Employees Are Looking for Something Greater in their Employer:

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Intentional Culture Development in a Post-Pandemic Workforce

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Contents

Introduction

Return to office is a hot-button topic in the world of work today following the COVID-19 pandemic. While many organizations were experimenting with or had already implemented remote work pre-pandemic, most organizations were forced into remote employment in March of 2020 and have been in a hybrid or remote structure since. During this time, employees have gotten to experience many of the benefits that accompany remote work, such as better work-life balance, less or no commute, more flexibility and autonomy, and research has shown that employees can be just as productive at home as they are in an office setting (Davis, 2022).

As companies discuss the future of remote and in-office work, employees are vocal about their disdain for return-to-office demands, often choosing to leave their organization when forced to return to a fully in-office environment. However, we must ask ourselves: Are employees opting out of something crucial to their experience and well-being?

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We know that humans are wired for connection, and our social interactions and relationships play a large role in our mental health and well-being (Kleine et al., 2019). We also know that when employees thrive at work, they are more mentally and physically healthy and are more likely to contribute to a thriving workplace, improving personal and organizational performance (Kleine et al., 2019). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the in-office environment provided organic social connections. In a remote world, we often miss out on meaningful moments of connection and community building. Today, one in five workers in the US are working remotely and 38% of advanced degree holders work remotely (Haan, 2024). Astoundingly, 98% of workers want the opportunity to work at least part of their time in a remote setting (Haan, 2024). Knowing this, it is incredibly important that we reimagine our workspaces.

While more organizations than ever will choose to remain in remote and hybrid environments, leaders must be intentional in authentic relationship building, crafting new ways to build community, and instilling a sense of belonging within their teams.

In the US Surgeon General's framework for mental health and wellbeing, he states that "while federal and state laws represent a minimum floor of protections for workers, organizations and employers can [and I would argue should] do more" (Public Health Service, 2022, pg. 6).

Now more than ever organization leaders must design environments and opportunities that support the wellbeing of employees. By reimagining the workplace and investing in intentional leadership, we can strengthen employee engagement, well-being, and overall organizational success.

In this whitepaper, I examine **self-determination theory, the belongingness hypothesis, and the U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Mental Health and Well-Being** to emphasize how we can utilize each as a tool to enhance engagement, well-being, and organizational success in a virtual and hybrid work environment.

Understanding Motivation

While our work environment, community, and resources are rapidly changing, our human needs for motivation and belonging remain consistent. First, we will look at self-determination theory to understand how employees are motivated to perform. Self-determination theory, proposed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (2000), postulates that there are three essential and innate psychological needs that, when nurtured,

increase self-motivation and improve mental health and, when weakened, can have detrimental effects on well-being and motivation. These three needs include the need for **autonomy, competence, and relatedness** (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
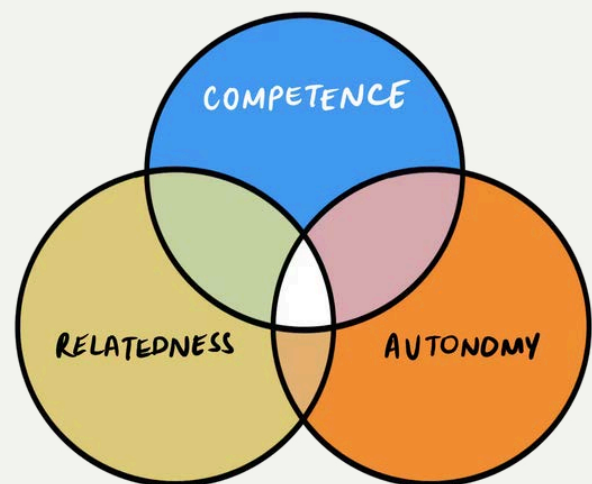
Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that if these needs are not satisfied, there are significant negative consequences to well-being. Additionally, the self-determination theory distinguishes between two types of motivation: autonomous and controlled. Autonomous motivation is more intrinsic and comes fully by choice of the individual. Controlled motivation is motivation that is manipulated by others, such as motivation by reward or punishment. Research has shown that people who have more autonomous motivation are more interested in and excited about their work and are more confident, allowing them to perform at a higher level and be more creative (Ryan & Deci, 2024).

When we think about the hybrid and virtual workplace, employees now have more independence than ever before. People work from home, with fewer external motivation factors like the office environment, their coworkers, or their manager to hold them accountable. Therefore, it is vital that we foster autonomous motivation in our teams. When we cannot foster this autonomous motivation, we see an increase in "quiet quitting," creating disengaged employees who only complete the minimum requirements of their job (Robinson, 2024).

The answer to this, though, is not scheduling more meetings or excessive check-ins. In fact, excessive check-ins and close supervision feel like micromanaging and diminish intrinsic motivation (Robinson, 2024) (Ryan & Deci, 2024). Ryan and Deci suggest that by nurturing the three needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, we can increase intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, social relationships, and well-being, ultimately improving performance, engagement, and creativity (Ryan & Deci, 2024).

Within self-determination theory, there are six sub-theories, including cognitive evaluation theory or CET. CET explores the relationship between autonomy and competency and how both are needed to foster internal autonomous or intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory proposes that intrinsic motivation depends heavily on the perceived locus of causality. Regarding autonomy, it is important that one feels they have control and choice (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Ryan and Deci's research revealed that when given orders, directives, deadlines, or goals to meet by a superior, intrinsic motivation is negatively impacted. However, when employees are encouraged to forge their own path, innovate, and self-direct, their autonomy is nurtured, enhancing intrinsic motivation. This is because they can see themselves as the cause of their own success or failure. Along the same line of thought, to experience competency, one must see themselves as the creator of that competency. Intrinsic motivation is only created when competency is experienced as a self-determined behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, it is vital that leaders empower their teams by renouncing micro-managing and giving employees the tools, accountability, and encouragement needed to thrive based on their own actions.

Fostering Belonging

The third need in Ryan and Deci's equation is relatedness or the need to develop positive social relationships with others. This is a crucial element that organizations struggle to transition to the virtual environment. We have traded in water cooler connections and organic relationship development for the convenience that remote work affords, but this can detrimentally impact our wellness, commitment, and propensity to excel. The belongingness hypothesis, created by Baumeister and Leary (1995), illustrates the impact of belonging, or relatedness, on our mental and physical health. First, we must understand belonging. Baumeister and Leary (1995) define belonging as a human motivation to create and maintain positive interpersonal relationships. They propose that...

"the need to belong has two main features. First, people need frequent personal contacts or interactions with the other person. Ideally, these interactions would be affectively positive or pleasant, but it is mainly important that the majority be free from conflict and negative affect. Second, people need to perceive that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future"
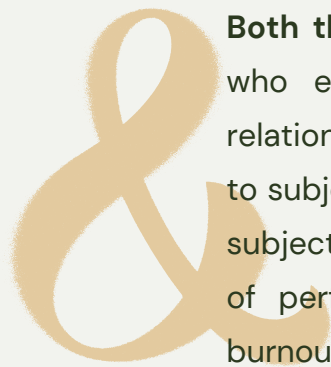(Baumeister & Leary, 1995, pg. 500).

Additionally, to fully satisfy the need to belong, it is key that one feels cared for and perceives they are liked by the other (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Therefore, there are two key elements to belonging;

1 Frequent positive connections

2 Perceived genuine care.

Both the quantity and the quality of the relationship matter. People who experience better quantity and quality in their interpersonal relationships experience more positive affect, which is a key contributor to subjective well-being (Reis et al., 2000). People who experience higher subjective well-being are more engaged in their work, show higher levels of performance and productivity, and are less likely to experience burnout (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

While the work and findings of Baumeister and Leary were illustrated before the COVID-19 pandemic, the formula remains the same. With remote work, we automatically have less frequent interaction and less spontaneous interaction, which often results in not feeling heard, seen, or cared for. We must change how we create opportunities for frequent interaction and persistent caring, starting with our leaders. The term belonging has recently been used interchangeably or in accompaniment with mattering. To belong is to feel connected and to matter to others (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). We must hire, retain, and train present, intentional leaders and relationship builders who care about the team members in their charge and create cultures of belonging. Knowing the job and getting the job done isn't good enough anymore.

Employees are looking for something greater in their employer.

Building a Framework for Wellness

We know that employees who are more mentally and physically healthy thrive at work and are more likely to contribute to a thriving workplace, improving personal and organizational performance (Kleine et al., 2019). Organizations can move towards improved employee well-being by starting with a framework and adapting it to meet the needs of their organization. The U.S. Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being is a great starting point for organizations as it outlines five essentials for workplace mental health and well-being. The five essentials include **protection from harm, connection & community, work-life harmony, mattering at work, and opportunity for growth**, as outlined in the image below. Each component is centered on worker voice and equity and is based on two human needs (Public Health Service, 2022).
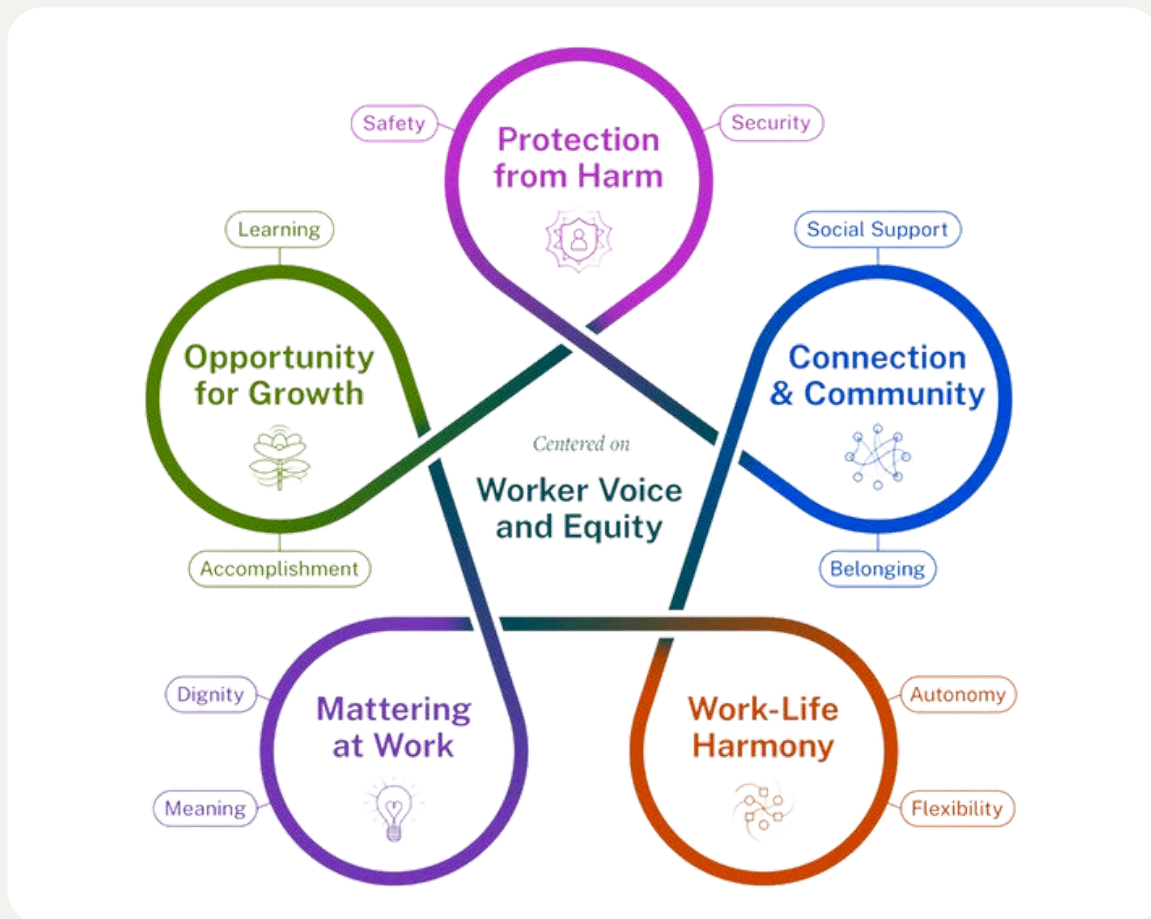
(Public Health Service, 2022)

Protection from harm

is supported by the human needs of safety and security, which includes normalizing the importance of mental health and ensuring employees know the tools available to them.

Connection and community

are grounded in social support and belonging, which speaks to relatedness in self-determination theory and the belongingness theory. This component includes cultivating trusting relationships and an inclusive culture.

Work-life harmony

is based on autonomy and flexibility. Like self-determination theory, autonomy and control are important, especially in remote work where the line between work time and nonwork time is often blurred.

Mattering

at work centers on dignity and meaning and includes recognition, which is an important tool to ensure one feels competency, as in self-determination theory.

Opportunity for growth

is based on percieved learning and accomplishment and exemplifies competency as it pertains to consistent feedback and the opportunity to receive training and improve.

(Public Health Service, 2022)

Organizational leaders cannot remain idle and assume their employees know their intentions or that their people managers are instilling the desired culture. Employers should look to communicate their commitment to employee well-being openly, expressing their care for their employees and holding leaders accountable to a standard of care. This framework can be a great tool for communicating your intentions and expectations. Whether utilizing the framework as it is or adapting it to your organizational values, setting the standards for employee wellbeing is important to organizational success.

Investing in Intentional People Leaders

The essentials in the workplace mental health and well-being framework apply to many types of work environments and are most valuable when supported and implemented by leaders. Leaders have the power to influence by setting the standard for culture, shaping the employee experience, and cultivating powerful connections (Public Health Service, 2022). In the remote environment, interactions with peers are dramatically less frequent, which means the leader is likely the strongest tie the employee has to the organization. Also, as previously noted, both the quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships are important for one to experience more positive affect and more subjective well-being (Reis et al., 2000). Employees are losing the quantity of positive social interactions, so it is vital that those they do have are of high quality. Effective leaders must have a philosophy for ensuring their employees matter, and adhering to a developed framework can allow leaders to cultivate belonging, trust, autonomy, safety, and well-being.

As the workplace changes, we must adapt and understand that one size no longer fits all. In a mixed environment where organizations can have fully remote, partially remote, and fully in-person employees cohabitating, leaders must capitalize on the foundations of self-determination theory and the belongingness hypothesis to understand the needs of each unique population. Today's leaders have to understand their direct reports on a deeper level, inspire motivation, and foster a community. Understanding how to shape culture and adapt the environment for the team you have is a particular skill. Organizations should prioritize the development of people leaders, specifically as it relates to relationship building and empowerment through autonomy, if they want to achieve a homogeneous culture that ripples throughout every department and promotes organizational success.

Conclusion & Recommendations
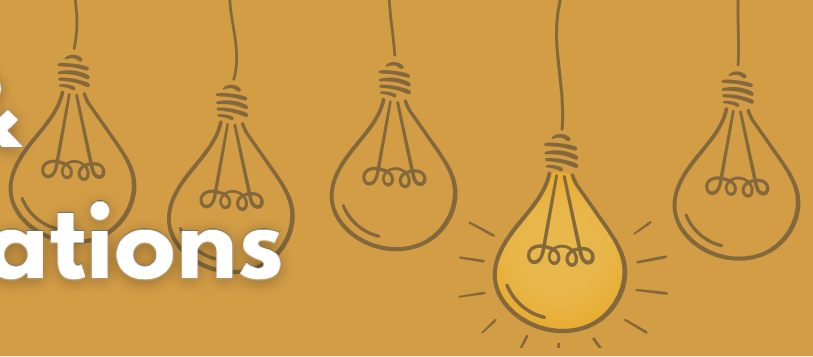
While social relationships at work are an important factor in belonging and employee experience, it is important to remember several factors impact a person's mental health such as socio-economic, political, and cultural influences (Public Health Service, 2022).

As a workplace, we are not able to control all of the outside factors. What we can do is *offer a safe place where employees feel cared for, accepted for who they are, recognized for what they do, challenged to do more, and know that their contributions make an impact.* By committing to a work environment that promotes employee wellbeing, no matter where you work, we can contribute to a healthier community, while improving employee commitment, productivity, performance, and engagement (Kleine et al., 2019).

Both human resource leaders and managers must be invested in the engagement, belonging, well-being, and development of their employees. We have a responsibility to intentionally design environments and opportunities that support the intrinsic motivation, belonging, and well-being of employees. I propose the following recommendations for human resource and people leaders to begin cultivating a supportive cutlture in today's workplace.

1 Discover how individuals are motivated through self-determination theory and build programs that support the autonomy, competence, and relatedness your employees experience.
- Consider how we offer opportunities to all employees, even in a mixed environment of remote and in-office roles.

2 Build a framework for employee wellness.
- Utilize the US Surgeon General's Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Wellbeing as a starting point.
- Ensure leaders have a part in building the framework and are held accountable to the standards of the framework.
- Ensure the framework is well communicated and highly accessible to employees.

3 Create a culture of belonging and community, starting with your leaders.
- Utilize the belongingness hypothesis to train leaders who are present and who set the standard for intentional caring and relationship building.

Through understanding and addressing employee motivation, prioritizing and messaging the importance of wellness by building and executing a framework, and intentionally hiring and developing intnetional leaders that establish community through belonging, we can create a loyal workforce that operates at its fullest potential.

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