



Work From Home & Work From the Heart:

Reimagining the Future of Remote Work
and Employee Engagement



 Employee Fanatix



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Letter From the CEO

If you asked leaders a few years ago what they envisioned the future of work to be, I doubt anyone would describe the current moment we find ourselves in. The intersecting effects of a global pandemic, economic recession, and racial justice protests have created a chaotic time of stress and discord across the globe.

As the COVID-19 pandemic took the world by storm, a wide-ranging series of paradigm shifts ushered in a new way of work, and with it, radically different workplace dynamics that few leaders were equipped to successfully manage. As the majority of the global workforce transitioned to a work-from-home setup, the task of maintaining employee engagement has faced unprecedented challenges that impact every single individual of an organization at every level.

In the months since, we've developed new routines tailored to our new normal. We've integrated online project management softwares into our workflow, opened up new digital forms of communication with a host of augmented features, and hopping on a video call is now as commonplace as "watercooler talk" once was. And our collective comfort with this new reality shows—recent Gallup findings indicate the percentage of engaged employees at work has risen to 36%, which is slightly above the pre-COVID-19 rate of 35%. It appears the workforce is finally beginning to recenter itself after months of volatility, and that employees are finally feeling settled in an increasingly unsettling time.

With this in mind, the question is no longer *"is remote work here to stay?"* but rather, *"what does the future of remote work hold, and how can we best prepare for it?"*

When we acclimate to the status quo, leaders often slip into complacency. We become too comfortable with the state of things, and lose motivation to push harder, think in creative ways, and make proactive improvements to our ecosystem in anticipation of foreseeable obstacles. As a caring leader, it's your responsibility to demonstrate your dedication to continual improvement and cutting-edge thinking.

"Caring leadership will simply never go out of style, simply because we lead humans and humans need to be cared for."

As we look ahead at the coming year, it is clear that remote work will still be central to our organizations' operations for a long time. Whether your team will adopt a hybrid model that combines telecollaboration and limited in-person office time, several unforeseen challenges will surface, raising difficult questions around leadership practices and employee engagement strategies. At Employee Fanatix, we've been keeping our ears to the ground, and intently listening to employees for months to discover what their needs are in this moment, and perhaps more importantly, how those needs will evolve in the coming months.

This thought paper is the culmination of that careful listening process, and I hope the insights shared here will guide you in reimagining the ways in which work from home processes engage and empower your team members. We have identified upcoming trends across three areas—Employee Communications, Employee Engagement, and Diversity and Inclusion—and compiled various strategies and techniques for staying abreast of them.

It suffices to say that building and sustaining a robust organizational culture in times like these has been difficult at best, and I know as the Employee Whisperer™ that last year challenged our team members like never before, both professionally and personally. And realistically, there are probably a slew of bigger and tougher challenges right around the corner. So what's my solution? While I don't claim to have all the answers, I do know that my leadership philosophy has carried me and my clients through past crises, just as it will with our current one. Now more than ever, we need to center care. Caring leadership will simply never go out of style, simply because we lead humans and humans need to be cared for. It's not only a matter of performing well at work, it's a matter of survival. As you move through this paper, keep the notion of caring leadership in the back of your mind, as it truly constitutes the nexus of my leadership principles. Looking ahead, I wholeheartedly expect caring leadership to be an indispensable tool for weathering imminent storms during this year and beyond.

Last year, questions of how to best care for one another were brought to the fore. This year, our answers to those very questions will be tested. As we continue to work from home, let's also begin to work from the heart.



—Heather R. Younger, J.D.
Founder & CEO of Employee Fanatix

Trends in Employee Communications

+50%

increase in expecting the employee-employer bond to weaken after 2020¹

1. “COVID-19’s Deepening Crisis of Emotional Wellbeing,” Leading Indicator Systems, 2020.

In a time of unprecedented change, consistently communicating with employees has never been more important—or more fraught with challenges. In many ways, the advent of telecollaboration has complicated our capacity to listen to one another. With the ability to mute yourself, turn off your camera, leave meetings at any point, and discreetly multitask from behind the screen, technology has perhaps hindered our interpersonal skills as much as it’s enabled us to connect. And that’s not even taking into account the myriad of other project management softwares teams now use daily. With no shortage of platforms to choose from, it’s never been this easy to get our wires crossed and allow critical communication to slip through the cracks.

It’s no surprise then that employee communications have been on a downward trend recently. Across the past three annual State of Remote Work reports, Buffer consistently found two struggles in the top three for remote workers: collaboration/communication, and loneliness. And examining last year in particular, Leading Indicator Systems found a 50% increase in expectations that the employee-employer bond will weaken. To course correct in the future, caring leaders will need to build a resilient listening culture that permeates every level of their organization and effectively leverages new technology to combat the ongoing degradation of employee communication.

When we think of communication, our minds most quickly go to how we express ourselves to others. Though it goes without saying, I’ll say it anyway: communication is a two-way street, and necessitates effective listening in equal proportion to effective speaking. With that in mind, here are three things to keep an eye on as you conceive a comprehensive employee communications plan and move to foster a listening culture in your organization:

1. Articulate your planned path forward with transparency and frequency: Many look to leaders for a sense of security. In fact, the Edelman Trust Barometer reported employees viewed corporate leaders as the most trusted source of information since the early days of the pandemic. As daunting as that scrutiny might be, the easiest way to model stability is through regular and transparent communication. You should express a clear plan of action that prepares employees for the new normal, and provide a framework that contextualizes why and how you’re adapting the way you are. You should also indicate who is involved in the decision-making process, how they’re thinking about it, when announcements will be made, and what you consider to still be uncertain. Even if all you have to relay is that leadership is still formulating the master plan, your employees will listen and appreciate the honesty.

2. Bring your team members into your planning process, and listen to them with care and intention: Caring leaders solicit feedback from all stakeholders on a recurring basis to signal they value all perspectives. Some organizations have assembled task forces to process feedback or outsourced it to employee engagement firms (like us!), whereas others have set up recurring roundtables with employees. This is where the advancements made in teleconferencing can make or break you. Be careful not to overwhelm your people with a barrage of memos across all channels at your disposal; instead, survey your team to understand which forms of communication they best respond to. It's critical to remain flexible on this matter to make the listening process as tangible and accessible for a diversity of employees.

3. Create channels for informal, relationship-building communication: As caring leaders, we need to reprioritize our connections and ensure we continue to humanize our employees. You might need to alter your communication methods to actively create space for casual conversation. Many organizations have moved to instituting virtual team-building activities to maintain a sense of family. For example, consider hosting virtual lunch tables, digital coffee breaks, or small birthday celebrations. If your people are more tech inclined, they can join a Discord server and play outside of work. There are even online book clubs and meditation/yoga classes. Though this kind of communication strays from the conventional business-oriented kind of back-and-forth, it's nonetheless essential to minimize the loss of camaraderie.

Whether it's a detailed return-to-work plan, a key leadership change, or even a personal message of vulnerability, we know how tricky it is to keep employees informed and engaged. The most important thing to remember moving forward is to sustain your listening culture—once you've conducted surveys and successfully articulated your plans, it will be dangerously easy to stop making a concerted effort to hear your people. But thriving communication requires the constant check-ins, the continual surveys, and more. If we hope to maintain the interpersonal bonds we've worked so hard to repair these past few months, this is the kind of work we need to be heavily engaged in. So buckle down, and listen up.



Trends in Employee Engagement

Employee engagement was especially tied to one thing in particular last year: mental health. Times of crisis engender an impressive slate of conflicting emotions (stress, anxiety, fear, depression) all of which indelibly affect work performance.

In the early stages of working from home, many employees felt more engaged in their work. In fact, Deloitte found that a whopping two-thirds of millennials believe working remotely enables a better work/life balance, and half of millennials report they've felt more able to bring their 'true selves' to work by having their offices at home. With more flexible work hours, time and money saved from the absence of a grueling commute, and the general comfort of being in your personal safe space, it initially seemed that virtual work was a triumphant success.

But as the honeymoon phase ended, we noticed discouraging signs of employee turmoil. Leading Indicator Systems (LIS) found extreme concerns for one's own mental health have increased by 38%. Worse yet, a recent study from mental health provider Ginger discovered 7 in 10 employees described the COVID-19 pandemic as the most stressful time of their entire career. This mental health crisis is also adversely affecting companies' productivity: among those reporting stress, 62% noted losing at least 1 hour a day in productivity and 32% lost at least 2 hours a day due to stress. Sustained lack of in-person interaction, long workweeks blending into the weekends, and extended screen time has contributed to feelings of loneliness, burnout, and a newly coined term known as "Zoom fatigue."

What do all these statistics tell us? Employees are hurting right now, and engagement is suffering as a direct result. Moving forward, employee mental health—and by extension, employee engagement—will continue to worsen, unless leaders take dramatic steps to support their wellbeing and prove they care for their people as much as the bottom line. In the future, how can we boost employee engagement while taking into account fluctuations in mental health? To start, we recommend the following strategies.

THE GOOD

67%

of millennials believe working remotely enables a better work/life balance¹

THE BAD

38%

increase in being extremely worried for one's own mental health²

THE UGLY

70%

of employees described the pandemic as the most stressful time of their entire career³

1. "The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2020," Deloitte, 2020.

2. "COVID-19's Deepening Crisis of Emotional Wellbeing," Leading Indicator Systems, 2020.

3. "How Has COVID-19 Affected Mental Health, Severity of Stress Among Employees?" by Matthew Gavidia for AJMC, 2020.

1. Connect people to the appropriate resources within your organization: I suggest revisiting your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to ensure that your providers are equipped with adequate and comprehensive mental health resources. As a leader, you are especially positioned to visibly promote these services, so employees are not only aware of them, but feel less stigma when using them, as well.

2. Normalize informal check-ins about mental health: Sometimes, a little conversation goes a long way. Caring leaders should be comfortable just sitting with their employees and having courageous, honest conversations about where they're at mentally, where they'd like to go, and how they can be supported in getting there. If you find yourself at a loss in terms of how to help your employees, then ask them directly.

3. Continue to conduct regular surveys to measure engagement: Conducting a COVID-19 Employee Support Survey is a great way to actively listen to your employees' needs, whether it takes the form of a pulse survey or more of a periodic one with more of a macro lens. In these surveys, you should be soliciting feedback on your team members' confidence in the organization, how they perceive your crisis response, and how they believe internal communication is helping or hindering their motivation levels. You can also inquire about emotion-related items alongside more business-oriented questions, so you can begin to see connections between the two.

At the core of these recommendations is establishing a listening culture, which will continue to appreciate in value as our workforce becomes fragmented within a hybrid model of working. As some people return to the workplace and others choose to stay home, the duty of maintaining cohesion will fall to caring leaders, and active listening is the first step in that process. Listen to every level of your organization—listen to their professional needs, their emotional concerns, their roadblocks to engaging on a deeper level, and more. In short, show your employees that you see them, hear them, and empathize with them.



Trends in Diversity and Inclusion

90% of executives are struggling to execute their diversity and inclusion initiatives¹

1. “Diverse employees are struggling the most during COVID-19—here’s how companies can respond,” McKinsey & Company, 2020.

Before COVID-19, only 7% of employees had access to a “flexible workplace” benefit or telework option. Nowadays, it seems near ubiquitous in the corporate sector. In this sense, it could be argued that the coronavirus pandemic was an equalizer.

However, those of us in the diversity and inclusion sphere know this to be false. The COVID-19 crisis has not leveled the playing field—in many ways, it has amplified the inequities that plagued our society and workplaces for decades. A growing body of research shows that marginalized communities have been particularly susceptible to more severe impacts from an economic, social, and medical standpoint. A recent McKinsey & Company report surveyed women, LGBTQ+, people of color and working parents, and discovered that only one out of six individuals from these groups feel more supported now than in pre-COVID-19 times.

That same report determined nine out of ten executives are struggling to execute their diversity and inclusion initiatives. This combination paints a troubling picture: minorities are struggling more than ever, and leaders are unsure how to best support them. We are all facing challenges right now—some more than others—and caring leaders will need to dig deep in their arsenal of tools if they hope to recover a semblance of inclusion. To rescue teams from the current crisis of belonging, caring leaders need to create inclusive and equitable cultures that address the differential impacts of the coronavirus pandemic & reinforce psychological safety.

The first step might be learning what those differential impacts are in the first place. Connect with those you lead on a personal—perhaps even vulnerable—level about their unmet needs at work. This conversation might lead to a more intimate discussion around the balance between personal and professional life, which is to be expected after a year that blurred the boundary between the two beyond recognition. Hold space for this deepening of relationships, and respect the level of information your people choose to share with you. The true test is using that data to determine the best ways to support them. How can you, as a caring leader, compensate for significant gaps created by identity or external factors? The more you listen to your employees’ stories, the more you will know how to best meet them where they are.

Inclusion will continue to face threats of encroaching bias and inequity, even as we remain in the virtual realm this year. Those who aren’t used to taking up space in the in-person office may feel

similarly excluded from the digital office, so be sure to perform small gestures that create a sense of psychological safety for all. Leaders can ensure the online workplace is inclusive by inviting certain people to share, encouraging innovative risk-taking, or meeting one-on-one or in smaller breakout groups. Inclusion means working with your people to collaboratively push through tough projects, demonstrating trust by intentionally delegating big projects, and respectfully inquiring about their personal life to signal you care about their entire experience as a human. The online office is no different, and all these things still apply even from behind a screen. In fact, greater attention on your behalf to show care is required to truly inspire your employees to show up with their authentic selves.

Looking ahead, leaders need to understand that employee expectations surrounding diversity and inclusion initiatives are strong, and only promise to accelerate and amplify with time. Organizations that seize the moment to rethink flexibility, belonging, and colleague relationships will not only be better equipped to empower their employees, but will also benefit from sustainable business performance as a result of their flourishing teams. Will you rise to the occasion, or let this moment pass you by?

“To rescue their teams from the current crisis of belonging, caring leaders need to create inclusive and equitable cultures that address the differential impacts of the coronavirus pandemic & reinforce psychological safety.”

The Three R's of Resilience

In closing, it's safe to say that 2021 holds a lot of uncertainty. But the best leaders will see this uncertainty as what it should be: a call to action. Now more than ever, leaders need to meet their teams in the unknown, and help them as they navigate murky waters. Employees are calling for constant and thorough communication, and some semblance of stability, and it is the leader's job to help them focus forward and develop emotional strength in anticipation of what's to come.

As I steered my own team through significant changes at work and helped my clients do the same with theirs, I kept returning to one thing time and time again: the value of resilience.

Last year, I developed the Three R's of Resilience; three simple steps that help me work through tough moments I face, both big and small, and both professionally and personally. I want to share these steps with you, in hopes that you can call on them in 2021 to sustain your efforts, recover from adversity, and bring your organization out of this crisis stronger than ever.

1) Reframe: In psychology, cognitive reframing is a mindfulness tactic in which you identify and reconceive the way you view difficult situations, experiences, or emotions. It involves shifting your outlook to focus on the positive benefits rather than the negative disadvantages. To reframe your perspective moving forward, ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ What thoughts do you find yourself ruminating on during this new normal? Are these thoughts grounded in rationality or emotion?
- ▶ List 3 negative and 3 positive things that have happened to you or your organization during this time. Which of these were things you could control?
- ▶ How might you be able to reframe irrational thoughts into something more productive?

2) Restructure: After acknowledging the positive side of things, it's time to build infrastructure to support the flourishing of those advantages. In this step, focus on instituting incremental changes from an organizational point of view that address whatever issues you discovered. During the restructuring phase, it's critical to include a diversity of perspectives so your new system works for everyone. Consider the following questions:

- ▶ What structural elements has this crisis exposed as lacking? Examples include diversity and inclusion, value-aligned strategies, customer-employee focus, etc.
- ▶ How can you include your employees as you restructure the future of work? Who would you normally turn to, and who else can you bring to the table?
- ▶ How can you include customers in the restructuring process? Do you encourage customer councils or other forms of constituent input?

3) Reimagine: Now that you've cleaned house and made some changes to your organizational structure, innovate within that new system and push it to its limits. At this stage, look to competitors to see how they're adapting, encourage risk taking that pushes your team forward into new territory, and open yourself up to radical possibilities that were not feasible in the old state of things. This final step is where you allow yourself to dream a little—disruption reframed can be seen as liberation. Now that your team is liberated (albeit in an unexpected way), how high can you go? Start asking yourself these prompting questions:

- ▶ Which organizations did you admire before the pandemic? Were they well prepared for a crisis? If not, what pivots did you see them make to adapt and stay relevant?
- ▶ Which organizations have gained your admiration because of their responses to current events? What behaviors have they modeled that you respect, and how do they differ from your own?
- ▶ Imagine a new workplace for the future, one created in response to the past year and all its ups and downs. It can be as achievable or radical as you like. What changes do you visualize?

As you reframe uncertainty as opportunity, it is more than okay to realize—and admit—that you do not hold all the answers. You can still articulate a sense of hope despite battling your own fears; the very gesture of reaching out and just being with your team goes a long way. Be honest and transparent about your own emotions as you tend to theirs. This will help mitigate the discomfort and stigma of “unproductive uncertainty.” The whole point of the Three R's of Resilience is to equip yourself with the mindset to face that sense of uncertainty with confidence and a willingness to fumble or fail without shame. After all, resilience is all about recovery.

It's often said that times of crisis show a leader's true colors, and this current moment is the perfect chance to display yours. If you can demonstrate to your employees that you see them, hear them, and are actively working to aid them in their personal struggles, they will continue to follow you once the bigger picture comes back into focus. Working from the heart and instilling resilience in your team are just two ways to fortify your organization, and I'm sure there are countless others. I urge you to explore all of them, and lean into this learning process with the humility and empathy that serves as the core of caring leadership. Though we can't anticipate what's on the other side of this uncertainty, we can use our innate humanity to prepare for it.



About the Author

Heather Younger is a best-selling author, international speaker, consultant, adjunct organizational leadership professor, and facilitator who has earned her reputation as “The Employee Whisperer.” Her various experiences as a manager, entrepreneur, attorney, writer, coach, listener, speaker, collaborator, and mother lend themselves to a laser-focused clarity into what makes employees of organizations—large and small—tick.

As a champion for positive change in workplaces, communities, and our world at large, Heather founded Employee Fanatix, a leading employee engagement and leadership development consulting and training firm, to inspire others by teaching the kind of caring leadership that drives real business results.



During her time as CEO and founder, Heather has facilitated more than 350 workshops, reaching more than 100 employers and their employees. Her motivation has reached more than 20K attendees at her speaking engagements. Companies have charted their future based on her renowned focus groups. In addition, she has helped companies see double-digit employee engagement score increases through implementation of her philosophies.

Heather hosts the weekly podcast *Leadership With Heart*, which uncovers what drives leaders from all over the world and all walks of life to be more emotionally intelligent leaders. Her book, *The 7 Intuitive Laws of Employee Loyalty*, hit the FORBES Must-Reads list and is a go-to source for HR professionals and organizational leaders seeking insight into their organization’s dynamics.

About Employee Fanatix

At Employee Fanatix, our purpose is simple: to equip companies and organizations with the intelligence needed to improve the quality of work life for their employees.

We are guided and inspired by our vision to help leaders shine by putting people at the heart of everything they do, while empowering employees with the knowledge that their voice and ideas matter.

As a leading employee engagement and leadership development consulting and training firm focused on helping companies and organizations to become more agile, creative, and successful, Employee Fanatix partners with in-house HR and management teams to uncover challenges and devise action plans to build trust, improve morale, and mitigate employee turnover.

By using innovative and effective listening and communication strategies, we unlock critical clues that reveal the source of ongoing problems and help leaders see those problems through a lens of opportunity.

Whether we're building strategic plans to create a more inclusive workplace culture, delivering an effective employee communication strategy, coaching a leader to better engage their employees, or facilitating an employee focus group, everything we do is designed to uncover actionable insights that enable deep cultural improvements, increase leadership effectiveness, and drive business results.

If you believe your team or organization could benefit from our services, we would love to hear from you! Visit employeefanatix.com to send us a personal message, or get in touch via the following channels:



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