How new attitudes on flexibility and equity are reshaping the workplace

The Great Return

How new attitudes on flexibility and equity are reshaping the workplace
Forging a way forward in a changed workplace

Companies are addressing historical inequities and past practices to shape the new normal, including a focus on diversity programs and mental health policies. 6

Views from the top

Executives comment on changes resulting from the pandemic and social unrest. 16

Talking it out

There’s a business case for having delicate and potentially volatile conversations. 22

Inside

2 Editor’s note
3 Breakdown
26 Methodology
28 Largest Top Workplaces winners
30 Large Top Workplaces winners
32 Midsize Top Workplaces winners
39 Small Top Workplaces winners
A year after my post-divorce, mid-pandemic move, I’m finally hanging some art on the wall in my home office. But it’s far too late to establish appearances. Over the past year, my co-workers have already seen my bare wall, bare face, towers of clean unsorted laundry and delivery boxes, work-inappropriate coffee mugs, Mean Mommy scowl, ashy roots. I’m definitely bringing my whole self to work.

In a traditional commercial office setting, “people are used to seeing the code-switched version of their peers,” says Kwame Christian, conflict resolution expert and director of the American Negotiation Institute. In the U.S. corporate workplace, that code is largely patterned after straight White men. At some workplaces, employees are all encouraged to include their pronouns in their email signatures; at others, LGBTQ workers still feel safer obscuring their partner’s gender in break-room conversations.

Women rein in their resting B face and toe-heel the line between “assertive” and “aggressive.” Autistic professionals scrutinize every conversation for cues they’ve missed or accidental offense they’ve given. And Black knowledge workers are constantly tuned in to the white-noise frequency of the U.S. corporate workplace, where “professional” is understood to mean straightened or close-cropped hair; accent-free English; and carefully curated conversations about news, sports and social events, bland as unseasoned potato salad and never, ever angry.

Like actors or athletes, most of us go through some kind of ritual to help us flip the mental switch to work mode: shaving, putting on work clothes and makeup, taking in news or work-related podcasts during the commute. At the end of the workday, we undo the rituals and strip down to our private selves. But those of us shifting to 100 percent remote work during the pandemic have ditched many of those rituals — along with many of the conventions that govern what we reveal of our personal lives and opinions.

Boundaries between work and home life, steadily eroding over the years, finally just crumbled altogether.
screens for medical appointments, therapy, teacher meetings, socializing and news updates, then pivot directly to our work screens, threads of our prior interaction still clinging to our minds. We feel frustrated by the randomness and lack of motivation, anxiety about covid, family dramas.

And we’re talking about other things, too: The murder of George Floyd and conviction of Derek Chauvin. Protests. The 2020 election. The Capitol riot. Mass shootings after mass shooting after assault on Asian elders after mass shooting after outpour of influential sexual predator after mass shooting. And we’re stuck in our chairs, without the usual mental and visual cues of a boardroom setting, our reactions to the delve are more raw. Unfiltered. Unmoderated. Unmasked.

But in the past few years, there has been an “unspoken rule that you don’t bring certain conversations into the workplace,” says Ashley Virtue, director of external relations for the National Conflict Resolution Center. Now, not only are colleagues openly discussing inequality, politics and other too-hot-to-handle topics at work, but in some cases, employers are making those conversations part of the formal discourse, hosting forums and drawing up official statements of values promoting diversity, equity and inclusion.

But is work really the appropriate place to have these delicate and potentially volatile conversations? And should employers be encouraging them?

NOW OUT IN THE OPEN

For Christian, it’s not whether people “should” be having social and policy discussions in the workplace. “The reality is, people are talking about race and politics at work.” And nowadays, “the industry standard is for companies to have to say something” on politics, racism, sexual discrimination and other issues — in public and within their own walls.

But is it a good idea, when, for instance, to discuss a performance issue, or a friend brought up something thoughtless I said, my lack of reaction looked like indifference. And as with many people, my subconscious wants to catastrophize “you did a bad thing” into “you are an entirely bad person,” so being called out in any capacity feels essentially threatening and makes me defensive. “Who’s allowed to say what in any discussion?” says Virtue. “Sometimes it is to express his thoughts, anticipate that others will disagree, and engage from there with a focus on having a productive conversation — not on being right.”

It makes me wonder: In shutting down or getting defensive over being called out, how many opportunities have I missed to get a broader understanding of the converge of misunderstandings and part of making things better? Was I staying neutral, or dodging accountability? What if, instead of trying to avoid being Wrong or a “negative person,” I engaged in the conversation and ridded out the discomfort?

Whether you have something difficult to say, or you’re being told something that’s difficult to hear, Christian has two tips: Slow down — “if you’re heated, the first thing you want to say is the wrong thing.” And don’t participate in the conversation if you believe is right, at the end of the day. . . . I view this as a matter of duty, to provide opportunities and guidelines for candid conversations about the systemic inequities that affect their employees and the broader community. Like it or not, their people are having these difficult conversations anyway, so establishing the company line helps stay ahead of resolving misunderstandings and controversy.

And there’s a business case to be made for engaging in these conversations, says Brian Elliott, vice president of Future Forum, a consortium formed by workplace communication platform Slack. “Having diverse voices in the boardroom ‘helps you tackle broader markets and adjust to change.’ But more than that, he says, building trust is a big component of creativity.” Team leaders who don’t understand or acknowledge how a particular news event is affecting the focus and well-being of certain groups of employees aren’t going to inspire that trust.

Plain talk, equipoise is baked into all our systems: justice and law enforcement, education, politics, economics, labor, real estate, health care. Even when equal treatment is mandated by law, historical and ongoing discrimination against marginalized races, genders and abilities means the impact falls far short of the intent. Removing that systemic inequality means addressing it at the point of contact with people in those various systems — so, for many, “the conversation begins at the workplace,” says Gilbert.

Right now, aside from some eye-rolling over “woke corpora- tions,” public opinion generally favors companies that explicitly promote diversity, equity and inclusion in their internal and external statements. But to have a lasting effect on systemic inequality, the hard conversations will have to continue — with our colleagues, and within ourselves.

TIPS ON HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Assuming all parties are coming to the table in good faith, “the best things in life are on the other side of difficult conversations,” says Christian. His three-point “Compassionate Curiosity” framework for having difficult conversations:

• Acknowledge and validate emotions on the other side. You can be empathetic to the fact of someone’s fear, anger or anxiety, even if you personally don’t feel it’s justified.

• Get curious with compassion. Christian advises asking open-ended questions with a compassionate tone and no agenda. “If you don’t know what you want to say, it means you should be asking a question.” And listen to the responses. (Again, don’t you have to agree to hear.)

• Focus on joint problem-solving. Ask “What’s next?” and look for a solution together. Addressing a specific behavior, and casting it in the context of adhering to the employer’s stated values, takes the personal sting out of the conversation.

In conducting bystander intervention training with the U.S. Navy for National Conflict Resolution Center, Gilbert was trained how to address discriminatory behavior in colleagues with whom they had “literally ride or die relationships.” The game changer, said Virtue, was when a boss wanted to discuss a performance issue, or a friend brought up something thoughtless I said, my lack of reaction looked like indifference. Christian advises asking open-ended questions with a compassionate tone and no agenda. “If you don’t know what you want to say, it means you should be asking a question.” And listen to the responses. (Again, don’t you have to agree to hear.)

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