

Redefining the Workplace: Being Responsive and Flexible Is Imperative

Summary of June 25 FORTUNE Future of Work event, presented in partnership with Domo

Transparency. Empathy. Flexibility. All are essential leadership qualities to make employees feel comfortable about the process of returning to offices after months of working at home during the COVID-19 crisis.

“One of the new and emerging leadership characteristics coming out of this crisis is compassion,” observed Ellyn Shook, chief leadership and human resources officer for Accenture, during a FORTUNE Future of Work discussion on June 25, in partnership Domo, a cloud-based data platform and intelligent apps company. “It is not just what you say, but how you say it.”

Also participating in the event were Peter Cappelli, director of the Wharton School Center for Human Resources; Domo Founder, CEO, and Chairman of the Board Josh James; and Ray Wang, chairman of Constellation Research. The conversation was moderated by FORTUNE Senior Editor Kristen Bellstrom.

Wang notes companies must weigh legal considerations as they adopt health and safety guidelines suggested by the medical experts many companies are consulting to plan their reopenings. Measures commonly being embraced are temperature checks, space reconfigurations to support physical distancing, and staggered work shifts. “A lot of employment lawyers are going to have a field day with this puppy,” he says.

As an example, managers might face discrimination scrutiny if they require junior-level employees to work onsite while managers can opt to work remotely, notes Cappelli. He urged transparency about policy, even when leaders don’t have all the details worked out: “When you don’t tell people what is going on, they will make up an answer.”

Mental health services for employees stressed out by hours of video meetings and burned out by the blurred barriers between their professional and personal lives must also be a priority, say the speakers. One group that might need particular attention is veterans, for whom post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may already be a concern, notes Cappelli.

Ideas for creating breaks offered during the conversation included encouraging people to stand and walk around during meetings, setting up a buddy system to informally check in with employees, creating discussion groups or programming to support breaks, or even encouraging people to turn off their cameras for a while. These are services that should continue after employees start returning to offices. “We need to normalize talking about these issues, and I think the best way to do that is when the tone is set at the top and the most senior leaders in the company are sharing how they are recharging ...,” says Shook.

Domo is prioritizing responsiveness. While James wants most Domo people to return to the office as a matter of culture, he is encouraged by the sense of shared experience that has occurred during virtual chats and happy hours.

For example, as a result of a well-attended virtual discussion about diversity and inclusion hosted by Black employees, Domo adopted a hiring policy effective later this year requiring managers to interview at least one qualified woman for every open position. This policy already existed at the management level and will also include interviewing one person of color for every open role.

“That one initiative came about from all these virtual conversations that we probably wouldn’t have had otherwise,” says James. “These kinds of interactions—you’ll see some great positive things come from them. And the bonus: you’re still moving your company forward.”

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