The Last Three Years Changed A Lot: Why Businesses Need To Invest In Getting Better At Work

An Impact Retrospective

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THERE'S NO GOING BACK

Employers and employees dealt with a lot over the past three years. But the work has just begun.

The workplace underwent a full on transformation, creating changes on both sides of the workplace equation.

Employees have looked for more transparency and flexibility. To prioritize their wellbeing and mental health, along with their careers and work success, and that of the organizations they serve.

At the same time, employers want their people to be happy and fulfilled in their careers. All while running a profitable organization that continues to grow, generate revenue and contribute to society.

As a result, during the pandemic we saw organizations experiment with different ways of adapting. Some approaches worked, and others didn't. While many other organizations focused simply on surviving and getting "back to normal".

Throughout it all, Impact provided articles about what we were hearing from leaders. We created this retrospective report to help you reflect on what you were thinking at the time. So you can consider what you've learned and how you've grown. And we offer some guidance for redeveloping workplace culture and enhancing productivity, post pandemic.

Because there's no going back.

We need to focus on moving forward. Delving deeper. Examining where we've come from, yes, but putting more work into evolving where we're going. Understanding more about each other and how we can work together, as equals, for a future that's beneficial for everyone. Because those who pivot and acclimate quickest to take advantage of this new workplace will be the ones who achieve the greatest success.

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THERE'S NO GOING BACK

We hope this retrospective report helps you reflect on, acknowledge, understand, and learn from the transformative changes of the past three years – including these prominent trends:

Remote work: the shift to remote work and its impact on individuals and organizations.

Mental health issues: the increased prevalence of mental health challenges and the importance of addressing them in the workplace.
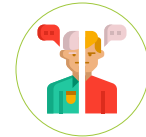
Productivity and burnout: the effects of remote work on productivity levels and the rise of burnout.

Relocation: the implications of individuals moving from major cities to remote locations.

Virtual teams: the challenges and benefits of managing virtual teams.

Generation gap: the impact of different generations adapting to the changes brought about by the pandemic.

Talent War/Talent Shortage/Talent Retention: the talent-related challenges organizations face and how it's affected how leaders respond.

Shift in job perspective: the pandemic has influenced people's perceptions of work, focusing on the why and where.

Lack of Mentorship: the need for a mentor, apprenticeship style training/learning (on-the-job training).

We're grateful to have been able to speak to and help thousands of senior leaders as they tackled the many challenges of the pandemic. Those conversations represent a true pulse of what leaders were thinking at the time and inspired us to see what learnings we could unravel from our work and insights of the last three years. To find some benefits and opportunities we can all use to grow as leaders. We're optimistic everyone can apply what we've all collectively learned from COVID and put it into practice going forward. So we can be better, kinder, more successful – and happier. So we can all evolve and develop with greater integrity, authenticity, prosperity, and promise.

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OUR IMPACT

23,000

TOTAL HOURS
DELIVERED

500

PROGRAMS
DELIVERED

2,100

PARTICIPANTS
COACHED

19,000

CONVERSATIONS
WITH SENIOR
LEADERS FOR 360
INTERVIEWS

50+

COMPANIES

7

COUNTRIES

95%

LIKELY TO
RECOMMEND
RATING

40+

COACHES

99%

SUCCESSFUL
COACH / CLIENT
MATCHES

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YEAR ONE: NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON THE WORKFORCE

During the challenging times at the start of COVID, we looked closely at how the pandemic impacted organizations and industries. Our articles written throughout that first year provided valuable insights and strategies to help organizations navigate the uncertainties and complexities of the "new normal" including:

- Delving into the growing prevalence of anxiety and stress among individuals.

- Offering actionable steps to foster better health and productivity.

- Exploring the emotional stages of transitional periods.

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YEAR ONE: NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC'S IMPACT ON THE WORKFORCE

The New Normal Is Not Normal (But You Can Still Work Through It)

Date: June 29, 2020.

Key insights:

1

- **Anxiety surge:** The pandemic led to a surge in adult anxiety levels (from 18% to 40%), mainly due to remote work challenges.

- **The importance of communication and coaching:** Effective communication and coaching became vital for navigating these changes, necessitating greater transparency and leadership support.

- **Finding a healthy "new normal":** With a focus on well-being, breaks, and sustainability in remote work.

It's Time for Organizations to Ascend the Pandemic's Change Curve

Date: November 19, 2020.

Key insights:

2

- **Emotional transitions:** The Kübler-Ross Change Curve highlighted the emotional stages individuals undergo during significant transitions, like the 1918 flu pandemic and 9/11, and that societal changes persist long after the immediate event.

- **Global hiring trends:** The shift to remote work has broadened talent acquisition strategies globally, and the adoption of asynchronous communication tools has improved collaboration across different time zones.

- **Reinvesting savings:** Reduced business expenses during the pandemic can be redirected towards employee development, emphasizing continuous growth.

The Talent War Is Real: How Leaders Should Respond as Their People Return to Work

Date: November 8, 2021.

Key insights:

3

- **Flexible work preferences and priorities:** The pandemic shifted the focus from where employees work to why they work, emphasizing work-life balance, compensation, and new experiences.

- **Evolved retention strategies:** Talent retention strategies evolved to include designing jobs around interests, prioritizing connection, and aligning company values with broader purposes.

- **Emphasis on empathy and wellness:** Workplaces emphasized empathy, wellness, and connection – and those that could authentically prioritize these attributes are more likely to thrive.

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YEAR TWO: ADAPTING TO THE EVOLVING WORK LANDSCAPE

As the second year of the pandemic unfolded, we remained dedicated to supporting businesses amidst the ever-evolving challenges. The articles we wrote during that second year addressed critical issues like talent retention, employee well-being, and effective management strategies. Our articles and insights looked to help organizations adapt, make data-driven decisions, and nurture employee well-being during an unprecedented time including:

- The rise of Chief Happiness Officers vs creating individual motivation through autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

- The trend of "quiet quitting" as a response to stress vs developing long-term solutions through open communication.

- How to manage talent effectively amid economic uncertainty.

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YEAR TWO: ADAPTING TO THE EVOLVING WORK LANDSCAPE

1

The Conditions for Happiness: Increased Retention Comes from Managing People Well

Date: June 29, 2020.

Key insights:

- **Retention challenges and the CHO role:** The pandemic exacerbated talent retention challenges. The rise of the Chief Happiness Officer (CHO) role sought to provide a solution – but it missed the point.

- **Individualized coaching:** One-on-one coaching conversations can help leaders understand the individual needs of their people and design jobs their employees want to keep.

- **Employee-centric approach to retention:** Successful retention revolves around ensuring employees feel valued, engaged in interesting roles, and connected to a larger purpose within the organization.

2

Quiet Quitting: Why It's Not the Answer You Think – And What Is

Date: September 30, 2022

Key insights:

- **Reactions to overwhelm:** Pandemic-induced stress caused two main reactions: outright quitting and "quiet quitting", or fulfilling a role with minimal effort. But neither of these reactions tackle deeper job satisfaction issues.

- **Both reactions have impacts:** Quitting and quiet quitting affect not only the individual but also colleagues and the overall work culture, emphasizing the need for long-term solutions.

- **Communication is key:** Effective communication, seeking mentorship, and investing in personal growth are vital for tailored work experiences and sustainable career satisfaction.

3

The Talent Pendulum Swing

Date: November 21, 2022.

Key insights:

- **Economic challenges:** Post-pandemic economic considerations led to layoffs at major companies like Ford, Amazon, and Facebook, impacting talent management decisions.

- **Remote work challenges:** Remote work introduced challenges, such as poor visibility and unclear performance expectations, prompting companies to reassess their talent strategies.

- **Open conversations:** Transparent discussions about organizational needs and employee potential are crucial for retaining valuable talent in challenging economic times and within remote work environments.

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YEAR THREE: BALANCING THE HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT

Coming out of the pandemic in 2023, we continued to explore critical topics, delving into the concept of ideal team players and the importance of assessing and investing in employees' potential for long-term results. Amidst heightened stress and burnout, we highlighted the need for:

- Leaders to prioritize their own well-being.

- Fostering open conversations and a culture of support.

- Strategic planning for in-person and remote work to enhance collaboration, creativity, and overall success.

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YEAR THREE: BALANCING THE HYBRID WORK ENVIRONMENT

1

Uncovering Your Organization's Hidden Gems: The Ideal Team Players

Date: January 4, 2023.

Key insights:

- **Addressing underperformance:** Understand each person's potential contributions and address underperformance, rather than laying off employees and losing out on that potential.

- **Post-COVID assessments:** Identify employees who lacked support and training during the pandemic, but have untapped potential.

- **Strategic approach - the Ideal Team Player:** Seek employees who are smart, humble, and hungry, as they bring innovation, drive change, and are deeply motivated in their work.

2

Taking Time to Heal

Date: March 14, 2023.

Key insights:

- **Leaders' mental health:** Post-pandemic, leaders are grappling with heightened stress, exhaustion, and new, complex people challenges.

- **Hybrid challenges:** Hybrid work arrangements intensified stressors, which means we need more leaders to manage the increased workload.

- **Self-care for leaders:** Leaders must prioritize self-care, including vacations, therapy, and coaching to ensure they address their well-being.

3

Returning to the Office Starts with a Conversation

Date: June 20, 2023.

Key insights:

- **Value of in-person work:** In-person work offers greater opportunities for creativity, productivity, and culture building. But it needs to be balanced with the benefits people receive from working from home.

- **Open conversations:** It's important to encourage open conversations about returning to the office and actively seeking employee perspectives on their diverse needs and preferences regarding their remote vs in-person schedules.

- **Customized approaches:** Tailoring return-to-office plans to individual needs and aligning them with organizational goals helps create more sustainable, long-term strategies.

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SO, WHAT NOW?

2023 was a pivotal year for many businesses. Coming out of the pandemic, leaders across industries were challenged by the new hybrid environment and how it impacted them, their teams, and their organizations. More and more companies began asking (or requiring) employees to return to the office. And we started to see a struggle arise between what employers and employees see as the benefits of showing up in person vs working from home.

And they're both right.

There's great value in people coming together in one location to interact with each other in person. To learn from and mentor one another. There are soft skills that are best imparted when you're working side-by-side with someone else. When you can see the reaction on their face, hear the nuance in their voice, and receive the benefit of instant feedback. And there's great momentum you can achieve when everyone's working together consistently, every day.

At the same time, the work model where all employees come into the office from 9 to 5, five days a week, has been around 150 years since the rise of the industrial age. But just because it's had a long existence doesn't mean it was a great model for everyone. Or that it's a model we should still use and honor today. Especially after the massive cultural shift created by an event like the global pandemic.

We've all become accustomed to the new normal of hybrid. Of caring for our well-being and that of our colleagues. Of looking at work and life as a different kind of balance. And it would be a greater challenge to go back now.

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Instead, we need to move forward within the new framework we've collectively developed. Mass customization will be important going forward because we can't treat everyone the same anymore. Customizing each role to the individual will help ensure each person has the greatest opportunity to contribute the most to the organization and build a career that is the most fulfilling and meaningful to them. We need to create an equal relationship between employers and employees – one that both parties can not only understand, accept, and work with, but thrive in.

To do that, we need to ask some tough questions and come up with answers that benefit everyone. Questions like:

- How do we make life better for employees and still meet employers' and shareholders' needs?

- How do we design a workplace that allows people to customize their experiences with their own preferences, schedules, wellness routines, and career paths?

- How do we ensure their work is aligned with the business?

- That they are working on the right things and helpful to the workplace and their teams?

- That they are earning their salaries?

- How do we support leaders better to ensure they continue to perform, while also looking after their mental health and wellbeing, so they don't burnout?

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Here are some ways we can answer these questions:

More dialogue creates stronger relationships: As leaders, we need to have more regular, open, honest communication with our people. And hybrid work environments make that need even greater. We need to talk with our people more often to ensure they're empowered to do their best, feel supported, and are aligned with the business strategy. Building stronger relationships with our people helps us figure out when they're struggling or dissatisfied with their work, so we can better address their needs and help them succeed. Because when they succeed, we succeed. A future indicator for success will be the ability for employees and employers to have open and honest conversations about work deliverables, work arrangements and feedback. It used to be that the employer told the employees what to do and people mostly did it or were let go. And people stayed at the same company for a long time. But that old model has been breaking down for years. It needs to be replaced by a new, more collaborative, open and egalitarian model. And the foundation of this model will be relationships. The organizations that have the best ability to drive effective work relationships and effective dialogue will be the most successful. And both parties have to play – supervisors and subordinates.

Productivity is a hot button: Leaders want people back in person. Employees mostly want hybrid work. All leaders are concerned about productivity. The data is all over the place, but almost all leaders we speak to feel that productivity has dropped. People are not being trained, coached or managed well enough. Innovation has untapped potential. People are sometimes working hard on the wrong things. At other times, they're not working at all, believing their jobs are to "mind the shop" in case they get an email or are needed. Few jobs are like this. Most jobs require you to think and act and add value to something, in your unique way, in an effort to better the team or help meet objectives. Jobs are units of value in an organization or team. If someone isn't pulling their weight, it impacts the whole team – and in smaller organizations, the whole company.

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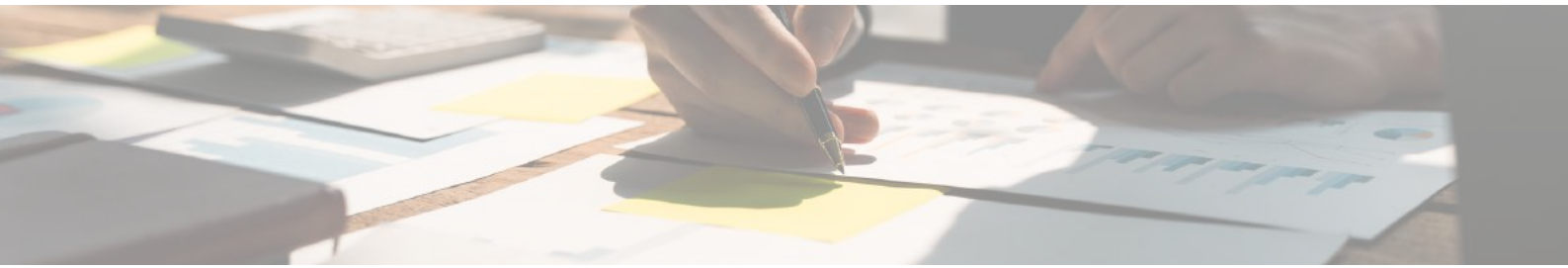
Real conversations: Developing a hybrid model that works requires a lot of real dialogue. This means both parties talk about their needs honestly and openly, and then they design plans unique to each person. The whole organization needs to have the courage to let people have different approaches to work. Both employees and employers need to be comfortable with this and celebrate it, without comparing. If there's something you're uncomfortable with, don't complain to HR. Talk to the person – supervisor or colleague – who's concerning you.

Technology can help: We need to recognize that people work more asynchronously now – whether because of hybrid or outsourcing. We need to be more flexible in the hours we work and use technology more effectively. If you do your best work at night, post it on Teams or OneDrive and ask your people to review or respond when they're ready. You might get an immediate response, or overnight, or the next day. We need to both honor how people operate, and how and where they live. Given that we're working more globally today and are often geographically dispersed, using technology to facilitate our lives will become more and more important.

Personality profiles provide valuable insights: Understanding yourself deeply as a person and what you need to be successful will be critical for leaders. Knowing when you're at your best and what you need in a relationship is key to effectively managing good conversations with others. Recognizing when you've reached your limit, being aware of why that's making you frustrated, angry or defeated, and understanding what to do to overcome the situation. Knowing the kind of business you want to run and the kind of people you want on your team. Self-understanding is a hugely important part of being a leader – and personality profiles can help you get there. So you can be more present and show up as the best version of yourself for your people and your organization. For example, the understanding and insights you gain from personality profiles can help you show up to meetings ready for tougher and deeper discussions. The more seriously you take your personality profiles and use them to be at your best and be transparent with others – the more effective your working relationships will be.

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Good measurement helps define success: For many roles, especially more senior ones, we can't always look to old models for assessing performance or productivity. How long the individual is in the office, or how much time they spend on a project. Instead, we need to focus on what the individual is being paid to do. (How is their work contributing to the success of the organization? How does their output support the business' goals? What impact are they having?) And ensure the supervisor and subordinate are aligned on what performance and productivity levels they expect, which makes it easier to measure. Productivity and measurement are two of the biggest concerns for most leaders today. If people aren't in the office, how will the company or department be successful?

Success is the sum total of the success of all the players. It's critical that everyone in the company or department add real value. Supervisors and subordinates will need to spend the time to understand what the "success profiles" (capabilities) and outcomes are for each job. And supervisors will need to be clear about their culture and strategy, and how subordinates fit into the organization. This takes work and lots of informed dialogue on both sides and the ability to coach and manage conflict. And both parties then need to be ready to discuss progress regularly. This is less about assessment and deciding compensation, and more about helping both parties be successful.

The changing nature of feedback: Creating systems where people get feedback immediately and can gather feedback for themselves will be key to the new employee/employer relationship. People will need the skills to manage their performance and careers, and be prepared to have good and informed conversations with their employers. The shift to a more egalitarian model means more work for everyone and less reliance on the employer to be everything to everyone when it comes to performance feedback.

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Group work will be key going forward: Hybrid makes it harder for people to connect with each other, which is why it's important to have plenty of group work. It allows people to feed off each other's ideas. Collaborate to achieve common goals. Feel part of something bigger than themselves and more connected to the organization. And it can make work more enjoyable.

This means delivering more group learning and projects than ever before – throughout the entire organization. Groups will become the units that drive results and learning. So being good at groups and teams will be a huge differentiator. This also means building very strong and resilient leadership teams. Teams that effectively cascade through the organization. And alignment and effectiveness of those leadership teams – especially in today's more complex, post-COVID, hybrid world – will also be a significant differentiator. The more they're aligned on the company's strategy and culture, the easier it will be for everyone to contribute to the best of their ability, and have really good dialogue and tight, effective work relationships.

We need more leaders: Leading today is a lot harder. Leaders are expected to maintain the work levels they did pre-pandemic, while also having meaningful conversations with each of their people, learning about their lives and how they want to work. We're expecting them to continue to perform at a high level in their core work, while also being good at psychology, health and wellness, coaching, mentoring, communication, running effective teams, and providing individualized experiences for each employee. All this takes a lot of time. We can't set these higher standards for leaders without taking some things off their plates, reducing the number of direct reports they have, and providing them with more support.

And EQ, leadership capability and the ability to be strong but caring are more important to leaders. They will need courage, curiosity the ability to build relationships – and employees will need these same skills. The days of making this all about the leaders are over. Both parties need to be very skilled in handling a greater complexity of performance and personal issues.

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Trust is at the core: All these approaches – increasing communication (and facilitating it with technology), understanding ourselves better as leaders, aligning on how we measure performance and productivity, group work, feedback, and supporting leaders more – lead to building greater trust with our people. In the new hybrid, post-pandemic environment, trust will be the cornerstone of building successful teams and organizations. It's something that wasn't as important to achieve in a 9-to-5, five-days-a-week world, where everyone worked in the office together. Proximity didn't require as much trust. But today, when we don't spend time with our team members every day because we're geographically dispersed, often meet virtually, and come into the office on different days, trust plays a much more crucial role.

And the currency for trust is great dialogue. To build trust you need open and honest dialogue and you can't have open and honest dialogue without trust. It's a chicken-and-egg balance, but it's critical we get it right.

Suspending judgement and using positive language are key to building trust through dialogue. For example, using words like "challenge" instead of "problem", and avoiding charged terms, such as "entitled". Suspending judgement, avoiding assumptions, and having good dialogue will also be key to connecting the many different generations of people working together in today's business environment. Ensuring we embrace different views across generations in the workplace will be crucial for everything from employee engagement and succession planning to innovation and creativity, and mental health and wellbeing.

And people (leaders and staff) who don't create trust will impede everyone else.

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WHAT CAN COACHING DO?

Leaders need to be good at conversations: Coaching can help leaders be more comfortable with having really good – and more frequent – dialogues with their people. It can help leaders become better coaches to their people, so leaders can support them in their careers in ways that are customized to each individual. Coaching helps leaders better understand their people, build trust, and manage conflict. It also helps leaders have more meaningful and effective conversations to ensure their people can get the help they need with everything from mental health and wellness concerns to productivity and measurement challenges.

Coaching, combined with personality profiles and assessments, can also help leaders understand themselves better so their conversations are more open, honest, and meaningful. And it can help leaders better manage the new challenges they face in this more complex workplace so they don't burnout. Having candid and safe discussions about all aspects of their work and relationships with someone outside the organization can be invaluable in today's business environment. It can help leaders not only overcome the challenges they face, but rise to even greater heights. At a time when we need more leaders, coaching can be a true asset.

Non-leaders need to communicate better, too: Coaching can help people who aren't leaders think about how they want to work, align with the business, prepare, and negotiate their perspectives with their leaders. That's because work is a two-sided relationship, and ensuring we have good, frequent dialogues means both sides need support in defining their new ways forward. Facilitated group discussions with a coach for leaders and staff can also help improve group work and team effectiveness including driving greater connectedness and trust among team members from different generations. And talking to an external coach allows individuals to work through some of their toughest challenges without fear of jeopardizing their jobs, which can accelerate their development – and build greater trust.

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Coaching will be the new training: There's less need for formalized training today, and much of it can be asynchronous. People can complete training online and then use coaching as a mechanism for embedding the skillsets and approaches they've learned into their own experiences. In this way, coaching helps each individual customize their learning to ensure it has a more significant impact on their performance, career fulfillment, and success.

Ensuring you're plugged in as a leader: Have you read the latest thinking on leading strong, vibrant, high-performing teams? Do you really understand what's impacting your people's mental health, well-being, and satisfaction at work? Do you know how your strengths and weaknesses as a leader are affecting your organization? Because if you aren't keeping on top of these critical people issues, you're not doing everything you can to be successful as a leader. Coaching provides more emphasis on enhancing complex interpersonal and leadership abilities, creating more meaningful and effective dialogue, and building trust. It allows leaders to sharpen their skills and better manage critical situations on a global scale within different cultures, geographic environments, and among different generations in the workplace.

Transforming HR: We need to move away from an HR function that's focused on operational tasks and maintaining a standardized set of processes across the organization. Instead, to be truly effective, HR needs to become a highly well-informed advisory function. HR and talent resources need to transform so they are true advisors who are deeply connected to the business. Who understand the issues leaders face, and are fiercely committed to helping leaders solve them. This includes allowing greater flexibility among leaders to manage their teams in ways that work best for them. And HR could be supported by external experts in the field, providing services including everything from training to coaching to recognition programs, to help maintain their strategic focus on the needs of leaders within the organization.

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HOW IMPACT CAN HELP YOU FACE THE FUTURE, STRONGER

Senior Leadership Support: Facilitating seamless transitions for new CEOs and executive teams, encompassing succession planning and alignment with the evolving demands of the modern workplace.

Team Reconnection Programs: Rekindling team connections post-distancing, aligning teams with organizational objectives, and empowering them to navigate challenges sustainably in a hybrid environment.

Enhanced Assessment Programs: Tailored for CEO/C-suite coaching and role selections, these programs foster compatibility within hybrid teams and organizations, supporting effective onboarding strategies.

In-House Coaching Initiatives: Developing internal coaching capabilities to nurture a coaching culture, enhancing business development skills essential in the hybrid work landscape.

Large-Scale Transformation Programs: Addressing the shifts in work culture and capabilities induced by the hybrid model, fostering sustainable changes that resonate with modern work dynamics.

High-Potential Accelerator Programs: Aimed to fast-track the growth of your standout employees, fostering deeper connections between individuals and the organization. Spearheading strategic succession planning and retention, driving sustained organizational growth and success.

Individual Programs: Designed for leaders and high performers to achieve personal and professional goals.

Facilitated Group Work: Facilitated sessions with leaders and staff separately, and then bringing leaders and staff together for facilitated group work to help enhance relationships and build better functioning groups.

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Looking to take it to the next level?

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