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Strategic reset: stabilising the ship?

As organisations attempt to settle into new ways of working, **Christine McDonald, Dr Rachel Robins and Professor Tony Wall** spotlight key strategic priorities emerging from employee voices that must be heard



Has the dust settled from your post-pandemic reset? Have you found new or adjusted ways of working which are successful? The senior teams we work with tell us they are readjusting to find the balance point between maximum employee flexibility and customer access to vital local government services

Using a strengths-based approach to organisational change, we were invited by a local government organisation to capture the experiences of managers and teams to pinpoint areas of organisational development as part of a strategic reset.

We found although staff felt the boat had been rocked, there were some areas which – if left unaddressed – were signs of a tipping point.

Strategic insights from this research highlighted the need to:

1. Role model the patterns of visibility at the top, and use this as the basis for cascade

For example, asking staff to be in the office for five days when a leader is

in for one can create an unhelpful divide and sense of unfairness. What pattern are you and your senior team currently modelling?

2. Rules enable option-making and taking, and total freedom can be disabling

Flexibility and flexible working do not necessarily mean having no routine: people have day care, nursery, gym, and brownies on a Thursday night – all require a routine. Be courageous to use supportive rules and ensure that these are reflected in the technological platforms which support it. How are your rules currently enabling?

3. Tell people what you want as a leader

For example, what does 'good hybrid' look like for your organisation or the teams within it. Staff need to know your vision to help them make decisions and organise their services. Some leaders have delegated detail decisions to teams – the 'you decide and tell me' approach. We have found this can enable some teams, but

others will choose to continue their home working arrangements because of the additional flexibilities.

What is your vision of reset? And how could this be co-created with and across teams in your organisation?

As a first step, we encourage you to test how open your communications are to be able to keep your finger on the pulse of your teams

4. Make sure the physical environment is fit for purpose and, importantly, welcoming

Many leaders have adjusted workspaces over the last few years, but may have forgotten to humanise the work place. Where are the money plants? Where is the space to put your mug? Or has someone moved your mug?

What about in shared open spaces, how are you creating

opportunities for people to make the space their own? Personalisation helps people feel comfortable even in shared spaces – to what extent do you enable this?

5. Highlight service need rather than focusing on the people who have busy lives

We have found that some individuals can be targeted because they live busy lives outside of work (eg volunteering, caring, sporting responsibilities). Focus on the need and service users, and organise around those, rather than trying to change individual behaviours.

6. Be courageous in changing internal and external expectations

We have found that introducing high levels of flexibility at team or service level can have major, knock-on effects across an organisation. There are decisions to be made here about this birds eye view of service – some will relate to local scheduling. However, if the vision of flexible working ultimately means some procedures take longer, then a decision must be made about

changing expectations related to service levels.

If these are not addressed, unrealistic pressures are placed on staff and this generates disappointment for service users. What expectations need to be changed in your organisation?

Importantly, we found visible leadership which demonstrates confidence and support provided a bedrock in driving strategic reset.

As a first step, we encourage you to test how open your communications are to be able to keep your finger on the pulse of your teams. A strengths-based approach to organisational change works because it is not only voice driven, but action driven.

It can act as a foundation for inclusion and improvement as we inevitably prepare to ride the upcoming waves together. ■

Christine McDonald and Dr Rachel Robins are directors and Professor Tony Wall is an associate at The Conversation Company

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