different approach than many were used to. Leaders also felt the need to show up as strong, authentic and honest. They wanted to help employees make sense of the rapidly changing conditions without causing panic or worry – a challenging tightrope to walk. And while one-to-one check-ins proved helpful to both leaders and employees, they were time consuming and many worried they would be unsustainable in the long term.

So, leaders are feeling the strain. They want to step up, but they need the support of their organization. The leadership models in most organizations don't need to change to meet these new needs – they're just becoming more important, as organizations need to focus on supporting leaders, as well as employees.

" [I want to be] a visionary leader through these challenging times, both COVID-19 and social justice issues.

OPPORTUNITY

Identify gaps in leader and manager skills and comfort zones and invest in developing leaders in areas like communication, managing remote teams and results-based performance management. Support leaders with mentoring, coaching and peer support.

Leaders are anxious

An average of 26.2% of people leaders self-reported as being in a fear mindset, compared to 18% of individual contributors. When people shared their personal experiences in comments and workshops, we learned that leaders (especially people's managers) took on anxiety to shield their employees. The mindset results showed that leaders were largely successful in their efforts: 83.4% of employees were in either growing or learning mindsets at the time of the study, while leaders lagged at 71.6%.

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Culture

A strong culture is more important than ever

Organizations with strong cultures have invested time and effort into understanding their core ideology, which includes their purpose and values. They've worked hard to align everything from their strategies to tactical policies with their culture.

When we talk to employees about their organization's culture, we're interested in learning how they get work done, how they show up for each other, who is included and how that culture is brought to life within the organization, both virtually and in person. Culture is the system of beliefs and behaviours that form the operating system for an organization. In the best of times, this acts as an anchor for employees; during COVID-19, it became critical to their experiences.

In this study, organizations with an intentional culture, rooted in a clear purpose and values, benefitted from a stronger footing through adversity. In an environment of uncertainty and change, purpose and values made a big difference in alleviating employees' fear and uncertainty. Organizations that invested in their culture over the years reaped the rewards of that work during COVID.

" It sounds strange, [because] obviously things are different, but the essence of our culture – the caring about our wellbeing, the fun and shared jokes, being personal and genuine – is still there.

Unfortunately, only 41% of US employees strongly agree that they know what their company stands for and 27% strongly agree that they believe in their organization's values.[1] Our study found that when a crisis hits, if your organization doesn't have a bedrock of purpose and values in place, employees feel the gap.

" We already had some traditions in our week and I'm glad we had them. It would be harder to create all of that from scratch now.

Employees want their organization to *walk the talk*

The crisis of COVID-19 has tested organizations to live up to their values and demonstrate who they are to employees. In some cases, employees felt their existing beliefs about the organization were validated, as when a leadership team at one organization took a pay cut to protect other parts of the business.

When employees believe the company's actions and words align with their purpose and values, it leads to an increased sense of trust in the organization. This has a cascading effect. For employees, it's as though they've been given a gift and they want to reciprocate, offering their time, energy and attention when their team or company needs help.

" I don't feel like our values and beliefs were 'tested' in any capacity – only validated.

Some study participants felt like they were seeing their organization's values for the first time. Communication around layoffs proved to be an especially clarifying experience for some employees; they noticed if the tone or timing did not align with the organization's purported values.

" The lack of transparency in the first wave of dismissals went against the teams' values we created and caused fear and more damage at a time where we were already frail.

"**How has the way our company handled COVID-19 work environment disruption changed your opinion of us as an employer?**"

48%
improved

43%
no change

9%
lessened

Bringing life to work®

" The tone of the communication throughout all of this could have been gentler, more supportive, more nurturing and less competitive…. We missed an opportunity to communicate to the world what our values are and what we represent.

Most of the employees we talked to during our study reported no change or an improvement in their perception of their employer, as a result of how they handled workplace disruption due to COVID-19. Only 9% of employees surveyed reported that their opinion had lessened. We expected strong results in this area, as our study focused on organizations with above-average workplace health.

Our qualitative research revealed insights into their feelings and experiences that provided a richer understanding of what was happening. We saw the biggest dip in opinion from employees in organizations with a strong culture, where employees felt a deep connection to purpose and values. Employees had high expectations, so it was easier for these organizations to fall short when trying to navigate the uncertainty of COVID-19. Improvement or no change in employee opinion signaled only the organization's performance in relation to expectations, which may have been low to start.

OPPORTUNITY

Understand the limits of survey results. Engage your curiosity, empathy and deep listening skills to make sense of what you're seeing and hearing in your organization.

What led to lower scores

Organizations that were not able to meet their employees' high expectations due to slow reaction time and/or actions that did not align with perceived culture, purpose and values.

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Purpose and values provide clarity and direction

Our study found that a strong company culture supported employees as they adjusted to new norms and ways of working together. A clear purpose helped guide employees by empowering them to go back to the why – the organization's reason for being – from which point they could make decisions that best serve the organization.

Employees also felt the reassurance of knowing how to work together, because they had deeply rooted values and norms to lean on. Some employees recognized the advantages of their strong culture, and it felt more like a superpower than a support.

" The environment has changed, but the mission has never changed.

Through the study's workshops, we discovered that high trust with managers and within teams gave employees the clarity they needed to focus on important work and feel supported. This culture of trust gave them flexibility, which they noted was crucial during their transition to remote work. Conditions like working from home, once only *allowed*, now became trusted.

" The biggest thing for me has been the consistent understanding and space for flexibility from everyone across the organization.
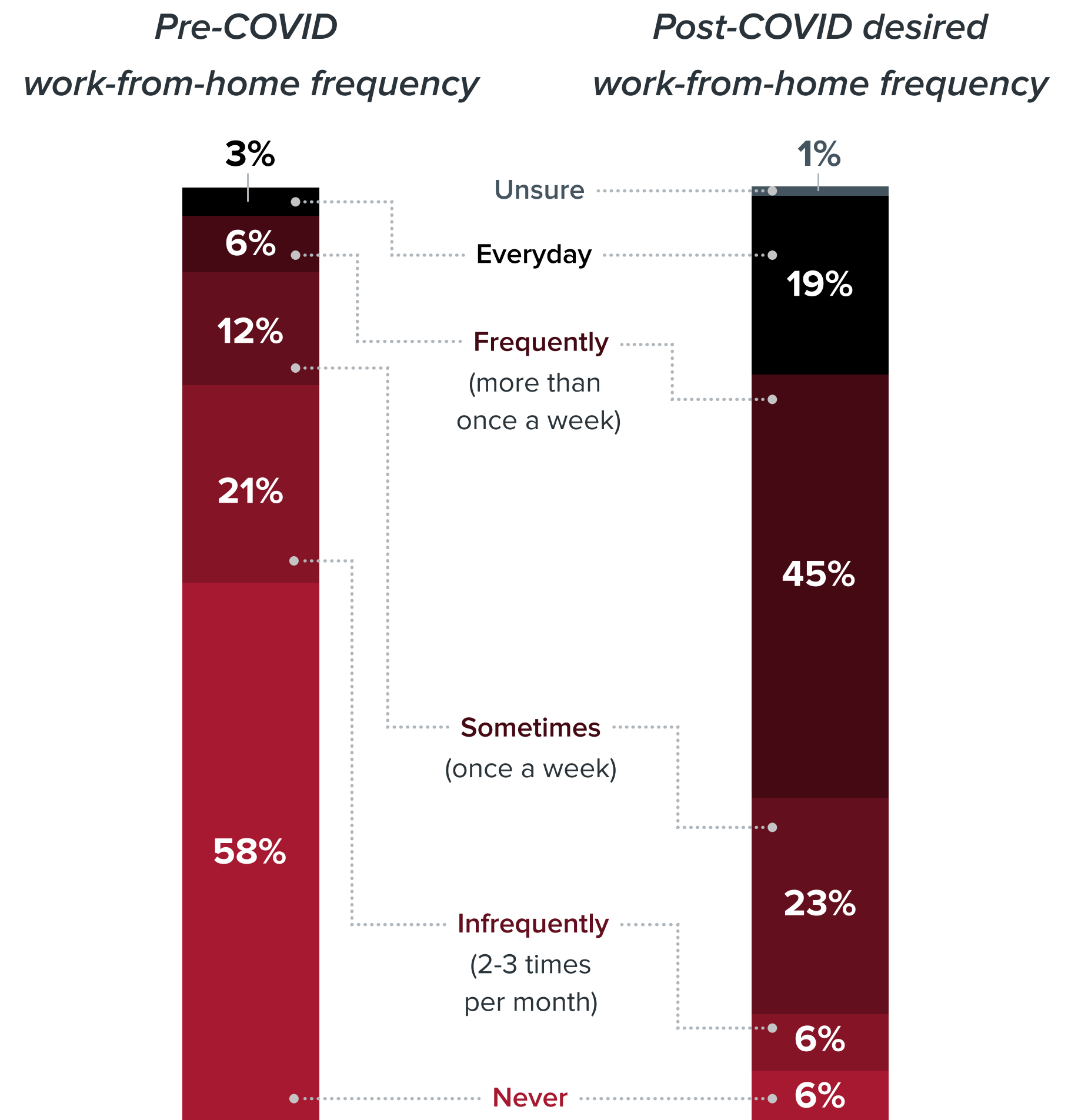
I feel like it's a gear in a vehicle that we've never had to really use before, and now we can use it. All the beliefs and values are already there and now it's like 'ok we're going off-road now.' It's like a sixth gear that not all organizations have.

Bringing **life** to work®

Fostering culture during remote work is challenging — but critical

Interviews revealed employees' sensitivity to organizational culture. They can feel if it's eroding, and this often showed up when they expressed feeling a lack of connection to one another and of being around each other in the office.

Working from home is a new experience for many employees. Seventy-nine percent of the employees in our study reported that they never worked at home before COVID-19 or did so infrequently. The full impact of this shift on organizational culture is ongoing and unknown.

" I'm worried that work-from-home will deteriorate our great company culture. You walk in and eat, live and breathe it, and that's a real missing element of my engagement with the brand. You can't recreate that from our spare bedrooms and kitchen tables.

Pre-COVID work-from-home frequency

Post-COVID desired work-from-home frequency

Pre-COVID	Category	Post-COVID desired
3%	Unsure	1%
6%	Everyday	19%
12%	Frequently (more than once a week)	
21%		45%
58%	Sometimes (once a week)	
	Infrequently (2-3 times per month)	23%
		6%
	Never	6%

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Culture matters to employees, and any change or weakening in culture has a potential impact on motivation and job satisfaction. Some interviewees expressed that culture figures heavily in their decision to work for their organization. Without their sense of organizational culture – that palpable connection to the purpose and values – a defining aspect of their work is lost.

OPPORTUNITY

Develop and reinforce new traditions and behaviours that will keep employees connected to each other and the organization, such as sharing the stories of organization's successes when faced with adversity in the past. Remind everyone that you're a team, you're in this together and you'll get through these times – because you've done it before.

> I can't emphasize enough how grateful I am for what my company is doing for us. I don't know what the future holds but for now I am happy to do everything I can to help us be successful.

Employees want to feel like they matter

Employees want to feel that their organization understands the impact of COVID-19 on their lives and cares how they are doing. This sense of care showed up in a variety of ways — from practical accommodations to empathetic communications or friendly and creative gestures.

Percentage of employees who felt supported by their organization, on a scale from 0 to 10.

not supported

0	0%
1	1%
2	1%
3	2%
4	2%
5	5%
6	5%
7	11%
8	23%
9	19%
10	31%
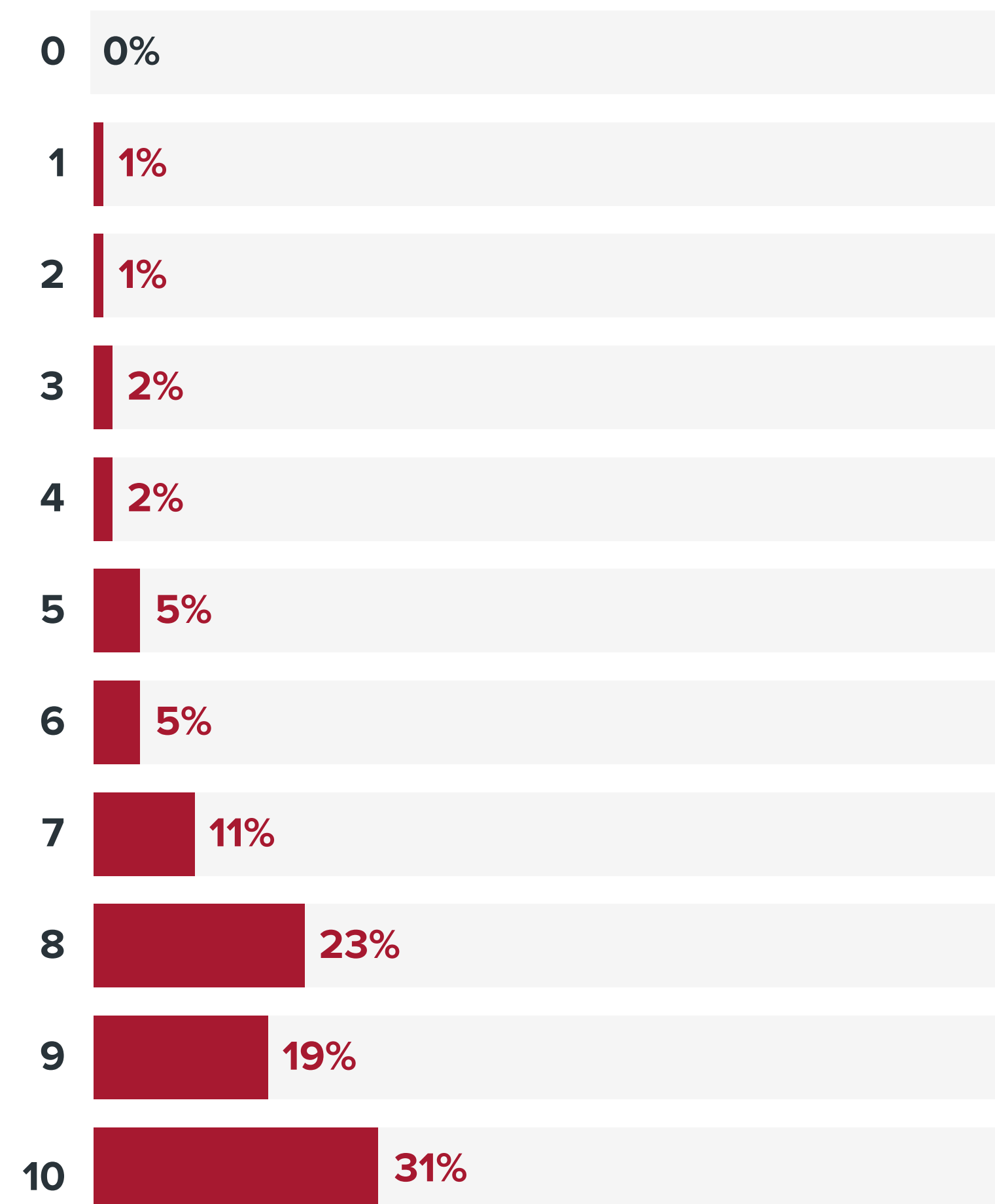
very supported

Employees felt cared for when managers asked them how they're doing, outside of work performance, or made sure they had the equipment they needed to work from home. Some organizations found creative ways to sustain their caring culture and connect people while they work from home, like home-delivering pizza or copies of a company cookbook of favourite recipes from employees.

"I cannot overstate how privileged I feel to be so well supported by [my] organization. Despite the obvious stresses of working through a pandemic, [they have] effectively removed any added stress of concern over job security or personal safety.

I feel I am connected to [my organization] as family, not just an employee. They are even working on professional development to get us involved in training and courses. I mean, how (much) nicer can you be than to think of sending your employees pizza to their front door.

When employees felt this care from their organization, their sense of trust and loyalty increased. In interviews, they expressed gratitude at what their company was doing for them. Despite the uncertainty they felt, they rededicated themselves to the purpose of their organization and were invested in its success.

"The trust and care makes me want to give back and do more. I'm happy to work a bit longer or do things I wouldn't normally do if it's needed.

OPPORTUNITY

Make the time to show empathy and support employees with both practical and creative actions, like providing the technology, peripherals and schedules to make sure their work-from-home experiences are successful. Involve employees in a process to co-design the future of their work environment.

What led to higher scores

Employees felt supported when they received personal reach outs by senior leaders, extra communication and time for connecting with each other.

What led to lower scores

Employees felt the strain of work pressures on top of individual life stressors. The impact of difficult work-from-home transitions and a lack of compassion from the organization regarding their workloads and schedules compounded their stress.

Meeting this moment, and the next

COVID-19 has tested organizations, leaders and employees. We've all stretched ourselves to adjust and adapt to a new, uncertain landscape, proving just how much we're capable of. It has been a time ripe with learning, if we're able to pay attention.

Our world has been forever changed, and there's no going back to what we knew before. Organizations are realizing that the past ways of working won't get them to where they need to go next. They're asking themselves:
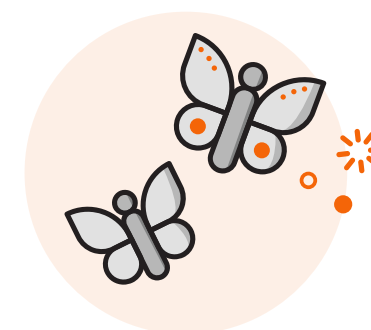
How might we…

Recognize, keep and amplify what's already working

Fine tune or change what isn't working

Test and scale new ways of working

Achieve positive, sustainable change

To answer these questions, organizations need to start with a clear understanding of what's really going on with their people. This is now more challenging than ever. It demands they invest in consistent, sustainable ways of engaging employees in conversation. Surveys provide insight, but it's in the stories of people's personal experiences where themes and actionable steps emerge.

The outlook today is very different than it was just a few months ago, and it will continue to shift over the months and years to come. Uncertainty and change aren't going away, but empathetic research can provide the insight to empower organizations to build the resiliency, connection and agility they need to meet this moment, and the next.

Benefits of qualitative research

During this study, we heard time and again from employees that they valued the qualitative research process. They loved the opportunity to make better sense of their world and, most importantly, be heard. Leaders, in turn, gained the clarity and confidence they needed to chart a path forward into the next phase of their journey.

What participants said

"We've seen, overwhelmingly enough, that people really enjoyed being able to contribute in a way that they feel seen, heard and understood."

How Habanero can help

We help companies become better places to work.

Habanero is a global leader in organizational design and digital transformation. We help organizations achieve meaningful change by engaging and empowering your most important activators of change – your employees.

Organizational design

It's pretty hard to see where you're going if you don't know where you are. We'll help you uncover cultural insight to confidently guide change and experimentation in your organization.

- Purpose and values
- Culture
- Employee experience design
- Change leadership

Digital transformation

We transform the way people work. We'll help you humanize the world of work and connect teams, increase productivity and foster agility in our changing world.

- Digital workplace strategy
- Modern collaboration
- Workplace automation
- Websites and customer portals
- Intranets
- Knowledge management
- ECM and records management

We have a great culture and we're doing a lot of the right things now so I would have been surprised to see many dramatic and new ideas. What we have got out of the study is clear direction on the most important things we have to focus on to evolve and find our way in this new world. This clarity is the foundation our team needed to stand on as we lean into the hard work of change ahead.

— PAUL CHISHOLM

FOUNDER, CEO & CHAIRMAN, IFD CORPORATION

Get in touch

We have big ideas, but let's start with hello. If you have questions or want to learn more about how you can turn deep insight into action, let us know. We'd love to talk.
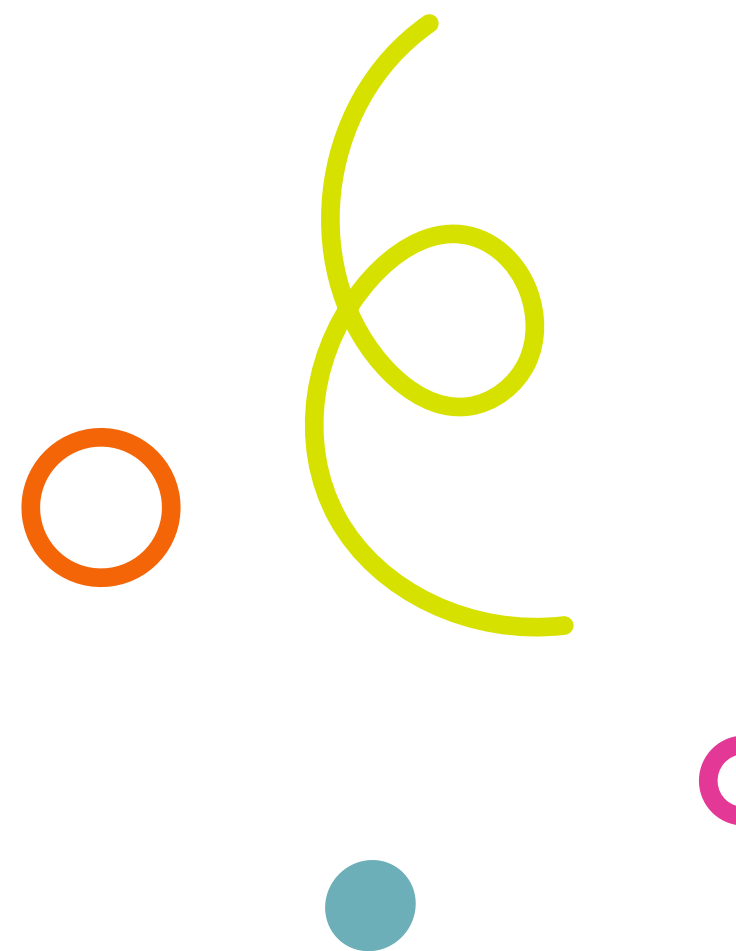
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