

Celine Dion, the Pandemic & Understanding ‘Hybrid Workforce’



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You’re sick of hearing about COVID-19. You’re sick of staying inside. And some of you are just plain sick. The fact is, the specter of the pandemic is everywhere you go. Manifesting itself as a favorite coffee shop limiting its hours, or a canceled Celine Dion concert you were really looking forward to (or maybe that’s just my personal experience). For some of you, it may have even more serious implications.

You might be tempted to despair – and who could blame you? We’re all in a communal mourning. But it won’t stop things from changing. I invite you to instead view these changes as an opportunity for innovation, like the innovative leader you are. You can’t control the next variant that will surely pop up and ruin a concert or vacation you’ve had planned (goodbye, Celine Dion tickets). But you can control how you lead, and how you influence your employees to hold onto their grit and weather the storm.

Inspired a year ago by challenges surrounding the future of the workplace, I started a mission (a research project, really) to better understand what was in store for the workplace as we know it. My research initiative went beyond surveys, ever-changing CDC guidelines and vague promises (I swear, if I hear “in these uncertain times” again I’m going to walk into the ocean and never come out). Instead, our firm dedicated hours upon hours to interviewing executives and individual contribu-

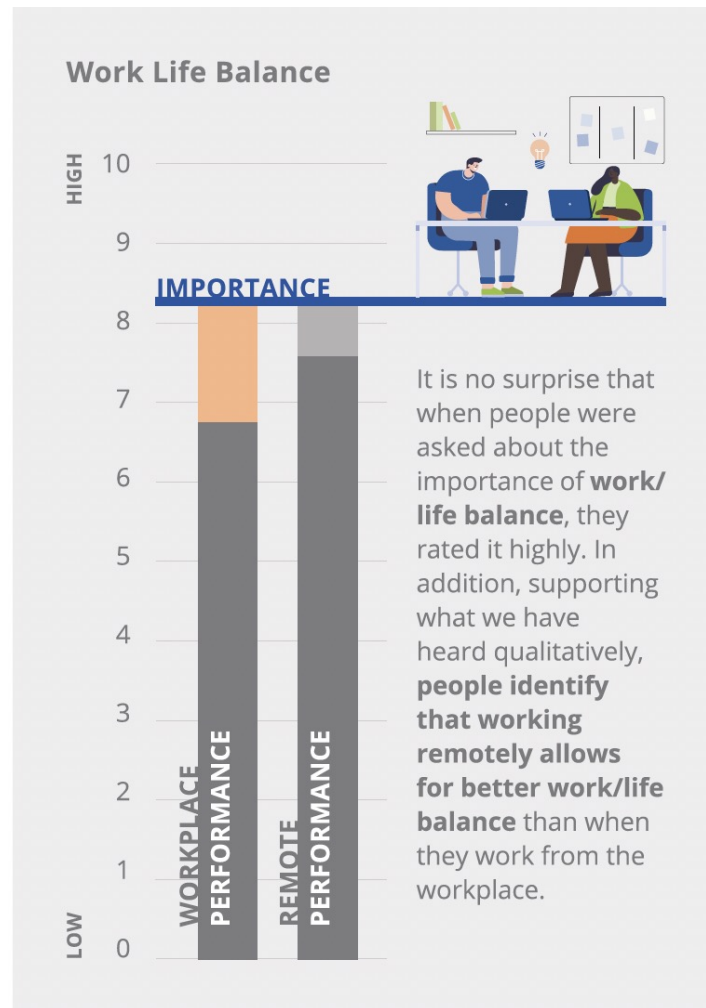
tors, asking them to describe what it’s been like working in a hybrid environment during a global pandemic. (If for some reason you haven’t heard about it by now, a hybrid work environment is a flexible working model where employees work partially in the physical workplace and partially remote. Remote work can be from a home office, a coffee shop, your parents’ lake house, or anywhere else you’re lucky – or desperate – enough to park your lap-

top.)

As I dove into my research, what revealed itself was the enormous focus on the interpersonal aspects of the workforce, as opposed to more obvious topics like technology or physical safety. Instead, we discovered that people were most concerned about a much more fundamental need: trust. Relationships between leaders and individual contributors built on trust have a direct impact on the success or failure of a hybrid work environment.

One of the most powerful forms of data we collected were stories. When we engaged with participants

about working in a hybrid model, people were more likely to tell positive stories about working in a hybrid work environment when they could pinpoint a demonstration of trust from leadership. These stories would often include feelings of confidence and autonomy, which almost always stemmed from a leader who “trusted them to do their job.”



From “Hello Hybrid: Workplace Playbook”

It's important to realize that trust is a two-way street. It's not just individual contributors who crave, and benefit from, feeling trusted in the workplace, but leaders as well. Leaders we spoke to who had positive stories to tell about transitioning to a hybrid work environment often cited or credited their employees for the positive transition. "I trust that my employees will get their work done," and "My employees trust me enough to share vulnerabilities and issues."

What does a demonstration of trust look like? This might be different for you, your employees and your company. But here are a few examples we heard about when discussing trust in a hybrid work environment:

- Employees meeting deadlines;
- Employees and leaders following through on everyday promises;
- Everyone keeping calendars updated;
- Everyone asking for help when it's needed; and
- Leaders taking into account individual considerations.

Furthermore, trust is built when people can bring their whole selves to work. This is something anyone who's worked at a startup has heard. But what does "your whole self" mean?

The whole self is simultaneously very difficult and simple to explain. Ultimately, accepting someone's whole self is accepting that they're a human first, an individual second, a family member third, and – if you're lucky – an employee fourth. This can be difficult for some members of leadership to accept, but once you do, your whole organization will be better for it.

In organizational psychology, instead of "whole self," we would name this concept the individual considerations. Individualized consideration is the extent to which a leader attends to each team member's needs. It involves listening to the concerns and needs of each employee and providing support and empathy for each person's situation and background.

Accepting that your employees are humans might mean making allowances for parents while they pick up their kids, or for Zoomers to take their animals to the vet. It's about work-life balance. Maybe some employees have longer commute times or don't own a car and don't want to get on a filthy train. The list of vulnerabilities that make us human is endless – and that's OK! A good leader doesn't have to know and anticipate every scenario, but there are some skills that you can work on to strengthen your trust muscle.

Questions to ask yourself to evaluate your ability to think about individual considerations:

- Do your employees share openly and freely their concerns to leadership?
- Does your leadership team listen and ask questions to ensure they understand their employee's perspective?

- Do you know if your employees do their best work when in the office or working remotely?

Trust is an expensive skill to remain underdeveloped. In fact, on average, employees make up about 70% of an organization's expenses. Creating a physical and meta-physical environment for your employees that conveys trust and psychological well-being is one of the keys to not only retention, but also attracting new talent. While creating a trust-filled environment can feel daunting initially, there are ways to tell your employees you trust them without actually telling them (but also tell them, trust me, they'll like hearing it). One way to set it and forget it (again, hyperbole, do NOT forget it) is by letting your physical office space do some of the heavy lifting for you. Have you ever stopped to wonder how exactly your office space can affect your company culture?

For instance, adding a gym, a mother's room, or even creating a welcoming break room can communicate to employees that you are sensitive to their need for comfort, and are willing to put that before their ability to produce.

Based on current average market rent for Class A and Class B properties in the greater downtown Denver area, an organization will spend \$7,532 per employee per year on real estate, according to Tributary Real Estate (2021). Your real estate investment strategy should focus on creating the most intentional space possible. Consider all the ways designing a space can benefit your employees. Thoughtful additions can help communicate to your employees that you trust and value them while acknowledging and respecting that they are humans first.

Questions to ask yourself to evaluate the usability of your space over the last several months:

- Are you satisfied with how your space is being used?
- Is there a way for you to maximize your investment while ensuring you have a space that helps your workforce thrive?

Remember: You're not alone. There are thousands of people sorting through similar thoughts, challenges and griefs right now. It's important to remember that YOU are also human first. Be sensitive to your own needs and vulnerabilities right now. Put your oxygen mask on before you try to help your employees. And remember that there is help – there are experts out there who can help you shape your company culture, build trust among employees, and design a space that demonstrates trust and humanity.

It doesn't matter when you return to your office – the opportunity you have as a leader is in answering this question: What does trust look like in my company and how does it translate into our office? Now is the time to explore building more trusting relationships across your organization to ensure the satisfaction, inspiration and productivity of your people.\