THE RESOURCE

VOL. VI, ISSUE III

# Labor&INSIGHTS Industrial NSIGHTS

magazine

# LEADERSHIP INTIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

COVID-19 and Discrimination in the Workplace

8 Ways to Keep
Furloughed Employees Engaged

The Fine Art of Listening

## Your Consulting RESOURCE

The Resource has recently launched a new division of the business, *Your Consulting Resource* - to help with Human Resources and "people issues" that you may be experiencing. We'd like to support you in addressing your challenges so that you can focus on making your business most successful. In gathering feedback from our clients, it seems that turnover & retention are definite pain points in this tight labor market.

#### Consider these statistics:

- According to Gallup, 51% of U.S. employees say they are actively looking for a new job or watching for openings.
- Further, 52% of voluntarily exiting employees said their manager or organization could have done something to prevent them from leaving.

Your Consulting Resource can help you maximize retention of your valued employees. We can serve as a confidential third party to identify employee pain points. This can be done through employee focus groups, stay interviews, or surveys. Once pain points are identified, we'll facilitate development and execution of an action plan. We can also assist with aligning your leadership team, promoting your improvements, and establishing a continuous two-way feedback loop.

In addition to retaining your valued employees, you want them to be engaged! Engaged employees are willing to go above and beyond what is expected of them. They're committed. They drive innovation. They work harder, perform better, and help others. Research has shown, time and again, that engaged workforces significantly outperform those that are not engaged. Yet, according to Gallup, only 34% of employees report being engaged in their jobs - which means more turnover and lack of retention. Furthermore, 13% are actively disengaged, which means they are not committed and generally unhappy (and they don't hesitate to share that unhappiness with others). In addition, actively disengaged employees undermine what their engaged coworkers accomplish, infecting **up to seven** other people. The remainder of the population is in the middle, and provide a great opportunity to move the needle on engagement - if you can create the right environment.

Your Consulting Resource has lots of tools and resources that can help you implement strategies to address important pillars of engagement - such as onboarding, employee recognition, two-way feedback, leadership, empowerment, teamwork, career growth, and more! Feel free to contact me for a **FREE** consult or coaching session.

Stay tuned! Future issues of this magazine will contain more information about other CONSULTING SERVICES that we can provide.

# THE RESOURCE

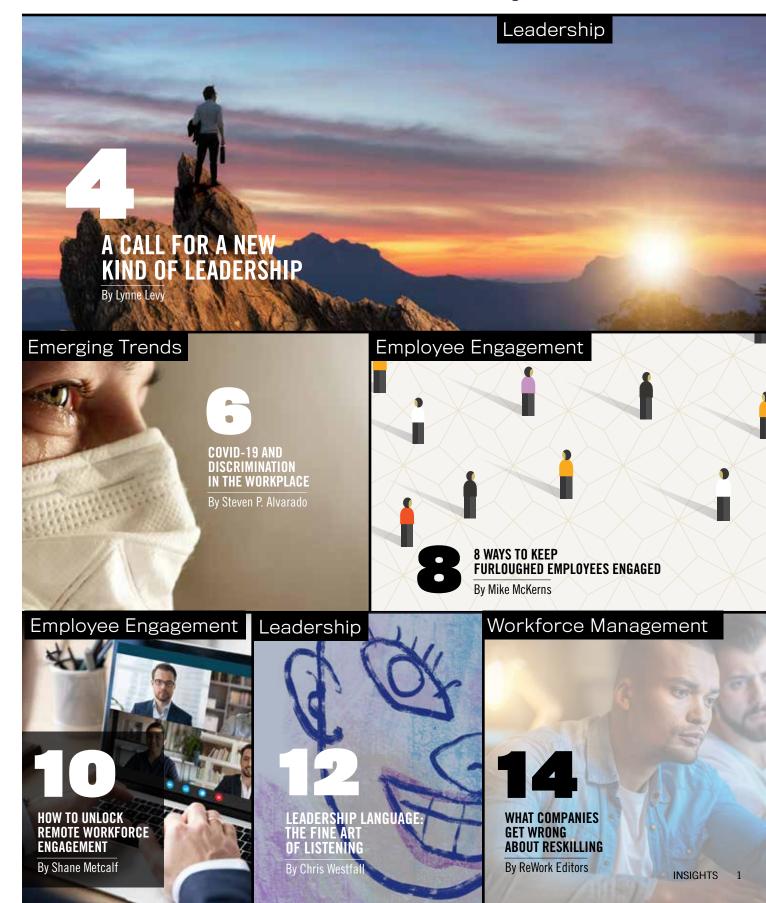
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# Labor&INSIGHTS magazine





## Labor&INSIGHTS Industrial INSIGHTS

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A s COVID-19 sweeps across the globe, it's accompanied by widespread anxiety about an uncertain future. The economy, public health, schools and education, society in general—everything is evolving moment by moment, and no one knows where things will end up. Many employees are working from home (or least trying to work while their children are racing around the house, thanks to school and daycare closures), and in such uncertain times they need a new kind



of leadership: leaders who inspire, motivate, and possess the qualities needed to guide employees during this unprecedented time.

#### **EMPATHY**

Leaders must move from an attitude of "make it happen" to one of empathy. They need to meet employees where they are and acknowledge the stress that everyone is feeling. For example, if any team members are trying to balance caring for young children with getting work done, a good leader will acknowledge—and accept—the fact that they may be a bit distracted during a video call.

#### **POSITIVE INTENT**

Leaders must build trust and assume the best of their staff. (For example, leaders who can't get in touch with their employees right away shouldn't assume that those employees aren't working.) Leaders also need to be flexible and offer alternative work arrangements, such as flexible work hours for employees who must juggle childcare with their work responsibilities.

#### COMMUNICATION

Leaders should focus on messaging that conveys certainty (such as reiterating current priorities and tasks at hand). When possible, they should share with employees any reasonably solid information about the company's future (for example, "we have the resources to support a five-month slowdown") to help alleviate some of the stress and uncertainty everyone is experiencing.

It's also important to keep communication open—and clear—with employees working from home in order to be sure that everyone's expectations are on the same page. Issues to clarify and resolve include whether employees can set their hours, which technology remote workers should use, and which methods of communication are most effective.

#### CONNECTION

Leaders need to find ways for their employees to connect with each other beyond meetings. One idea is to reproduce some of the "in-office experience" by setting a daily period during which employees join a video call and spend that time doing their own work; virtual coffee chats or virtual happy hours with team members are other options to consider. During this time, leaders should check in regularly—and with sincere concern—with all of their direct reports.

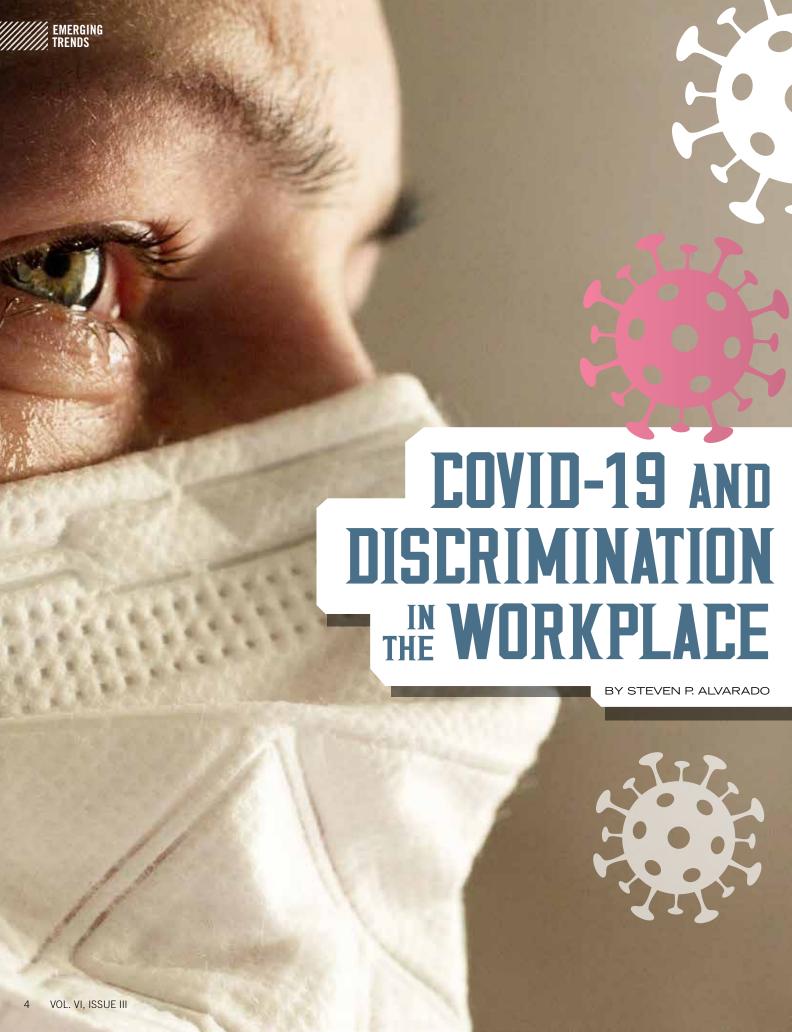
#### **FOCUS**

By focusing on work, providing guidance on expectations, and emphasizing routines, leaders can increase certainty. They should make sure that their employees understand the most important tasks and projects. Build shared team goals (for example, answering the question "how can we use our work to make a positive impact in this time of crisis?") helps create emotional connections among employees.

#### STRATEGY

It's important that leaders step back and take in the information they need to set a path for the next few months. They should outline standard practices to help people get into a rhythm and know what to expect, and try to keep the strategy consistent from day to day. By putting in place sustainable practices that will be used for the next few months, they can create routines that increase everyone's sense of control and certainty.

In this time of uncertainty, leaders must rise up and guide their organizations more than ever. Compassion, planning, and flexibility are the characteristics that mark the most effective leaders. By keeping a steady course and focusing on the positive, leaders can help their companies navigate today's challenges and emerge even stronger tomorrow.



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n the USA, widespread infectious disease outbreaks have often led to xenophobia- and racism-fueled attacks on groups of people who are associated with the places where those outbreaks originated. During the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 2009, because some of

the first cases of H1N1 were discovered at Mexican pig farms, Latin Americans and people of Latin American decent were stigmatized and blamed for the spread of the virus even though no evidence connected them to it. When a Liberian man visiting Texas was diagnosed with the Ebola virus in 2014, some people wrongly blamed Africans and African-Americans for the disease.

And now in 2020 history is repeating itself: because COVID-19 was first identified in China, people in the USA are scapegoating people of Chinese origin (and even people of Asian descent generally) for the spread of the disease. There have already been numerous reports of people of Chinese descent being discriminated against (for example, in the form of plummeting patronage of Chinatown districts in many cities) and publicly attacked.

These examples highlight the xenophobia that manifests in public spaces and discourse during these outbreaks, but the same kinds of issues can arise in private spaces as well—including the workplace. As a result, during the COVID-19 pandemic employers need to be vigilant about protecting their employees from any discrimination, harassment, and racist rhetoric that emerges from their colleagues or supervisors.

Almost all employers have general policies in place against discrimination, retaliation, and harassment. Those policies should make clear that employers (as well as colleagues, for that matter) must not discriminate against employees based on national origin. Employers should focus on two areas of concern in this analysis.

### How do I be sure that I'm treating all my employees the same regardless of national origin?

To address this question, employers should ensure that any decision to bar or remove an employee from the workplace is not based on that person's national origin or ethnicity. Such decisions must be made objectively and according to the same criteria used for the rest of the workforce. (Does it appear that only employees of Asian descent are being quarantined? What are the ethnicities of employees who have been sent home from the workplace?)

There are appropriate ways for employers to express and act on concerns about the coronavirus in the workplace. For instance, an employer will likely be able to show a nondiscriminatory reason for sending home an employee who has recently visited China or another highly affected area or an employee who has exhibited objectively documentable flu-like symptoms.

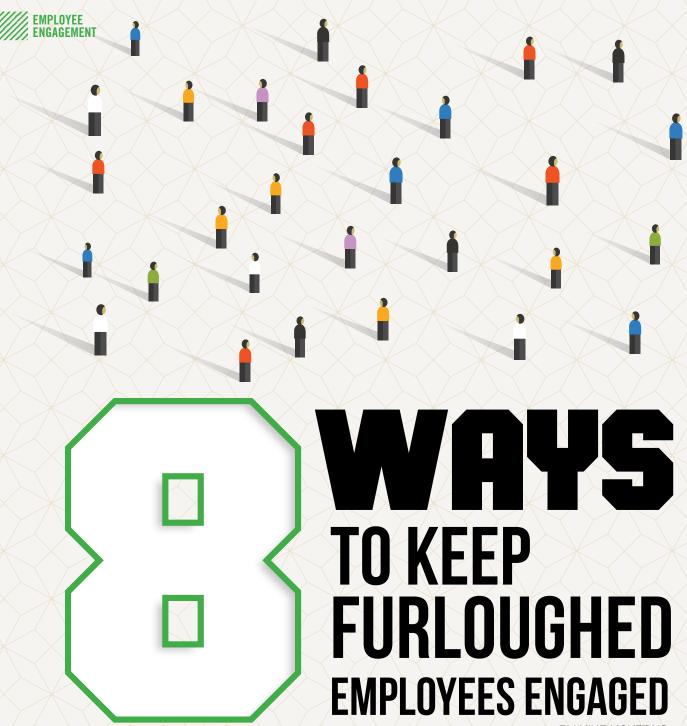
In short, employers must treat all employees the same. When making decisions, employers need to consider the objective evidence available at that time. They should also rely on the resources provided by the CDC, WHO, or OSHA, as well as relevant state agencies in their jurisdictions.

#### How do I be sure that my employees aren't discriminating against or harassing my employees of Asian descent?

Employers must be especially diligent and closely monitor any concerns expressed by their employees of Asian descent. One of the best ways to get in front of this issue is to provide employees with information and training they need to understand the best ways to minimize exposure to the coronavirus and that no nationality or ethnicity is more likely to spread the virus than another. Furthermore, employers should continue to enforce their harassment policies, investigate employees' claims of discrimination or harassment based on national origin, and take appropriate disciplinary steps against any employees found to be in violation of the policies.

The policies an employer puts forward are effective only when they are enforced. During this time of heightened tensions, employers need to be proactive about being aware of—and addressing—workplace harassment and discrimination related to misinformation about COVID-19. Enforcement of antiharassment policies should start at the top, so it is important that employers are sure that supervisory employees lead by example. ■

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BY MIKE MCKERNS

Furloughs can give affected employees and their companies some peace of mind: furloughed employees know that their jobs still exist, and organizations have access to a suitably vetted and trained talent pool for those roles. But those employees aren't always willing or able to wait around long enough for their employers to call them back. In those cases, companies can take a significant financial hit, because they have to go through search, hire, and training processes all over again for those positions. (For example, one study found that the average cost of turnover for nonexecutive and nonphysician positions is just over 20 percent of annual salary.¹) For that reason, it's prudent for a company to do everything it can to stay as connected as possible to its furloughed talent to avoid losing it completely.



#### **COMMUNICATE EARLY** AND OFTEN.

The worst thing a company can do in times of crisis is to keep employees in the dark. From day one and at least once a week thereafter, organizations should provide clear and honest updates to their furloughed staff.



#### CELEBRATE THE LITTLE THINGS.

Birthdays, anniversaries, and other significant life moments and milestones don't stop happening when employees are furloughed. Even when team members can't celebrate them together in person over cake in the breakroom, the company can still recognize and mark those moments with them.



#### **KEEP FURLOUGHED EMPLOYEES CONNECTED**

Encourage and facilitate networking with furloughed staff. Consider hosting departmental or companywide Zoom meetings or happy hours to keep team members in touch with each other.



#### **ENCOURAGE HEALTH** AND WELLNESS.

Anything that supports the physical and mental well-being of team members will help improve their engagement. Consider funding a monthly gym membership for furloughed team members. The monthly cost of such payments will likely add up to only a fraction of what the company could save in turnover costs.



#### HELP THEM INCREASE THEIR VALUE.

Provide furloughed employees with opportunities for optional, low-cost, high-value education that may not be directly related to the jobs they perform at the company.



# O→O CONNECT ON A PERSONAL LEVEL.

In addition to early and frequent communication with their entire teams, managers should also place personal phone calls to their direct reports. These individualized check-ins can strengthen those relationships and give the company a better idea of furloughed employees' engagement levels.



#### **OFFER FREE** PERSONAL FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT.

Being furloughed can be a shock both emotionally and financially. When a company shows care for its employees, it can make great progress toward building their loyalty.



## ORGANIZE VOLUNTEER

Keeping furlough employees actively engaged in nonwork activities with their colleagues can decrease the likelihood that those employees will seek work elsewhere. Such activities also have the added benefit of providing others way for furloughed workers to stay in touch with their teams.

Disruptive and unpleasant, furloughs are never wanted. But sometimes they are the only option companies have in order to remain financially viable and still have talent resources available for when things look up again. By taking care to cultivate goodwill—and strong connections—with their furloughed employees, organizations increase their odds of being able to draw on that valuable talent pool once their situations improve.



Until recently, few companies allowed their employees to work remotely (in fact, the very idea of telecommuting has been around only since 1973). Because office optics determined how employees were perceived by their manager and coworkers, being "absent"—that is, not in the office—was seen as a clear indication that someone wasn't contributing. But over the past few years, more and more companies have been rethinking their remote workforce policies and other cultural and performance strategies, and the exception is increasingly becoming the rule.

In its most recent (2017) State of the American Workplace report, Gallup found that 43 percent of employees work remotely ("away from their team members at least some of the time"), up from 39 percent four years earlier.2 Since that report's publication, the tide has turned even more, as employees increasingly demand flexibility in their jobs and younger generations of managers are more willing to support working from home.3 As employers compete to hire and retain the best talent, they are taking note of this trend and including telecommuting capabilities or hybrid options in their employee benefits. At the same time, though, companies must also be sure to implement certain best practices and programs to increase their remote workforce engagement.

By intentionally developing a culture that binds employees into the fabric of the organization, leaders can improve retention, increase workforce engagement, and decrease the risk of burnout.

This intentionality is essential when an employee works onsite—and even more so when an employee works remotely.

Although many employees desire the flexibility of working remotely, that arrangement comes with its own set of challenges, including feelings of isolation. Remote workers who aren't included in the company culture won't feel connected to the company's purpose and will be "more likely to quit because of loneliness and low engagement." By focusing on communication, performance management, culture building, and the effective use of technology, leaders can ensure that working remotely is a positive experience.

## **Essentials of communication**

In an office environment, it's common for a manager to pull an employee into an impromptu meeting or ask coworkers questions when running into them in the hallway. Remote employees don't have the same opportunities for such casual conversations, though, and may miss out on information that isn't considered "mission critical." To ensure that remote team members feel included, it's better for managers to overcommunicate with them.

When employees are dispersed, it can seem inconvenient to interrupt their work days with phone calls or texts, but this type of onthe-spot interaction is conducive to keeping those employees feeling involved. (One caveat: people do need uninterrupted times during the day to perform deep work.) While being respectful of

remote workers' time zones and work schedules, managers should make it a habit to connect with employees via video calls when any issues or concerns come up. These timely connections create more opportunities for the free flow of information and are essential for maintaining remote workforce engagement.

Meetings can be one of the most frustrating aspects of working as a remote employee. In many organizations, onsite staff meet in a conference room and the remote worker dials in and views the meeting via a small camera placed at the end of the conference table. Unfortunately, the people in the meeting room often dominate the conversation, making it difficult for the person who has dialed in to interject.

When conducting video calls, leaders or facilitators should be conscientious about including remote participants. If remote employees are not talking, leaders should explicitly invite them to share their opinions or knowledge with the group. Some companies have all meeting attendees (whether they work onsite or remotely) call in to meetings, which gives everyone the same perspective and opportunities to participate. Rather than leave one person feeling disconnected while staring at a video feed of a room full of people, this practice puts everyone on a level playing field.

#### Performance Management from Afar

Managers can engage remote employees in much the same way they engage onsite employees, but with a heavier emphasis on consistent communication. Without the structure of weekly meetings, holding one another accountable becomes harder and harder. If the performance management process already includes continual feedback, those frequent one-on-one conversations (such as weekly check ins) can give managers and remote employees chances to get ahead of roadblocks before they arise.

When frequent communication is open enough, honest feedback is seen as encouragement, not micromanagement. Establishing a habit of interacting regularly alleviates the inevitable stress that accompanies conversations about performance and can improve overall workforce engagement. These one-on-one meetings also provide opportunities for ongoing career conversations. No matter where employees are located, they all have the same desire to grow and develop in their roles and with their companies.

#### Building a Culture of Unity

Many companies fall into the trap of dividing employees into two categories: those who work remotely, and those who work at home. But that division only weakens the organization. To put the focus on achieving the company's mission, managers should instead create rituals that promote



belonging and inclusivity.

Because all employees, including remote workers, start their employment journey with an onboarding process, the more the organization grows, the more necessary a structured onboarding program is. This process of introducing new hires to the company rules, practices, and culture sets the stage for a positive workplace experience and can play a huge role in how long a company is able to retain its remote workers.

Early immersion in company culture can increase employee engagement, and one way to accomplish this is to help workers get to know their colleagues. Remote employees rarely have the kinds of opportunities to connect with coworkers that onsite employees regularly enjoy. For example, when a remote employee calls in to a meeting, the discussion usually goes right to the agenda. Consequently, remote employees don't get to participate in the pre- and post-meeting small talk among in-person attendees—the kinds of interactions that develop relationships that in turn build culture, create workforce engagement, and foster a more human experience at work for everyone.

When the ability to work remotely isn't a company-wide policy but

determined by the department, it can be difficult for employees to empathize with coworkers they don't know. Managers should encourage both onsite and offsite employees to have "virtual coffee meetings" together so that all of their interactions with each other aren't strictly dedicated to work. "Buddy" systems and mentoring programs also help remote employees get to know people besides their direct managers.

When the members of a team aren't physically close to each other, leaders can build psychological closeness by creating spaces in which people can open up and be more vulnerable with each other. Celebrating individual and group wins is one effective strategy. During meetings, managers can ask everyone to share a positive experience or something interesting they've recently learned. They can also take the time to ask about employees' families, weekends, or vacations.

#### Using Technology to Connect

Allowing employees to work remotely without Allowing employees to work remotely without offering adequate technology support won't yield much success. At the very least, remote employees need to have frictionless access to the Internet, including video

capabilities. Communications platforms (including instant messaging for quick conversations) help employees connect across the company, and video conferencing applications facilitate extended discussions. Employee-appreciation applications, too, can play a valuable role in culture building: it's easy to provide public or private kudos when all team members are onsite, but when team members are remote, these applications make it easier to intentionally recognize their accomplishments.

As new software platforms evolve, companies should consider which ones will enhance their employees' connections and relationships. These platforms shouldn't cause more confusion but should aim to alleviate common pain points that employees are actively facing. Making use of up-andcoming technology will help workers and managers develop healthy relationships with one another, no matter where they are located in the world. These relationships will help grow an organizational culture that brings out the best in a company's people.

As new technologies emerge and business needs evolve, remote workers will continue to grow as a segment of the workforce. In some sectors they may one day make up the majority of the employees; in others, perhaps only a fraction. Either way, all companies and managers will need to understand how to engage these workers in order to maximize their contributions to their organizations.

Shane Metcalf is the chief culture officer at 1 SFive, a continuous performance management software that includes weekly check-ins, objectives and key results (OKR) tracking, peer recognition, one-on-one meetings, and 360° reviews.

This article was reprinted with permission and originally appeared on the 15Five blog at www.15five.com/blog/remote-workforce-engagement/.

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# LEADERSHIP LANGUAGE

BY CHRIS WESTFALL

Today, everyone is bombarded by millions of messages every day, with tweets, texts, YouTube videos, and countless other media competing for attention. Amid all that noise, leaders must work harder than ever to build the connections that matter most. And the most effective strategy they have for achieving that is to leverage the three ways of listening.



The first way is listening to affirm. These listeners look for the relationships between what they already know and what they are hearing. Sometimes they are focused on self-validation ("I'll wait until she says something that confirms what I already know, so I can feel good about myself, my education level, my experience, etc."). Or they may be making comparisons to other ideas they've encountered. Although those references and comparisons can sometimes provide useful frames of references, they can also take listeners out of the conversation. When listeners are thinking about something else, can they be truly present and engage with whatever is taking place right in front of them?

The second way is listening to defend. These listeners focus their attention on themselves and how to defend their own stories ("I can't wait for Pat to shut up so I can tell him why his idea is idiotic and mine is better"). This is how lawyers listen: they look for openings for rebuttals. By listening only well enough to counterpunch, defensive listeners effectively dismiss what others have to say. In this case dismissal is disagreement that causes listeners to miss out on possibilities, because they are so focused on preparing their own one-upmanship. These listeners wait politely for someone to finish describing a recent vacation so they can say, "Well, when we went to Monterrey last spring . . ."

The third way to listen is listening to discover, and it's the hardest type of listening to do because it isn't about the listener. It's also the most valuable kind of listening to do—especially for leaders. Listening to discover will point leaders in the direction of innovation toward new results and new collaborations. Leaders need to ask themselves, "Am I so in love with what I already know that I can't look away from my own experience or stop talking about it?" When leaders answer "yes" and think that they have to go it alone and that their stories are the only ones that are important, they misunderstand what really matters.

If they're unable to listen to discover, how can leaders change the game? How can they lead others to new outcomes if they won't engage in the places where those outcomes live? By letting go of the misunderstanding that their voices and their affirmations are what matter most, leaders are no longer on the defensive. Their expertise is not diminished but enhanced, because they can discover the insights they need to obtain the results they want. By listening to discover, leaders can see what's missing both for themselves and for their clients.

To improve their leadership skills, leaders should start by asking themselves the following questions about their recent listening experiences:

- What kind of listening was evident in my last meeting?
- Who was listening to defend, and who was listening to affirm? (And who wasn't listening at all and was just checking text messages?)
- When I talk with others, how do I listen to them? (And how do they listen to me?)
- → My team members, my boss, and my shareholders all want to know whether I am really listening. Am I truly aware of and acting on what's happening around me?
- When I listen to affirm or to defend, whose agenda am I promoting?
- When I say, "I hear your concerns," do people believe me?

It's vital that leaders take in and acknowledge diverse points of view. However, acknowledgement is not the same as agreement. A leader's strength comes from understanding other points of view and

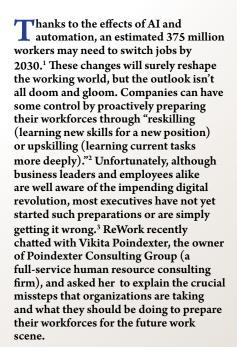


discovering new options. By developing greater awareness of their own listening patterns and cultivating those that increase access to innovation and new ideas, leaders can improve their own effectiveness and guide their organizations to even greater success.

This article is an edited version of an excerpt from Leadership Language: Using Authentic Communication to Drive Results (Wiley, September 2018) by Chris Westfall.

Chris Westfall is a business consultant, communication coach, keynote speaker, and author who has helped create multimillion-dollar-revenue streams for businesses on four continents. He can be reached via westfallonline.com.

WHAT COMPANIES
GET WRONG ABOUT
RESKILLING



#### THEY DON'T IDENTIFY THEIR NEEDS

Poindexter says the number one thing companies get wrong when attempting to broaden or improve their employees' skills is that they don't know what their specific needs are: "Oftentimes we forget that the employees already have a considerable amount of knowledge. So before you just jump into reskilling, you really need to identify the need, the goal, and how we get there."

One way a company can identify its needs is to use technology-based tools to take an inventory of what skills their employees currently have, which in turn lets it see what gaps need to be addressed. (Such gaps may not always be obvious: many organizations think they need to improve their workers' technological capabilities when in reality they should prioritize the critical-thinking skills that will become increasingly valuable

as AI replaces repetitive, predictable tasks.) Employers can also use these tools to develop individual "learning journeys" to help workers prepare for shifting roles or completely different jobs.

**MANAGEMENT** 

### THEY WAIT UNTIL THEY SEE A DECLINE IN SKILLS

Another way companies miss the mark is by not being proactive. Instead, Poindexter says, they take action only when they see a decline or a large gap that needs to be filled. When this happens, it's usually a function of not remaining engaged with employees at every level: "When we're at a point where we must retrain or reskill, it's often because we haven't done our due diligence and taken an analysis of what's going wrong."

So how can companies get ahead of potential setbacks? One solution is to implement a continuous review process (or tune up the company's existing review process) to open up the lines of communication. Poindexter also suggests sending out company-wide questionnaires to ask employees for their candid thoughts about where they think they are in terms of skill sets and what areas the company needs to address. She also recommends that companies invest in new skilling, a new process in which "AI-based adaptive learning systems [are used] to accelerate workforce development through personalized lessons, coaching, and feedback."4

#### THEY FAIL TO GET EMPLOYEES INVOLVED

Lastly, Poindexter says, companies make a big mistake when they don't get employees involved in the reskilling process from the beginning: "Companies are reskilling and then telling workers 'this is what the expectation is' without soliciting their buy-in. Oftentimes, it'll backfire, because you'll start getting resentment from employees."

To gain employees' trust, Poindexter suggests that companies convene focus groups to weigh in on the strategic process of retraining before the implementation phase begins. The makeup of the groups will depend on how large the company is but should reflect the interests of every team. Therefore they should include people from each department (one from marketing, one from IT, etc.) and represent all positions and pay grades (minimum-wage workers, mid-level team leaders, senior-level managers, etc.) within the organization.

With those who are managing this task, these groups should discuss goals and what the reskilling processes should look like. Focus group members should feel free to communicate each department's concerns and provide suggestions for moving forward. At the same time, when the reskilling or upskilling process starts, those in upper management and the C-suite should regularly check in with every department so that all employees feel visible and valued. Once they have a reskilling plan and employee buy-in for it, companies should keep workers engaged by offering a combination of both classroom-style training as well as independent online courses to appeal to different learning styles.

Tomorrow's business landscape will look very different from the one of today. In order to remain competitive, companies will need workers who have the new skills and capabilities that this landscape will require. Rather than wait until they have no choice but to address that need, companies should take a proactive approach and start making those preparations now.

Published by CornerStone, the ReWork blog is a guide to the changing talent-management industry and helps executives and HR leaders succeed in the new, technology-driven economy.

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# THE RESOURCE

## SERVICES GUIDE

2020 brings new opportunities, new challenges, and even more...

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