

## Is COVID-strategy Threatening Organisational Culture?



**Matthew Adam, Managing Director Systemic Solutions Consulting, Ltd.**

Since early 2020, businesses around the world have jumped into action, prompted by the global crisis of COVID-19. Without a doubt, what has been demonstrated by many organisations is the capacity to devise, introduce and mobilise a COVID-19 strategic response that has categorically changed the face of modern businesses. While many of the strategic elements comprising the COVID-19 responses are not new, enabling the global corporate workforce to shift to a fully digital, virtual work base certainly is. Virtual meetings are now significantly more common than meeting face-to-face, working from home is the new normal and productivity has increased significantly as a result of these changes (counter to many pre-Covid beliefs). Continuous rapid decision-making has also become a new norm, given the imperative to respond quickly to changing daily circumstances in the age of a global pandemic. These new ways of working are certainly aligned to an organisation's strategy, but **has the necessity of having a flexible, responsive COVID-strategy and largely virtual workforce created a more permanent change in organisational culture?**

Peter Drucker, one of the most influential 20th century thinkers on business management, once coined the phrase, 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast'. The implication of this statement is that regardless of how strong or coherent a business strategy, if an organisation's culture does not enable the workforce to deliver the strategy, the strategy is somewhat meaningless. During the COVID era, organisational culture has had to take a back seat and allow strategy to drive, often as a means of survival in many industries. Responsiveness and alertness to what's coming around the corner has meant businesses have had to stay focused, driven and committed. It has worked. And it's sticking. So, how attentive to culture do organisations really need to be when a successful COVID-strategy demonstrates the capacity to achieve amazing things. . . and quickly?

We would be remiss not to see the negative impact on organisational culture of the strategic changes that many organisations have implemented since March 2020. Drucker's statement could be revised for today's environment - during a strategy surge, culture, if left untended, will eventually eat strategy for breakfast. Let's examine the dilemma in more detail.

New working practices brought on by Remote Access Working and working from home have for the most part been an exception to the traditional workplace rules. But as each day passes, these new practices are quickly becoming established as an expectation, not the exception, for a significant portion of the workforce. In many cases, the expected COVID-strategy has created a new culture of working harder, faster, longer and more efficiently at all times. For many people, the social isolation subtly compounds the intensity of the work, making it easy to never to take a break from the computer. Sustained pressure for productivity, as though employees have something to prove working from home, are now commonplace. Blurring of boundaries between work and home life and working as parents whilst being on the job has created feelings of guilt or inadequacy and the need to compensate with longer work hours. The relentlessness of always being "on" is a new cultural norm creating significant challenges to the health and wellbeing of the global workforce on an unprecedented scale.

It is this aspect of COVID-culture that organisations should become more aware of and begin to challenge. Is a COVID-esque strategy worth the price if these new ways of working produce an unhealthy organisational culture? What is the cost to an organisation if an unhealthy culture becomes the standard? How can organisations bolster workforce wellbeing while implementing critical strategies?

COVID-19 has dramatically reshaped global workforce norms in a way that will be difficult to forget and perhaps even harder to change. But when is there time to pause strategy and think about culture when we have actual work to do? Perhaps there is more value in asking what is the cost of ignoring a negative organisational COVID-culture?

To avoid the onset of culture eating COVID-strategy for lunch, now really is the time to take action and **make** the time to focus on organisational culture. Here are some quick tips to help you reinforce a workplace culture that will continue to enable a strong strategy.

1. **Take the time to get to know each other.** Today it is common to work closely with colleagues you have never met, or to have lost touch with teammates you no longer see in the office. Consider reinstating water cooler conversations or tea breaks virtually.
2. **Dedicate regular time and a safe space for teams to think together, challenge, and discuss.** Rather than setting the expectation to 'now connect', create the space and ask, 'What do you want this space to be?'

'What is ok to share with each other right now?' Teams that think together grow together. Teams that don't are unlikely to perform at their best because there is too much that is unknown and left unsaid.

3. **As a team, identify what rules and norms do not represent how you want to work.** 'What have you lost through these new ways of working that we can rediscover in this forum?' Which new cultural norms should be challenged or deconstructed? Where is wellbeing support needed? By looking at the rules, norms and the stories associated with work, the organisation can begin to shape a preferred future by considering what needs changing and how it should be changed. New rules that establish clear guidelines for working from home can lead to new behaviours that can support the development of new, morale-boosting stories!
4. **Discuss your roles, team structure, and aim.** Team chartering is essential to coordination, alignment and outstanding performance. If you know what you expect of others, what others expect of you, and where you are collectively aimed, you will better understand how to maximise your team's potential.
5. **Establish your goals and set forth your strategy!** If your team has managed to do all the prior steps, now is the time to affirm and implement your strategy, a critical component of which should be workforce development. When your organisational culture and strategy are synced properly and aimed in the same direction, culture won't be eating strategy for breakfast again!

If you would like to discuss the ideas in this article, please contact me either at the email address or contact telephone number. To learn more, view [these videos](#).