

## **Bringing Employee Life Experiences Into The Workplace**

How has your organization's workforce adjusted to working from anywhere?

Susan B., CFO and Executive Director of multiple business units for a large Sacramento, CA health system, reached out to me after reading my book, *I Know*. She noticed a trend amongst her employees and requested a conversation with me to brainstorm me hosting a reading group and leadership mastermind based on my book's research, stories, and processes. Susan was repeatedly confronted by employees seeking counsel about stress reduction and wellbeing, managing interruptions in the home, and a host of other personal issues she'd rarely address when working in the office pre-pandemic.

The black and white nature of finding work-life balance disappeared. She chose to address the uncomfortable grey area of work-life integration. What topics did she feel safe to talk through? What boundaries did she need to personally erect? What resources could she refer to her team members?

Perhaps you're navigating similar circumstances. Society is decentralizing. Hierarchies are flattening in favor of consumer-responsive structures. People are finding personal meaning not by associating with a brand, but by living their life's purpose. According to Pew Research, pre-pandemic only 20% of the American workforce worked from home most or all of the time. Almost overnight that number skyrocketed to 71%. This transition taught us we're far more capable of change than we may have believed. It helped us learn new ways to communicate, authentically express ourselves, and to establish new habits.

Over 18 months, business became personal and local. Not local to a geography, but local to each member of a team. Forward-thinking leaders are "mass customizing" how they interact with their team members. These leaders know their employees' communication preferences, core values, how they prefer to receive appreciation, the ways they learn best, their personal and professional goals, and how to emotionally tie them to the organization. Whether the team member is in the office or working from anywhere, these pieces of emotional data can be gathered to deepen employee engagement and increase productivity.

### **Finding Uncommon Commonalities**

Through seemingly indefinite uncertainty, the most engaging leaders stopped looking for hours given and doubled down on results driven. They brought humanity back into the workplace. They became coaches who intentionally blocked time to ask questions and allowed their team members to vent about health concerns, homeschooling children, and not being able to physically be with family or friends.

These leaders slowed down. Constant activity was replaced with quality interaction. They found new ways to earn their teams' trust, to show them respect, to help them learn new virtual skills and systems. They established clear expectations, communicated more and through more channels, praised their teams weekly, and collected diverse opinions. They made time to care about each team member as a human being.

In my follow up conversations with Susan, she helped me see patterns I hadn't created the time to notice. She was searching for ways to discover uncommon commonalities and thought we could gather a group of finance and accounting leaders to swap stories and uplift one another through society's transformation. I'm reluctant to try new things, but Susan's vision and persistence inspired me in April 2021 to launch what is now known as the "You and I Know Circle." Our goal was to gather diverse leaders nationally to foster personal growth, celebrate one another, share resources, and demystify employee engagement in the work from anywhere era.

### **Who Do You Trust?**

Each year, international branding firm, Edelman, facilitates its Trust Barometer. Through surveying 33,000 people across 28 global markets, Edelman assessed the type of person others find most trustworthy. The most credible person is "a person like yourself." From the report, "In fact, none of the societal leaders we track—government leaders, CEOs, journalists and even religious leaders are trusted to do what is right." I was shocked by the results.

The people who lead bureaucratic institutions and brands, that we trusted for decades, are no longer trusted. Today, we have more confidence in our peers, neighbors, and reviews on Yelp, AirBnB, or Amazon than the mainstream media or advertisements. Society's level of consciousness, and focus on ethical behavior, is rising. Transparency matters more than ever. Leaders who vulnerably share their personal journey with their teams tap into this trust. They create a psychological safety that team members crave.

We designed the You and I Know Circle to be a safe place, with a set of ground rules offering members the chance to extend and receive trust. I lead all group discussions virtually and we begin with a celebration of member accomplishments, move into a behind-the-scenes look at a chapter's thesis, and invest most of our time talking through six group discussion questions. The next day, in a shared doc, I summarize key takeaways, resources shared, and suggest homework to be completed in between meetings. What has struck me most is how emotional and transparent the members have become. Trust deepened quickly. I'm seeing members share parts of their life's journey they've not shared before. Multiple members have messaged me privately asking for the group to continue after our final scheduled call. Through it all, I've learned when trust permeates your culture, where you work (or call in) from is irrelevant. What matters is the feeling you create in the hearts of those attending.

### **Associative and Experiential Learning**

Susan recognized that operating in the grey area of work-life integration meant gathering ideas from disparate sources, experimenting with them herself, and iterating as needed. Bringing employee life experiences into the workplace is new for many of us. As Earth moves further into the Age of Aquarius, business will become more personal and more local. Capitalizing on this means different things for each us, but humans retain information best when they engage the five senses in learning and then have the learning reinforced by a different peer or group.

It's imperative we get involved with third party organizations, such as the Arizona Society of CPAs, to learn peer-to-peer. Our employers can gain favor with Generations Y and Z by taking a stand on societal issues. Proactively partnering with our peers, vendors, or clients to share marketplace trends quickens relationship development and guides us in accomplishing goals faster. One member of the You and I Know Circle, Marissa G., helped her staff uncover and then openly discuss their personal core values. A CPA firm I supported last year implemented a meeting structure where all one-to-one and team meetings began with a celebration of wins and closed with a verbal expression of action items and due dates. Accountability increased and team members willingly shared their ideas to uplift one another.

You may also find value in granting team members access to online courses and having them give summary presentations to their team members. Consider having staff psychologists and nutritionists available on demand. Or, consider starting internal affinity groups or reading or movie groups to open personal dialogue and intentionally create opportunities for serendipitous connection.

### **Unlearn and Relearn, Repeatedly**

Alvin Toffler once said, "The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." As society becomes more holacratic, working from anywhere will likely become the norm. The last 18 months have taught many that we should invite team members to bring their personal experiences into the workplace.

And, I hope you have a Susan in your life. Or, that you can be a Susan to someone else. She helped me unlearn that work and life were separate things and she helped me relearn that work and life are now integrated as one.