

LEADING THE

W O R K F O R C E

A playbook for transforming work through COVID-19
created by our Employee Experience Consulting Practice

Ogilvy

THE OPPORTUNITIES IN DISRUPTION

COVID-19 has fundamentally changed the social contract between employees and employers. Perhaps more than ever before, it will matter to our people (and customers) whether we demonstrate the desire and the ability to put the safety of employees and communities first. Providing psychological and physical safety should be the minimum standard for preparing employees to return, whether it's to an office, a factory line or a retail outlet.

54%

of respondents say how companies treat their workers is the most important thing they want to hear from businesses and brands during the COVID-19 pandemic

Benenson Strategy Group, *The Pulse of America: National Omnibus Study*, March 2020.

The opportunity to build resilience

As we emerge in varying stages from COVID-19, reimagining the workplace is an opportunity to change the way we engage our employees and teams and improve their experience of our businesses and brands. It's important to reevaluate priorities, shift resources and track how well employees are adapting. But it's also crucial to see that this current crisis is a potential turning point for competitive differentiation. Employees and their work spaces, a relationship that may have been transactional in nature before, could become a source of transformation, enriching your brand and business for years to come.

The pandemic has taught us much that we wouldn't have likely otherwise discovered about ourselves, our coworkers, our clients and our partners. We have an opportunity to take the lessons learned from what we've experienced up to this point and translate them into our foundational approaches to change. This renewed sense of business adaptation and innovation can carry us beyond this moment, setting up companies, leaders, managers and employees for a successful future. Today you're helping employees build organisational resilience in a pandemic. Tomorrow that resilience will be there when you tackle new business models, new skills development in the face of automation and new capabilities to thrive.

“We always had a collaborative culture and a supportive one. We are engaging our employees more than ever.”

—Tracy Keogh, chief HR officer at HP, in an interview with CNBC

WHAT COVID-19 TAUGHT US ABOUT OURSELVES

Employee well-being and company well-being are more closely aligned than ever. COVID-19 has reinforced the idea that **resilient individuals make resilient organisations.**

Promoting well-being can help prevent stress and create positive working environments where teams can thrive—even under pressure. We're reminded that when we empower and care for people, they adapt and do amazing things. We just have to give them the tools, time and culture to succeed.

How to use this playbook

This playbook is focused on the practical considerations that will help you successfully plan for bringing people back into the workplace and build resilience within your organisations to better manage future shocks.

We'll explore the work in three main sections. First we'll examine what makes a place safe to work for employees, then we'll reflect on how to show up as leaders and, finally, as managers. Leaders must clearly determine the way forwards and show up for the organisation as a whole, and managers must help leaders refine and operationalise by helping employees adopt, adapt to and sustain changes within your working model.

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What defines a safe place to work?

As companies move to bring employees back to the workplace, they must pause to consider the effect COVID-19 has had on everyone—leaders, managers and employees. Every individual has experienced some level of disruption in his or her professional and personal life, and the impact cannot be overlooked. For most, the adjustments to work, school and family routines have been significant and ever-fluctuating, requiring constant adaptation that can be exhausting—even if changes feel right.

The importance of psychological safety

There is the very practical need to rethink what it will take to keep our teams physically safe in this new and changing environment. New public health and safety policies established at national and local levels will largely drive safety measures for the physical space, company procedures regarding meetings and gatherings, and rules for employees' personal safety through social distancing and personal protective equipment (PPE). But equally important is ensuring psychological safety.

How will we help employees feel safe to manage circumstances that are not yet predictable (as if they ever have been)? Maybe a spouse is out of work. Perhaps employees are caretaking for someone who is ill. What if schools and day care centres open and then close again as new surges of COVID-19 develop? While employees manage the pandemic's effect on their lives, we must make work a psychologically safe place. Studies show that psychological safety greatly fuels effective and powerfully resilient teams.†

A psychologically safe environment leads to resiliency in teams because they feel:

- Secure and capable of changing
- Free to focus on collective goals and problem-prevention rather than on self-protection
- Able to speak up about unsafe conditions without retribution

37%
of respondents

do not agree that their company will put their health and well-being first in making decisions about the risk of coronavirus

as of April 29-May 1, 2020.
Forrester Research, Inc.,
Forrester's Q2 2020 US
PandemicEX Survey 2

† Harvard Business Review, "High-Performing Teams Need Psychological Safety. Here's How to Create It," Laura Delizonna, August 24, 2017, [Link →](#)
Harvard Business Review, "Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace," Amy Edmondson, January 22, 2019, [Link →](#)

6 KEYS TO CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

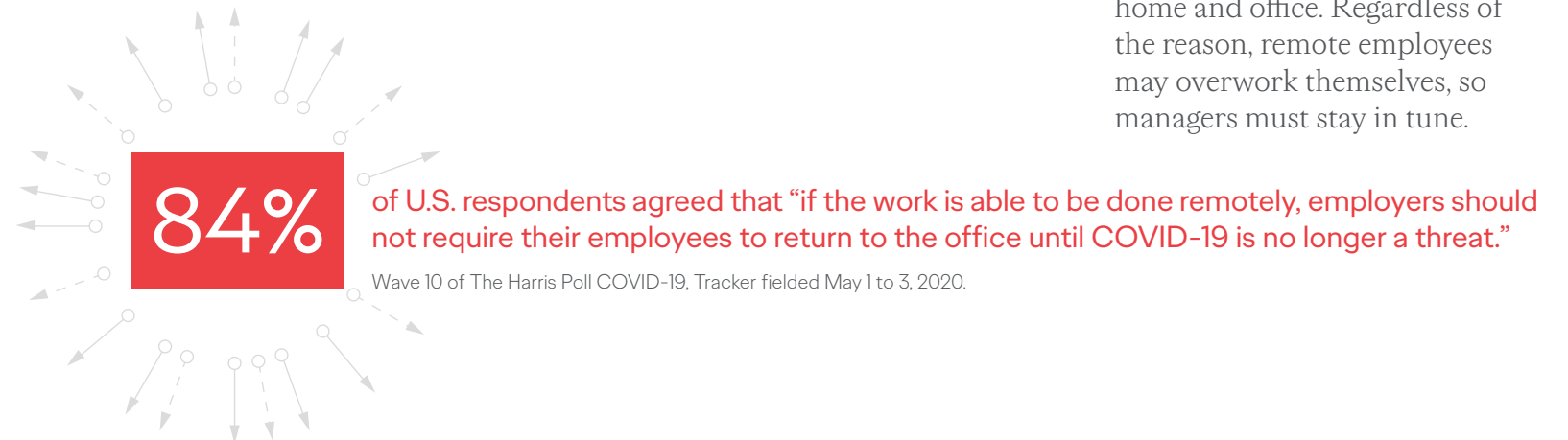
- 1 Set the stage to normalise uncertainty—it makes it easier for everyone to talk about it.
- 2 Practise deliberate, active, clear, frequent and honest communication.
- 3 Continue to prioritise physical and mental health and wellness.
- 4 Remind colleagues that they are not alone.
- 5 Reinforce to colleagues the importance of the work they do, connecting it to purpose.
- 6 Practise self-compassion and compassionate leadership.

Safety in two main modes

While many assume that employees are eager to return to the office, a recent Harris poll revealed that most employees felt they should not be required to return to the office if their work could be done remotely.† Perhaps schools are not yet admitting students back, or family members are immunocompromised and employees cannot risk exposing them. What if employees have simply discovered that they work better, healthier and happier from home? For most organisations, it will be imperative to look at safety, broadly, through two major lenses:

Safe at work. Establishing physical safety measures will be crucial to feeling safe in the workplace, but they alone will not be enough. Have a plan for how you'll embrace these measures in a way that is consistent with your company or team culture. Anticipate an effect on productivity as well as on employees' emotional well-being in the short-term of implementing these measures. Talk about how employees in the workplace can ensure they have what they need from those who remain working from home. Give employees more than one way to address their concerns about any of the above in a way that feels safe.

Safe at home. There will continue to be a need for flexible work arrangements to help employees manage this disruption while still getting their work done. But working from home has its hazards, too. Be cognisant that employees who continue to work from home are more susceptible to burnout. The same flexibility gained by having no commute, a built-in kitchen, and the ability to change a load of laundry or start dinner quickly can also lead to a never-ending workday. Some may feel more indebted to an employer because they've been given flexibility in working remote. Others may not have distinct boundaries between home and office. Regardless of the reason, remote employees may overwork themselves, so managers must stay in tune.



† Wave 10 of The Harris Poll COVID-19, Tracker fielded May 1 to 3, 2020

The case for a long-term remote working model

For many companies—manufacturers for example—the remote work model is simply not possible. But many others have found that at least partial consideration must be given to remote or distributed working. Whether part of future contingency planning or mid- to long-term cost management and control, we need to continue to plan for and optimise the remote working model because the need for it is here to stay.

Shifts in working patterns and expectations have transcended “temporary.” Many employees are not just doing their jobs but transforming their job routines. COVID-19 is eliminating the tasks that some employees normally do. Others are taking on new responsibilities and roles we hadn’t considered before and new ways of working. If employees have found this shift beneficial, it is likely they will want to retain some (or all) of their new routines when they “return.”

Leading the workforce

Expectations of leaders will continue to evolve. Employees have largely demonstrated productivity at home at an accelerated pace. Leaders quickly adopted the necessary new technologies and ways of working to support their companies and workforces. But decisions made in the short term will need to be reevaluated for the long term. The behaviours of leaders must continue to adjust to new workplace rhythms and stresses, supporting new needs as they emerge.

A portion of the workforce will always require remote working capabilities. Permanent work-from-home status will not be an answer for everyone. But for many organisations, the ability to work from home will now be an essential, always-on capability that must be robustly supported by technology and policy. There will be no going back to the old way of doing things.

WHAT BUSINESS LEADERS SAY ABOUT WORKING REMOTELY

52%

said their teams were more productive.

78%

said that “remote working is the future of my organisation.”

34%

said they were considering moving to an entirely remote office.

42%

said they plan to reduce the amount of office space they need.

Hoxby, “Hoxby’s Survey: Remote Working During Lockdown,” blog post, May 1, 2020.

How to show up as leaders

Making people your business

Responsible leadership has taken on an even deeper meaning as our workforces and our customers find themselves in an unfamiliar, changing and fast-moving global environment. Organisations' leaders are expected to be more emotionally sensitive, prioritising mental health while exhibiting extensive emotional control and mental optimisation. These leaders seem able to tap into a natural persona, relating to people openly as a way to instil calm and focus.

It's important to remember why people have come to trust and follow you. At a time when many of us have had to reveal large and small struggles we're managing at home, as we're peering into one another's living rooms and muting ourselves while we tend to others' needs, leaders can and should lean into their natural personas. Authenticity is a readable trait, regardless of where you physically sit. Your workforce is looking to trust you and will, if people have reason to believe their leaders care about them.

Empathy and compassion for organisational resilience

Organisational resilience requires leaders who can demonstrate care through active listening and communicating confidently, consistently and reliably. Leaders energise an organisation by setting clear direction and communicating it effectively. Offering a strong vision and a realistic outlook can have a powerful effect on motivation across the organisation.

To return to the workplace, while leaders must work with their peers and management

teams to establish the right structure and pick up the pace on crucial technology adoption, they must also mindfully fuel the culture, granting permission to rethink processes and do what's right for team members and customers alike. Resilient organisations operate on a basis of trust, where leaders earn trust by extending it. Resilience is the ability to give and take.

“Without empathy, nothing works.”

—José Andrés, celebrity chef and founder of the nonprofit World Central Kitchen, in an interview with *Time* magazine

Here are some examples of what objectives for leadership can look like when they are built on trust and empathy.

“If leaders have a clear way forward, human beings are amazingly resilient. There is a documented ‘rally effect.’”

Gallup, “COVID-19: What Employees Need From Leadership Right Now,” Jim Harter, March 23, 2020.

Involve employees in the shaping of employee experience so they are truly aligned with purpose and values. Listening to your employees is a powerful and disruptive thing to do, and it has the potential to transform the way you manage your organisation. Employees crave feedback. Helping them shape their experience motivates better performance, increases retention and helps you spot issues and risks sooner. Most important, it gives employees a voice, inviting constructive suggestions to run the business better and improve your products and services.

Address the real anxiety and inherent awkwardness of changes in the workforce. Some people will be afraid to return; some will be desperate to get back; some will ping-pong between the two. Take a step back, watch and listen. Before drawing conclusions, ask a lot of questions. The give-and-take of asking questions and providing answers establishes two-way communication between employees.

Soliciting input empowers others on the team, leading them to participate more willingly and effectively and building—you guessed it—trust. Create an employee experience that satisfies all five levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (from health, to safety and financial security, then finally to career and fulfilment).

Be transparent when communicating news, no matter how tough. When talking about emerging conditions and adjustments that must be made, be specific, be clear and above all, be human. Approved locations for work may change, or employees may gain additional responsibilities or go through a workforce reduction. Ensure that employees feel heard. Provide forums for two-way dialogue about questions and concerns. Demonstrate how the company is responding to input. Your workforce becomes more open to change through open discussions that let people share their views and concerns—and have them heard.

Normalise remote work and mitigate the “out of sight, out of mind” bias. We need to acknowledge all approved locations and implement processes that are inclusive of colleagues across them. One question to ask: Do on-site colleagues tend to place a higher value on interactions with colleagues in person than with remote colleagues? Eliminating subjective criteria when evaluating peer performance keeps this bias in check. Rather than asking, “Is Satya a good team player?” ask about measurable items, such as, “When Satya led a project, was the project done on time? How was the quality of the results?”

When it comes to sharing challenges and assigning tasks, leaders are more likely to rely on those with whom they share similarities (a phenomenon called *homophily*). Ways to manage it: Have regular touchpoints with everyone on your team. Keep a list of team members’ photos visible in your workspace.

Anticipate culture changes and an increase in bringing the “whole self” to work. Many companies will be reflecting that COVID-19 accelerated its digital transformation and its cultural transformation. Bringing one’s whole self to work has become a popular term for being unafraid to be seen managing other obligations and interests. While certain cultures, industries and organisations have resisted the notion as unprofessional, all of a sudden, millions of workers around the globe have heard doorbells ring, dogs bark, and children call for “Daaaad!” This doesn’t mean that all employees will want to bring their whole selves to work in the future. Many will prefer strict work and personal boundaries. But organisations should expect that employees’ expectations will adjust when it comes to dissolving personal barriers.

Purpose and planning for future resilience

As organisations reset and reimagine themselves under new assumptions, protocols and focus areas, leaders must seize the chance to learn from recent disruption to prepare for what lies ahead. Whether optimising for sustainable operations, standing up new business models or simply redefining normal, it is important to look closely at the effect of recent experiences on your collective sense of purpose. Then put the planning in place to support your renewed or reaffirmed purpose beyond your return to the workplace.

First, hold lessons learned sessions with leadership and conduct qualitative and quantitative research to explore:

- What did we learn about our organisation, our people, our leaders?
- What went well that should be protected?

- What were the challenges? Where did we stumble?
- In what ways did we emerge stronger? Where are we still recovering?
- What was the effect on our employee engagement? On our productivity?
- Do we have a new definition of meaningful work?

Next, using the insights from this exploration, create three key action plans that will propel you well into a future of adaptive operations.

- A role-based communications plan that addresses communicators and receivers
- An employee experience plan that focuses on building employee resilience
- A business continuity plan that outlines operational protocols

WHAT TO KEEP IN MIND AS YOU PLAN

Examine organisational purpose to develop greater clarity. Purpose, values and principles are powerful tools to provide clear decision-making guidelines for yourself and your organisation. Had lacklustre employee engagement in the past? Times of transition are a great opportunity to rebuild trust in and credibility for an organisation's purpose. It can also be time to revisit your purpose and values altogether. Decide whether they are really serving you. Have they been meaningfully internalised, and are they proving useful to people to articulate the way forward? If not, adapt them however necessary to help inspire and guide people now and through the next disruptions.

Ensure distributed authority to gain flexibility and strength. We must design our organisations and teams for resilience. Recent disruptions have highlighted the value of a model of highly trained, experienced, distributed teams—enabled and empowered by coordination and data. The most resilient, adaptive and high-performing companies are made up of leaders and emerging leaders who know, respect and support each other, distributing authority fast and making sure responsible owners have strong capabilities.

Plan for the right talent to meet a future of change. This is the time to revisit people management and organisational strategies. As the post-COVID-19 workforce converges with an increase in Gen Z, employees will become increasingly mobile and collaborative while expressing differing communication preferences. Mobile work tools and virtual reality conferencing could become a preferred form of communication for many customers over face-to-face meetings, and the future will require a new set of skills and capabilities for wielding those mediums for high-quality outcomes. Leaders (not just in HR) will need to lean in, finding new talent and retaining already-identified top talent by developing the new career paths and flexibility in ways of working that attract and engage them.

How to show up as managers

Bridging people and change

With a dispersed workforce, the manager's role becomes more complex because the needs of remote and in-office workers are theirs to address. Additionally, as the conduit between corporate leadership and employees, managers serve as the most trusted source for delivering information that has a personal impact on employees. And there's good reason: during any change or transition, those who manage teams have the greatest influence on whether employees embrace the change or not.

Managers are in the spotlight, and employees will look to them to define and demonstrate acceptable ways to interact and communicate with in-office and remote team members, follow office safety policies, and practise inclusive behaviours that support a sense of belonging for all employees, regardless of where they work. Managers can help eliminate the unconscious bias that exists with remote workers who are not physically present by working remotely themselves to demonstrate that it is still acceptable behaviour even after some employees return to the office.

84%

of participants ranked manager and supervisor involvement in change initiatives as "extremely important" or "very important" to the success of their project.

Prosci, *Best Practices in Change Management*, 2018.

Getting clarity on employee needs

Many companies have conducted staff surveys to gauge the effectiveness of COVID-19 communications around policies, new processes and collaboration tools implemented. With survey results such as these, organisations can then help managers inform and refine communications and change management needs. Some thoughts:

Review the current state of individuals and how they've adapted up to this point.

Company survey results, as mentioned above, can be used by managers as a baseline to inform individual conversations with team members. Managers should be prepared to not only determine productivity levels but also be able to assess the emotional well-being and stress levels of team members. All individuals will move at their own pace and react to changes differently, and it is up to managers to uncover what is working and where employees are struggling.

Identify the location, tools and communications approaches most effective at the team level.

Managers should begin with what's been working for their team, assessing the effect working remotely has had on the team's overall productivity, communications and ability to collaborate. Surface the successful practises teams have already adopted. Identify what tools have successfully supported the team's interactions, and consider continuing to use these successful practises even as some employees return to the office.

Define the specifics—location, role, motivators and work styles, adaptability, and resistance. For each employee, determine what aspects of the work environment and what personal motivators must be in place for him or her to thrive. The Employee Engagement and Resistance Tracker (see sidebar) is one approach for determining the ideal scenario for each employee or employee group. It can be used to uncover areas requiring additional attention from managers. Suggestions for key dimensions can be found following the tracker.

Explore key areas of resistance. Change management methodologies, such as Prosci's ADKAR model, include approaches for pinpointing employees' barriers to change through resistance mapping. This allows managers and leaders to develop proactive plans, to help employees progress through the sticking point and successfully embrace a change.

PINPOINTING AND ADDRESSING RESISTANCE

Equipping managers to handle the added complexity of their role during a transition back to the workplace is crucial. One thing managers can use is a method for gaining insight into what their employees need and what they will feel challenged by as they adjust to a return to the workplace.

The Employee Engagement and Resistance Tracker provides managers with a more comprehensive way to assess individual employees or employee groups on several dimensions to determine the ideal individual work setting and reveal specific areas that require additional coaching. The approach gives managers a holistic view of what's necessary to fully support employees, based on where they are today, and help them move past barriers inhibiting progress.

Key dimensions can be flexible based on the overall objective of the assessment.



Role and/or department	Location preference	Motivators and work styles	Areas of resistance	Adaptability	Coaching plan
What is required for an employee to perform the responsibilities of the role?	Does the employee prefer a remote, in-office or fluid location? Based on that preference, what additional steps does the manager need to take to ensure success?	Determine the type of drive employees have. It could be intrinsic—the act of learning for its own sake or for personal reward—or extrinsic—driven to earn a reward or avoid punishment. Also understand whether the employee prefers to collaborate, to work independently or a combination of work styles.	Based on the Prosci ADKAR change management methodology, areas of resistance—awareness, desire, knowledge, ability and reinforcement—are used to determine where the employee is stuck and unable to progress.	This tracker uses the a red, yellow and green scale to indicate the how adaptable the employee is to change. Red being the least adaptable with significant barriers to change and green being highly adaptable to change.	Based on the assessment, an action plan is created to help managers address barriers to move towards the required change.

Managing change day by day

Daily actions taken by managers will have a significant effect on the success of their team's ability to navigate the new behaviours required to either return to the office or continue to work from home.

Establish small, cross-functional teams: think agile. Small, autonomous teams help build resilience into an organisation with their ability to more easily shift direction and work in more flexible ways. The way of working becomes a more efficient and empowering approach to meeting project goals.

Revisit the basics, such as team objectives, expectations, roles and responsibilities. Employees need to be reminded that the work they do contributes to the overall objectives of the team as well as to the organisation. This is especially true, during times of significant change. More frequent communication and reminders of what is expected of them, as well

as accountabilities at the project level, will give them the clarity needed to confidently move ahead.

Normalise self-direction by focusing on outputs and quality rather than processes. Managers must refrain from any attempt to micromanage how employees choose to get their work done. Empower employees to determine the best approach based on their specific situation. Then acknowledge and reward them when they have exhibited self-directed behaviours.

Strengthen relationships by building connections, and identify and preempt stress. Most social interactions with employees have moved to video and chat, so the ability to monitor mental health is challenging—yet vital—to the health of each employee. Managers can proactively reach out through video check-ins; be aware of signs of distress, withdrawal or any performance changes; and provide the resources available to help

employees manage stress. This is the most important time for a manager to be empathetic to each individual's unique situation.

Increase employee interaction, and be specific about needs and support. More frequent communications and check-ins are necessary when employees are remote. Virtual coffee hours, chat and email can be used to reinforce what's needed from an employee, to demonstrate the manager's support, and to remind the employee of company policies and resources for flexibility and emotional support.

Enable new ways of working by assertively promoting them, providing clear guidance and investing in behavioural nudges. Managers set the example for what's appropriate, so embracing the desired shift in ways of working and communications starts with them. Their commitment can only be demonstrated by their actions. Providing additional guidance as well as encouraging beneficial change through

behavioural nudges can be subtle ways to move employees to more effective ways of working.

“Leaders are going to have to lean into the vulnerability and create space so people can innovate and grow.”

—Michelle Penelope King, gender-equality expert and author, in an interview with CNBC

Nurturing a culture of care

Together, leaders and managers can establish the ongoing habits that will make a cohesive, resilient team of all colleagues, regardless of location. Be mindful of the little things that go a long way to show people they are valuable teammates, and ensure that they feel connected to the whole. No matter what your policies can support for where the workplace is, resilience is more about how people feel when they work together than it is about where they work together.

Create a sense of belonging through proactive, tailored, consistent communications from managers. Remote workers require greater effort on the manager's part towards making sure they feel like they are part of the company and they belong. Establishing the right channels for communicating information as well as checking in can help make employees feel more connected.

Translate team rituals and replace the water cooler moments. Losing face-to-face interactions and impromptu conversations can affect the nature of social interactions. New interpretations of old rituals help keep employees engaged in a more personal way. Time at the start of every meeting can be used for informal conversations and check-ins with team members. Special groups or communities can encourage peer-to-peer interactions. Dedicated chat channels for personal areas of interest can fill the gap for the water cooler.

“I personally believe in bringing your whole self to work and being open and transparent, even vulnerable.”

—Rana el Kaliouby, co-founder and CEO, Affectiva

Reflect on the level of informality that comes with remote work. We've all experienced a new level of humanity that appeared on Zoom screens when a co-worker's toddler or dog stopped by to greet the team. Moving forwards, take the time to understand whether this level of informality works when some employees are back in the office. It may be a new part of your culture you want to keep.

Continually assess how unconscious bias manifests in the remote environment. Managers must pay close attention to any indication of bias they may be exhibiting by not treating in-office employees and remote employees equally. They should also pay attention to the behaviours of team members. Some companies, such as Microsoft, include scenarios with remote workers in their unconscious bias training. However you approach it, your employees will feel how much you care to get it right.



BRINGING EMPLOYEES BACK TO THE OFFICE SOON?

Take careful stock of what your objectives are as an organisation. Want to talk about your approach to your distributed work model? We can help.

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