



Reorienting people and culture to support business recovery

BY YONDER CONSULTING

This is a potent moment for humanity, and for businesses everywhere. The world's companies have reopened their doors to begin their recovery. Furloughed and home-working staff are starting to return to their workplaces. But when health and safety are paramount concerns, the trepidation is palpable.

Every brand says they want to emerge from the COVID-19 crisis stronger and more resilient. This means an engaged and productive team is absolutely crucial.

If you're facing this challenge, the rule of thumb is simple: start as you mean to go on. Aside from keeping customers and colleagues safe, one big question you could be asking is this: *"Based on our brand ideals and how the business will look post-COVID-19, how can we make our team's return to work experience as good as it can possibly be?"*

This isn't just a job for HR. Getting it right requires CEOs, Brand and Marketing, HR and other operational leaders to work in concert, and in full knowledge that the way we choose to engage people at



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this time – what we communicate, the experience we give them and how we make them feel – will set the cultural tone for years to come.

Embracing new working realities

It could be easy to overlook the importance of culture in the planning process. Setting up safe, post-pandemic workplaces is a serious logistical headache. Whether we're in offices or stores, warehouses or airports, there's a raft of new technology, equipment, routines, policies and guidelines to roll out. But there's also a soft side to manage.

Millions of us are facing a new working reality: the companies we left are not the companies we are coming back to. This pandemic has forced us to make changes we never could have anticipated. While some businesses are thriving in this crisis and scaling quickly to meet new demands, countless others have made deep internal cuts. Culture and engagement will have taken a hit. And how could it not? Workplaces were shuttered overnight. Mass furloughing, redundancies, hiring freezes, pay cuts and the suspension of bonuses, dividends and supplier contracts have been rolled out on an unprecedented scale. At this point, low morale, engagement and poor mental health is a serious concern.

But the picture is not entirely bleak. This crisis has tested our mettle, and many have surprised themselves with the speed at which they have been able to evolve. We've flipped the switch to become fully remote teams overnight, drawn deep on our core values and capabilities to help our communities, overhauled our policies and processes at pace, achieved digital transformation to continue serving customers and even pivoted to entirely new business models.

Culture-wise, many positive trends have accelerated, proving that we can – if we choose to – meet the demands of new generation talent. A recent research study conducted by Yonder (formerly Populus Group) called *Home Truths* showed that while we are missing aspects of working life pre-COVID, we are also keen to embrace new work patterns.

The genie is well and truly out of the bottle on flexible working. Traditional hierarchies and information flows have been disrupted. Tired corporate rituals have been replaced with different and better ones. The lines between personal and professional and have become blurred, paving the way for more authentic modes of engagement and leadership. And while too many of us have grappled with grief and loss, others have glimpsed silver linings. Gifted time, we have reconnected with nature, played with our children, learned new skills and invested in self-care and exercise.

Some have stepped off the treadmill only to notice what they've been missing.

Tapping the power of liminality

The lockdown process forced us to surrender to, even embrace [liminality](#). From the Latin for threshold, *limen*, this concept from anthropology – defined as “in-betweenness” or “being on a threshold” – describes the state many of us have been inhabiting. First coined by the French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in 1909, it was developed by Victor Turner in the late 1960s to explain how the middle phase of any rite of passage (after the initial ‘separation’ and before ‘reassimilation’) helps people make important changes in their lives.

Observed across cultures in situations as diverse as marriages and bereavements, carnivals and revolutions, this phenomenon can also be seen when a person returns to work after an extended leave of absence. In the COVID-19 crisis, we are experiencing this phenomenon *en masse*, as whole companies and societies.

Treating our return to work as a mass ritual sets the stage for engagement. The liminal state of lockdown is disorientating. As we prepare to transition back to work, fear and uncertainty accompanies excitement. The security of the past has been lost but the future has not yet materialised. Turner described liminality as “*a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.*” In this highly charged, receptive state, anything is conceivable. Transformation beckons, if we decide to pursue it.

Crossing the threshold

Our [Home Truths study](#) highlighted nervousness around how the return-to-work process will be managed by employers. Top-of-mind was the safety of working environments and commutes, but respondents also expressed a desire for reassurance around what they can expect in the future. So, we may have a new outlook on our lives, but we are also hungry for clarity on the changes we must now contend with.

In this context, we don't just need to reengage, we need to *reorient and reboard* people.

To instil confidence, employers must go further than the formalities to make this a positive, energising and empowering experience – one that reignites pride in who they are as a company, what they stand for and why what they do matters.

So, instead of getting back to business as usual – let's take this opportunity to welcome people back to our companies as we now

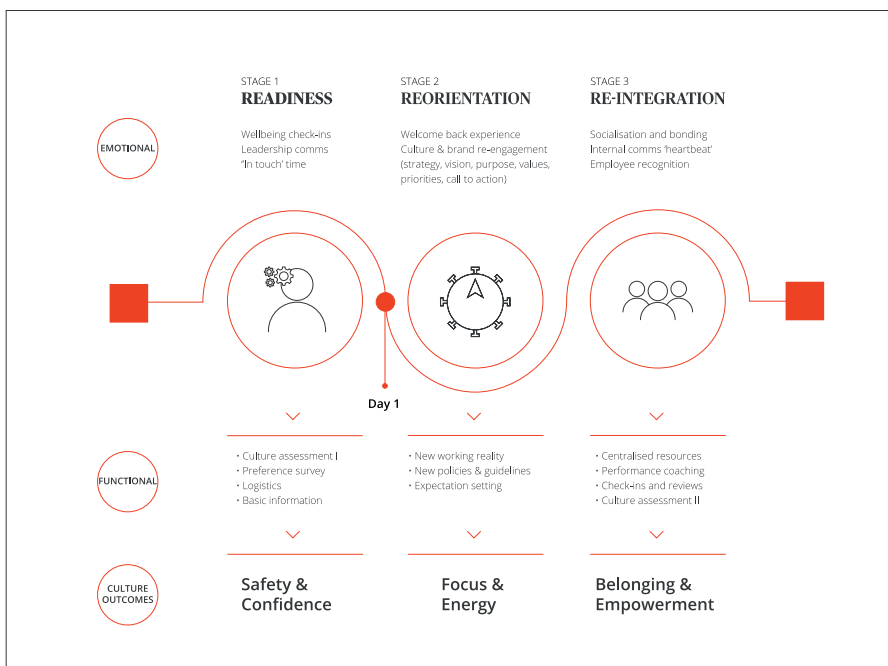
wish them to be and invite them to play a role in shaping the future. With a little extra care, we can make this a great return.

Where to begin

If you're mapping out your company's return to work experience, remember there is no single, magic formula for success. That said, solid plans will always address the emotional and psychological dimensions of the reboarding process, not merely the functional.

Start by getting an insight into what employees are thinking or feeling, and what matters most to them. The views expressed will be diverse, so look for patterns in the data. What are the most important cultural outcomes you need to achieve at each stage? Do some teams need more targeted help?

In the example below, the process has to deliver a range of cultural outcomes. A cultural assessment is shown as a key activity before and after the return to work, to understand baseline views, monitor changes and guide decision-making in the future.



If you're planning your return, here are a few pointers to support your conversations:

- **Listen to understand** – What's important to our people now? What do they hope for, and what do they fear? What do they want working life to be like in the future, and what will we do to show we're listening?
- **Galvanise with brand** – How will we use our brand to drive cultural engagement and inspire a sense of shared identity, pride and belonging? How will we deliver a return to work in our own inimitable style, with our purpose and values at the heart?

- **Bring people together** – How can we mark this moment, and bring people together? What's the uniting story we want to tell, and how will we tell it? How will we make sure everyone is included?
- **Clarify your focus** – What do we want people to focus on now, and why is this exciting? What are the biggest change priorities to rally behind, and what difference will it make to our business, customers and to each of us individually if we achieve them?

At Yonder, we help organisations to set their future direction and create the positive culture and momentum needed for long-term success. Bringing a blend of insight, strategy and imagination, we offer a range of culture consultancy services including talent research, culture evaluation and development, employee engagement, employer branding and business transformation.