The People Imperative:

Putting Employees First Through the COVID-19 Crisis and Beyond

Now is the time not only to respond and reset but to reinvent the employee experience

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a seismic toll on public health and economic well-being, leaving no geography or industry untouched in its wake. With the ultimate impacts unknown, much of society is living day-by-day and moment-to-moment beleaguered with worry and fear.

For all of the troubling storylines, however, it's worth reminding ourselves of the good that has come, and will continue to come, from this chapter. Like other challenging moments in our history, it has been a reminder of the resiliency of the human spirit which has inspired the type of compassion, generosity and ingenuity that only a crisis can produce.

Indeed, now more than ever, we are seeing leaders, employees and organisations rise to the occasion, responding to COVID-19 with a steadfast commitment to placing the safety and well-being of their people first. They are living their values; evolving quickly to meet emerging needs; creating new solutions for employees and delivering on their commitments to society and the world. Moreover, they are **re-envisioning the future**.

In a period where traditional rules no longer apply and norms are being negotiated daily, now is the time to consciously define what that new world look likes and the role of employees within it. Those who do not just recover but take this moment in time to actively get ahead, will come back stronger than ever.
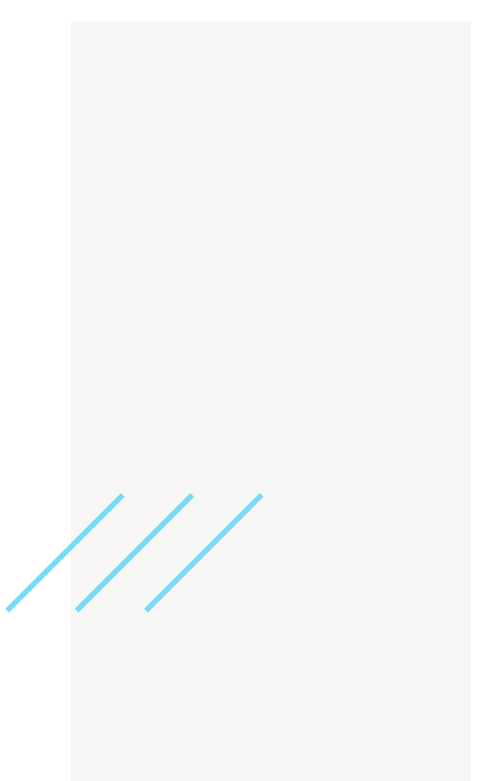
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People, culture and change leaders: Critical to charting the path forward

No matter where in the organisation you sit, if you have responsibility for people, culture and change, you have been at the heart of the corporate response to COVID-19. From leading a nearly overnight transition to a largely remote workforce, to implementing measures to ensure frontline worker safety, to sponsoring quick-turn policy changes such as paid sick leave, you have no doubt been a non-stop advocate for your people and a critical advisor to your organisation.

One thing is certain: you will continue to play a central role, though it is likely your focus will soon shift from crisis management to organisational transformation. In the weeks ahead, CEOs and Boards will make tough decisions about which of their current strategic priorities to advance or abandon; which new opportunities to pursue in a marketplace that is forever changed; and how to address operational, systemic and cultural vulnerabilities revealed through this crisis while preparing for the next one. These far-reaching transformation programmes must be led by those who bring a seasoned eye to the way an organisation and its people understand and adapt to change.

The framework that follows aims to arm you with foresight into how the next several months may unfold. While no one knows with certainty, there are important steps leaders can take not only to meet real-time needs and support transformation activities, but to spot freshly created opportunities to define the future within their sphere. Though we didn't have sufficient time to prepare for COVID-19's initial impact on our workforces and workplaces, we *do* have time to prepare for how we return. For example, we might consider:

> ‣ What new expectations will employees have for the employee-employer relationship post-COVID and how can employers answer the call? (people)
>
> ‣ What new cultural norms are emerging in a largely remote workplace and how can employers codify the positive and "un-learn" the negative? (culture)
>
> ‣ What change management capabilities will future-proofed organisations need to respond nimbly to yet-unimagined business threats? (change)

In a time when people and organisations are particularly vulnerable, there is much to be gained by proactivity. We applaud those who are not only anticipating the future but seizing opportunities to shape it at every step along the way.

The Three Rs: A Framework for the Months Ahead

PHASE 1: RESPOND

The onset of the COVID-19 crisis is marked by rapid change, short news cycles and significant tension. Leaders must safeguard the well-being of their employees and manage the health of their businesses.

WHAT WE'RE SEEING	WHAT PEOPLE, CULTURE AND CHANGE LEADERS CAN DO
Essential and frontline workers are risking their lives; all eyes are on them	• Identify quick-to-implement channels to improve communication to the frontlines • Leverage employee-focused storytelling and peer-to-peer recognition programmes to acknowledge essential contributions • Consider instituting hazard pay, paid sick days or extending mental health benefits

Job security, health and safety are top concerns for all employees (cont.)	• Adopt new health and safety measures and rigorously enforce new policies and practices • Provide CEO-led updates on the business at regular intervals that are transparent and human in tone • Leverage a crowdsourcing tool to have a company-wide brainstorm on cost-cutting ideals; enable employees to be a part of the solution • Take symbolic action in line with your values to show that you value people over profit
As ways of working shift, employees are feeling lonely, isolated and anxious	• Create a video culture, promoting meetings over apps and digital platforms • Encourage managers to compensate for the loss of informal meet-ups in the office with more frequent virtual check-ins • Convert physical celebrations (birthdays, anniversaries, product launches) into virtual ones • Reach out to Gen Z workers who are more anxious than their peers in other generations with messages of encouragement • Help managers to include all employees, not just those they are naturally inclined to lean on or engage with
The public is watching closely how companies treat their people while managing financial losses	• Establish rigorous criteria to aid in smart quick-turn decision-making, using company values as a guide • Consider all other alternatives before resorting to workforce reductions such as moving non-essential workers into essential roles • If lay-offs are absolutely necessary, take measures beyond what is typical to manage them with consideration and respect
Employees activism is on the rise, with far-reaching consequences	• Keep your activists close, listening to and learning from them • Harness your activists' experience and organisational knowledge; engage them in generating solutions to the issues they care about • Produce scenario plans outlining how the organisation will respond to activist-driven strikes, rallies, protests, online campaigns and more

Innovating for the future:
Thought starters

The prompts below are intended for people, culture and change leaders and their teams. As the new normal is defined, these provocations may help reveal opportunities to shape it.

1. How might we redefine and better recognise the value of frontline workers?

2. How can we identify and track cultural vulnerabilities in our organisation that expose us to further risk in times of crisis?

3. What does a constructive relationship between employee activists and leadership look like in the age of accountability and how do we get there?

PHASE 2: RESET

Curves are flattening and leaders are preparing to scale operations back up, while at the same time facing uncertainty without a vaccine or widespread immunity. Leaders must shift from reactionary measures and begin to make medium-to-long-term changes to how, when and where work gets done.

WHAT WE MIGHT EXPECT	WHAT PEOPLE, CULTURE AND CHANGE LEADERS CAN DO
Employees feeling stale or burdened by an "always on" virtual workplace	• Leverage existing platforms in new ways, introducing humour and fun when appropriate • Drive a culture of virtual collaboration through leader modelling, upskilling and behavioural reinforcement • Offer training on **adaptive leadership** • Remind employees of company-sponsored well-being programmes and services
"Return to workplace" scenarios play out with tough decisions on timing and approach given safety concerns	• Plan ahead for a number of "return to workplace" scenarios and timelines depending on how the COVID-19 curve progresses in different countries and regions • Involve medical and resiliency experts in your decision-making and communicate the factors you considered to your employee base • Offer a "Week 1" on-site concierge service to smooth re-entry bumps and provide reassurance as needed
Pain points in current work processes and technologies emerge	• Staff up IT, Facilities and Office Support resources to manage any kinks resulting from office shutdowns • Devote a digital feedback channel to employee "return to workplace" issues; open and resolve tickets for all pain points • Experiment with redeployments, changes to team configurations and new linkages within and across teams

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Leaders adept at managing crisis step up; skill gaps in others are exposed	• Design a leadership visibility strategy for the first month back in the workplace; adopt "management by walking around" • Provide key leaders with "soft skills" training to help them manage staff through uncertainty and change • Modify leader performance targets to include the responsibilities and qualities most needed during the transition period
Uncertainty still abounds regarding financial and organisational impacts	• Allow time for grieving among those who lost loved ones, experienced impacts to their own health, or have colleagues who have been let go • Ensure a regular communications cadence to curtail the rumour mill; communicate even when you have nothing new to say • Conduct an assessment of organisational design and job roles to inform strategic planning • Make improvements to processes for exiting employees; consider enhancements to outplacement services given the challenging job market

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1. What about remote working is not working for our organisation and what type of a solution could we invent for ourselves and potentially others?

2. What does "going forward" to work rather than "going back" to work mean for our organisation?

3. What would our approach to strategic planning look like if we operated under a "zero lay-offs" policy?

4. How might we reimagine the profile of the ideal leader as the list of business threats grows to encompass a wide range of health, political, social, cultural and digital risks?
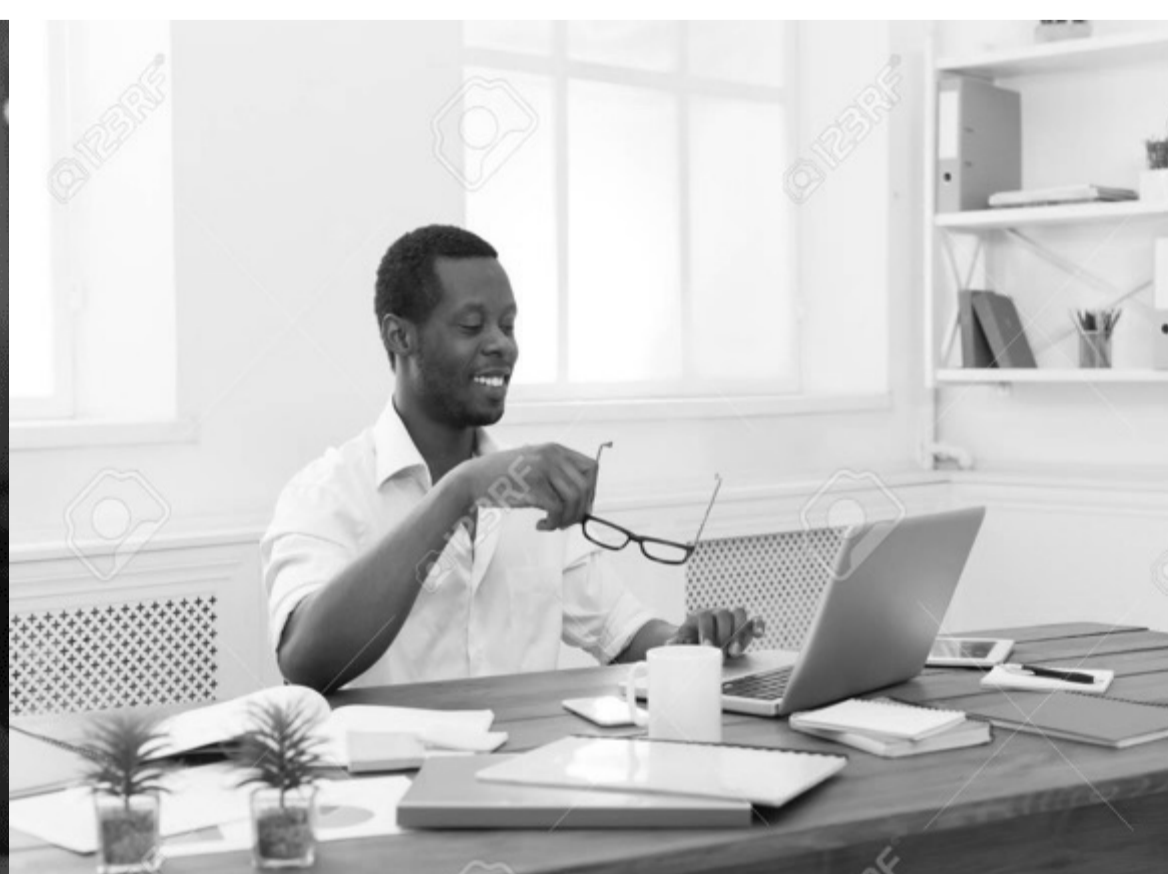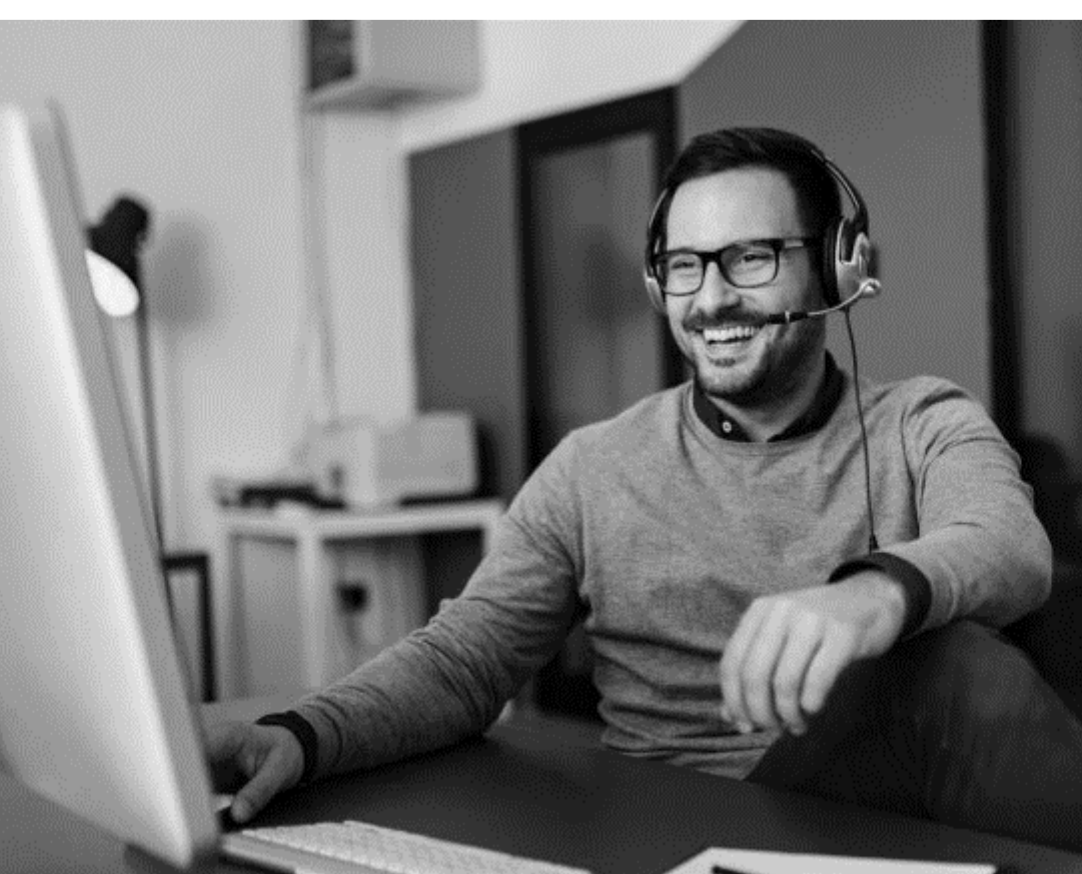
The resolution of the current crisis, marked by cautious optimism and energy to build anew. Leaders must re-evaluate their organisation and make more significant long-term changes to drive performance and resiliency.

WHAT WE MIGHT EXPECT	WHAT PEOPLE, CULTURE AND CHANGE LEADERS CAN DO
There will be a wholesale re-evaluation of long-term project priorities and resource allocation	• Conduct a COVID-19 retrospective that engages leadership in reflecting on their handling of the crisis and identifying opportunities to improve • Collectively develop evaluation criteria to distinguish between what is mission-critical and what is nice-to-do; be prepared to advocate for what is most important to your people • Develop a plan for communicating the new organisational priorities and managing resistance from those who lose out
Organisations that made missteps will need to make up for it, leading to values and culture refreshes	• As part of a COVID-19 retrospective, complete a values-based leadership scorecard – to what extent were leaders guided by company values in their response? • Re-launch or re-campaign your company values, emphasising those that will be most critical to your organisation's reset and reinvention (e.g., innovation, resiliency, etc.) • If mistakes were made, apologise to those impacted and commit to measures that will prevent them in the future; begin rebuilding trust
Renewed focus on driving agility and flexibility into teams, roles and processes	• Drive a culture of agility through leadership modelling, manager coaching and behavioural reinforcements • Reward those who are willing to move around internally to fill new job roles or meet short-term needs as part of stabilisation • Encourage collaboration over following set processes while the best ways of getting work done are redefined
Different working arrangements, xenophobia and discrimination based on caregiver status will create inclusivity challenges	• Pulse survey employees of various backgrounds at regular intervals to measure their perceptions of belonging and inclusion; leverage Employee Resource Groups • Redeploy standard diversity and inclusion training with a remote working bent • Reinforce a dual-mode mindset, designing every meeting, event and opportunity for both virtual and on-site staff

| Leaders will focus on building long-term resiliency in their business models, cultures and organisations	• Define the attributes of a resilient organisation and conduct a gap analysis that compares your current state to the ideal • Conduct crisis simulation training with experienced facilitators to prepare for the most likely business disruptions • Revisit your commitments to environment, social and governance criteria
Cautious optimism about a return to growth will emerge	• As signs improve, leverage it as an opportunity to pause and celebrate the progress your organisation has made • Find something invigorating to rally your employee base around – your purpose, a new product, a merger, a new technology • Gradually re-launch or adapt initiatives that were put on hold as a result of COVID, showing a commitment to returning to pre-COVID profitability and beyond

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1. What is the role of the "office" in work life going forward?

2. How will we manage an increasingly complex workforce comprised of gig workers, employees with "any-time" agreements and more?

3. How do we redesign organisations around agile networks of teams?

4. How do we rethink benefits, care and rewards for employees at all levels, and not lose the progress made during this chapter?

5. How do we involve our people in reimagining our employee experience and our business?
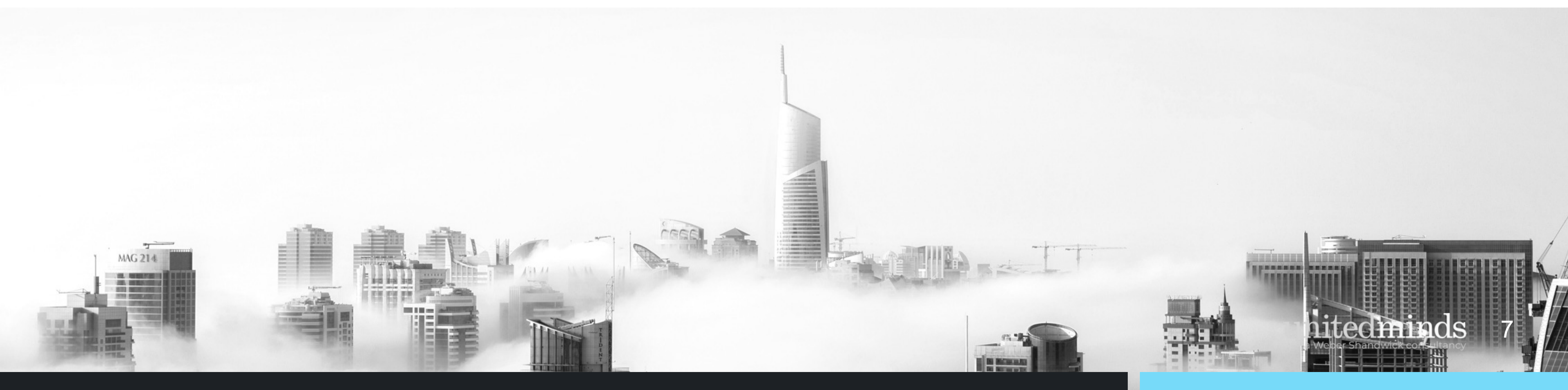
Transforming in a COVID-19 environment
Far from business as usual

While many of the core change management principles still apply, people, culture and change leaders should be sensitive to the complexities of driving organisational transformation efforts in a period of widespread instability.

01 **Start by building organisational confidence.** Point to the very recent past as evidence of organisations' ability to adapt. B2B distributors are now operating B2C channels; manufacturers have added ventilators and hand sanitiser to their production lines and distribution centres have found creative ways to increase capacity to get much-needed goods to consumers. Remind stakeholders that where there's a will, there's a way.

02 **Be decisive in decision-making.** While organisations must remain nimble in this unprecedented time, constantly shifting priorities can contribute to a sense of instability. To the extent possible, name change priorities and stick to them.

03 **Identify your sacred cows.** With so much up in the air, employees will find reassurance in knowing what is "off limits" for change. Take a **stand to put** employees' minds at ease.

04 **Don't boil the ocean.** Resist the temptation to re-launch all of your previously planned change efforts while piling on new ones the pandemic may have made urgent. Follow a rigorous review process that takes into account resources required, people impacts, timeline, dependencies and expected benefits to help you with prioritisation.

05 **Get scrappy.** While best practice is best, it's not always practical. Many of your organisational change initiatives are likely to be on accelerated timelines, whether it's rolling out a new platform to support a virtual workforce or shifting non-essential workers temporarily into essential roles. Know the limitations you're working with before you build your change management plan.
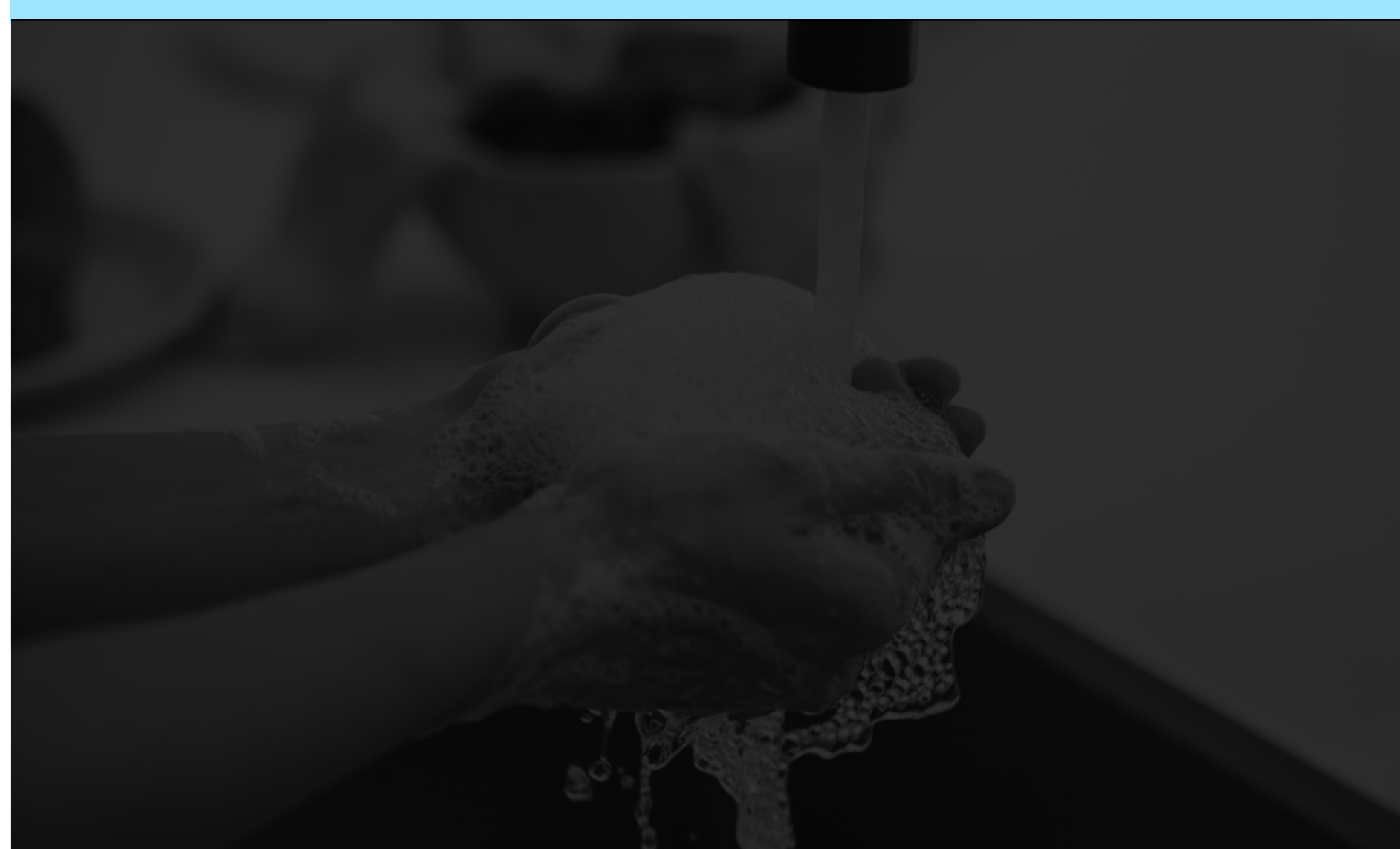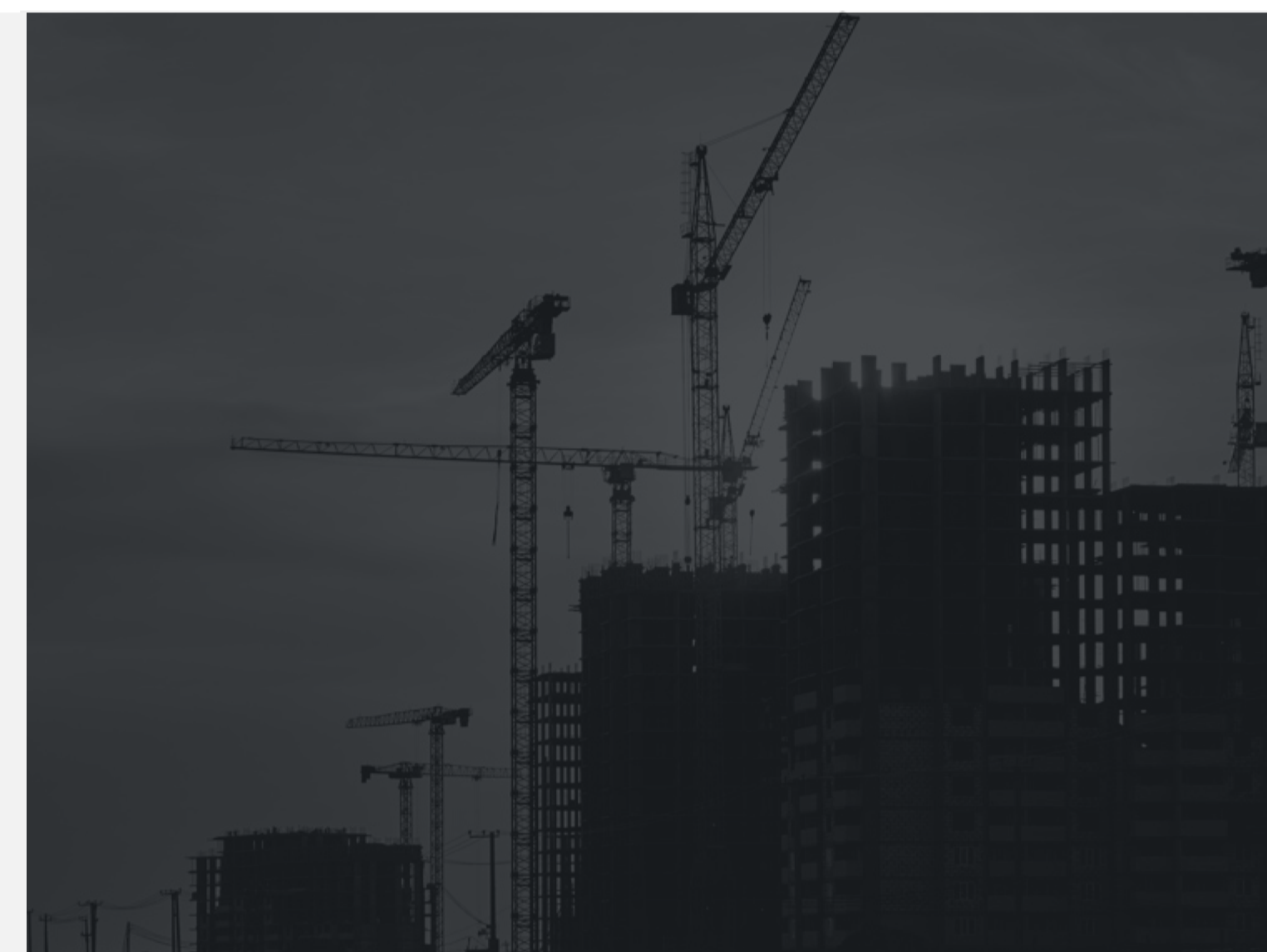
06 Rally around your change leaders. For most leaders COVID-19 will be the greatest challenge they will face in their careers. It will expose and test them in ways they couldn't have imagined and may not be prepared for. People, culture and change leaders are uniquely positioned to provide support, encouragement and coaching.
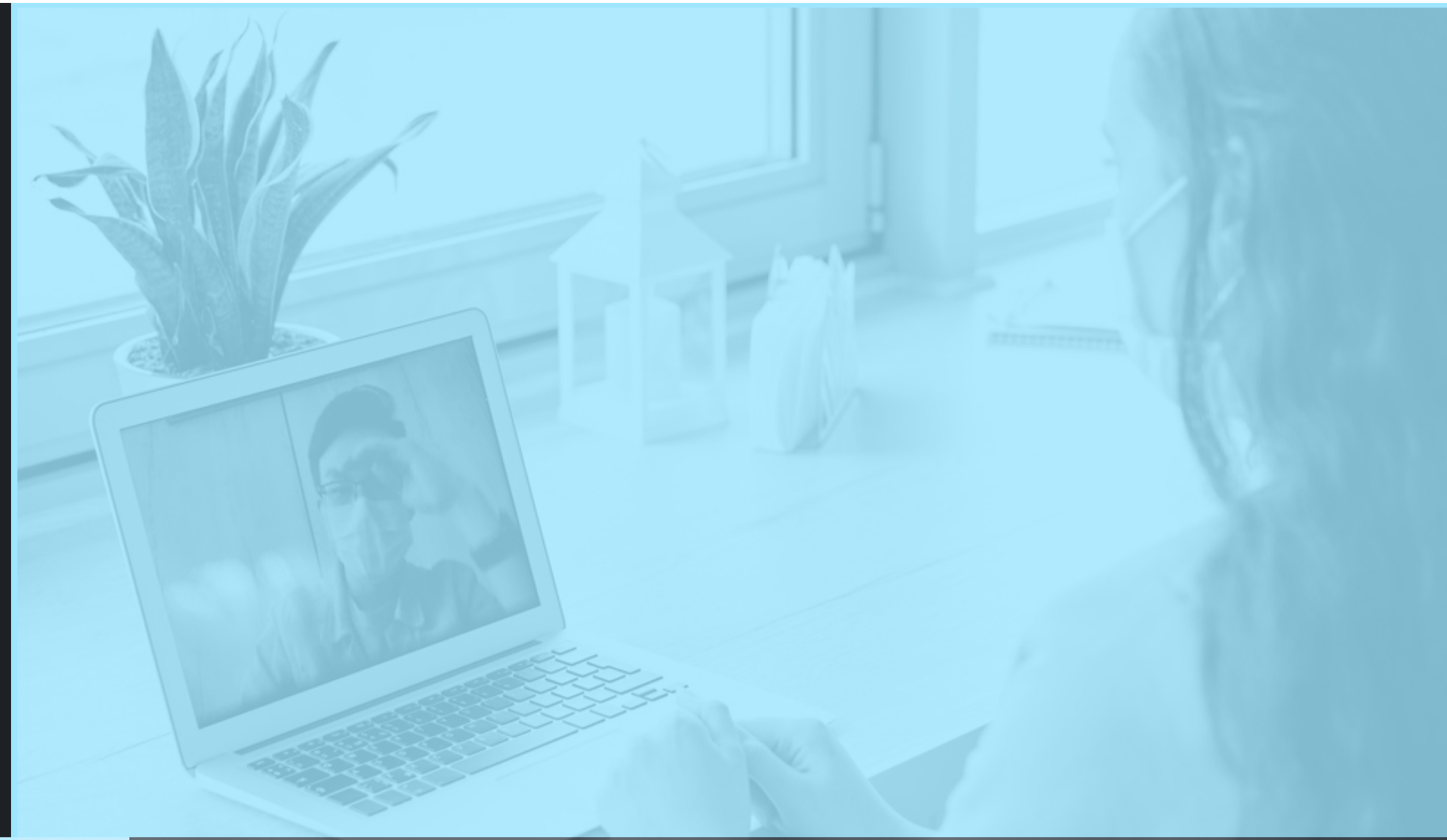
07 Harness employee commitment. During the 2008-2009 financial crisis, employee engagement remained stable even as economic and employment prospects worsened. We may expect a similar dynamic as a result of the pandemic with the absence of other job options and a growing appreciation for "just being employed" leading to increased discretionary effort and productivity.

08 Reach people where they are. With a mixed (from home and on-site) workforce likely for some time, communications, training and other change management tactics must be offered in both physical and digital formats.

09 Create and elevate good news. With much to be worried about, change leaders should help generate content and forums that spotlight the positive. If good news doesn't exist, create it by setting a meaningful, "quick-win" goal, rallying a team and working to achieve it.

Our Areas of Expertise

- ‣ Public health
- ‣ Crisis & issues management
- ‣ Restructuring & reorganisation
- ‣ Diversity & inclusion

- ‣ Change management
- ‣ Culture transformation
- ‣ Leader & manager enablement
- ‣ Internal communications & employee engagement

About Us

United Minds is a Weber Shandwick consultancy dedicated to organisational transformation. Our management consultants, business strategists, communicators and HR professionals know how to harness the power of your people to solve your most critical business challenges through COVID-19 and beyond.

Please reach out to us with any questions. We will be in touch within 24 hours and look forward to providing you with our counsel and support.

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