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Because of the pandemic, we are now engaged in the largest behavioral experiment in the history of work. The questions we had previously been asking about the future of work in an era of advanced technology are no longer just about the future — they're about now. And among the most pressing questions is: How can we build and sustain a robust culture in our organization if we rarely see each other in person? Can we maintain a shared and strongly felt set of norms, values, and beliefs? Can we really Zoom ourselves to the same level of closeness, collaboration, and mentorship without physical co-location?

This feels like uncharted territory — but it really isn't. The leading consulting firms, amongst others, have consistently shown that it's quite possible to build distinctively strong virtual or hybrid cultures. What can we learn from their experience?

The Consulting Firm Experience

McKinsey & Company, the consulting firm where I spent 30 years of my career, is often bracketed with the Jesuits and the Marines in the highest echelon of organizational cultures. They each have clearly defined norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions that are widely shared and intensely felt at all levels of the organization. McKinsey defines its culture with phrases like "client first," "one firm," "knowledge is king," and "up-or-out," and it's underpinned by institutional mechanisms such as a single firm-wide profit and loss statement, consensus decision-making, self-governance, and elected leaders. Even though the median length of a McKinsey career is just four years, the firm's enduring culture has now enabled several decades of profitable growth, as well as expanding influence in the business world and beyond.

But consulting firm cultures like McKinsey's are not based on employees spending a lot of time in the office — or at least in *their* office. Rather it's the opposite: If you go into a consulting firm office on a

typical day, you'll wonder where all the people are. The answer is — or should be — that they're with their clients.

New consultants are told that they shouldn't expect to spend much time in the office. Even senior partners, who are typically juggling a portfolio of clients, are expected to work remotely most of the time — at the client, on planes and trains, in airports and hotels, and, of course, at home. It sometimes seems like they work everywhere except in their own office. That's been especially true over the last two decades, as technology has enabled peripatetic working practices.

So, what is it that consulting firms do to maintain their cultures, despite the dispersed and transitory nature of their workforce? My own professional experience and subsequent research suggest that there are three keys to their success:

1. Build Strong Social and Learning Environments

A common feature of every McKinsey office is "Super Friday" — the one designated day each month when everybody is expected to be physically present in the office. To ensure this time is well spent, the managing partner of the office arranges special lunches, "town halls," practice meetings, and happy hours. Once or twice a year, they schedule office retreats at offsite locations, combining substantive discussions of shared interest (typically knowledge initiatives) with social gatherings. They also take any opportunity to celebrate promotions and personal milestones.

The firm as a whole requires that every office around the world hold a Values Day each year, with an explicit focus on renewing employee commitment to the McKinsey's norms and beliefs — and the underlying assumptions — that underpin the firm's culture. The agenda is typically a mix of role-play built around values challenges, breakout discussions on strengthening office norms, and keynote speeches by firm leaders and outside experts.

In these and other ways, firms like McKinsey have reconceptualized the physical office as a values-reinforcing supplement to virtual work, rather than the default for where people do most of their actual day-to-day work.

This redefinition of the office as a social and learning environment is reinforced at firm level. Global partner conferences, training programs, practice meetings, performance evaluation committees, as well as multinational client service teams, help build and maintain the social connectedness and commitment to learning that frame the modern firm culture. Each year, for instance, McKinsey invites every newly promoted engagement manager (typically three years into their career) to a week-long training program called "EM College" at Cambridge University. The program is valuable not so much for what they'll learn as for whom they'll meet in memorable surroundings. They're building the social ties and shared rituals that will underpin their careers in the firm. People may not see their office and firm colleagues often, but when they do, they make it count.

2. Focus on Teams

Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall have shown that people tend to care much less about which firm they work for than about which team they're on. That is especially true of consulting firms, where the work is almost entirely conducted in small teams. So, in addition to firm culture, consulting firms increasingly focus most time and effort on building effective team cultures.

On any given day, McKinsey has roughly 5,500 teams distributed around the world. Many of these teams are drawn from multiple offices, so they're not tied to any one physical location. Quite a few of their consultants — especially the more senior ones — are members of more than one team, geographically dispersed. Unavoidably, therefore, many team interactions are virtual — that was the case long before the pandemic constrained the ability to travel.

Knowing all this has clarified the task of creating and sustaining the thousands of team-based "micro-cultures" that aggregate to the whole. And given that these teams are constantly in motion, forming and reforming, the process of micro-culture formation is correspondingly dynamic.

In the "agile" project-based environment of a consulting firm, employees participate directly and pragmatically in the creative task of building a micro-culture for their teams. They do so at the outset of each project by developing their own team charters that specify how they will schedule and conduct team meetings, share the workload, make decisions, give each other feedback, blend virtual and in-person interactions, and respect individual styles and preferences — in other words, what their working culture will be. And they do this each time they form a new team in a self-perpetuating process.

To reinforce the concept of micro-cultures, consulting firm leaders now focus intensively on knowing who their best teams are and why. They've learned from Google's Project Aristotle the importance of building teams that are characterized by psychological safety and conversational turn-taking.

Some time ago McKinsey launched the bi-weekly Team Barometer, which enables frequent and timely insights on which teams are performing well and which are struggling. The aim of such barometers (or "pulse checks" as Deloitte calls a similar mechanism) is to ensure that consultants can honestly affirm that "in my team, I am surrounded by people who share my values" and "my teammates have my back."

Statements like these more meaningfully reflect the strength of a firm's culture than anything else. Each team receives the results of its team barometer and is able to act on any emerging concerns about the ways in which they're working together. The results are also visible to staffing and talent managers, who will intervene if necessary, and they form part of the performance review process for team managers.

3. Refine the Cultural Core

The leading consulting firms have gotten a lot of things right, creating some of the more successful and durable institutions of the last half-century. But they know they need to keep adapting to changing circumstances — they've seen far too many of their clients failing to do that. As MIT professor Edgar Schein notes: "Culture is dynamic, in that it can evolve with new experiences. This change can happen in two ways: as the result of a clear and present crisis — the 'burning platform' syndrome — or through a managed evolution under a skilled and sophisticated manager."

For the leading consulting firms like McKinsey, this process of "managed evolution" in its culture has involved adapting to increased global scale with more organizational structure and process; meeting client needs for more specialist expert knowledge; defining clear aspirations for gender and racial diversity; and increasing risk management and accountability in response to periodic errors of judgment and public controversies.

Now every organization is going through a period of "clear and present crisis," which may require a more fundamental refinement of the cultural core. Like other leading firms, McKinsey's response has been to "lean into" the crisis, committing itself to a more conscious social purpose — not just for its clients, but for the societies in which it operates around the world. In the process, it has reaffirmed Buckingham's and Goodall's observation that culture is a watchword for where we want our company to go. "Beyond explaining the now, culture has become our handle on the next."

The "next" with which we are all dealing will almost certainly involve a continuation of "virtual work," or at least "hybrid work." This may turn out to the largest behavioral change in our history. It's no longer an option to carry on with the same norms, values, and beliefs. Indeed, we may already be living on borrowed time, drawing down the social fabric that we had previously created. Addressing this challenge is the work of leadership today. It can be addressed in the knowledge that virtual or hybrid cultures already exist, and they work.

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