

UNLEARNING YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE:

A Playbook for Leading
in an Unpredictable,
Virtual World

LEADERSHIP NEVER STOPS



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WHAT CAN YOU **UNLEARN** **NOW TO TRANSFORM** YOUR ORGANIZATION FOR THE FUTURE?

As organizations around the globe simultaneously navigate the extraordinary disruptions caused by COVID-19 and plan for a post-pandemic future, I find myself reflecting frequently on Dr. Carol Dweck's book *MIndset*. Her research explores how we all tend to shift back and forth between a growth mindset, where we believe that our performance can continually improve through learning, practice, and effort, and a fixed mindset in which we convince ourselves that our potential is limited by our current talent, knowledge, and abilities.

CCL created this playbook to help leaders everywhere overcome a specific type of fixed mindset to which we're all vulnerable: assumptions about how successful organizational cultures operate.

Many of us are prone to assuming that getting ahead means working longer and harder. In approaching the critical work of driving greater equity, diversity, and inclusion in workplaces, it can sometimes seem as if creating awareness of this opportunity is enough. Also, as leaders, there's always the temptation to believe that communicating more means talking more.

In fact, CCL's own research and practical experience with hundreds of thousands of leaders throughout the world show that all 3 of these assumptions are not only wrong – they can badly undermine the growth of high-performance cultures. In the following pages, we propose new ways of reframing these 3 particular assumptions, which emerge from some of the most urgent leadership challenges around the world today. And we offer practical tips and solutions for leading in fresh and compelling ways at the individual and organizational levels.

Thank you for your interest in the CCL community and this playbook. We hope it helps you and your team find more ways to thrive each day and build for the future in a highly uncertain and unpredictable world. Now, more than ever, leadership never stops.

John R. Ryan

President & CEO

Center for Creative Leadership

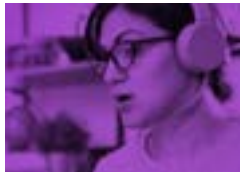
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UNLEARN TO TRANSFORM YOUR CULTURE

Individuals, organizations, and communities around the world are facing a deluge of urgent leadership issues: a pandemic and public health crisis, economic upheaval, a crisis in employee engagement, a need for more inclusive workplaces, a race to digitally transform — among many others.

Organizations seeking to adapt during turbulent times cannot force change through purely technical approaches such as restructuring or hitting on the right strategy. The *culture* of the organization is what will determine the level of success. And the time to change is now, when disruptive forces are demanding that leaders and organizations pivot quickly, or be left behind.

Many leaders understand the importance of culture. What they may not see is how once-vital aspects of organizational culture may, in fact, be stifling their progress. Assumptions, behaviors, habits, and processes get built into our decisions and interactions. It can be difficult to see when they're no longer effective, and more challenging to change.

The way forward requires leaders to question long-held beliefs, unlearn what they once knew, and reinvent their organizational cultures through bold action.

In this playbook, we spotlight 3 common beliefs that are likely damaging your ability to navigate the current reality and shape future possibilities. We provide practical suggestions to help you and your colleagues unlearn those beliefs and replace them through new knowledge, practice, and effort.

With this “unlearn to transform” approach, you can begin to adapt your culture for what's needed now, when uncertainty is an understatement, interactions are virtual or distanced, and everyone is re-calibrating how they live and work. To truly transform, you must accept the challenge of the current moment, and embrace the one thing that remains constant — that leadership never stops.

UNLEARN:

THE “**MORE IS MORE**”
WORK ETHIC



UNLEARN: The “More Is More” Work Ethic

Embedded Belief: *To get ahead, employees must work harder and for longer hours.*

Bold New Belief: *To get ahead, employees must rest, recharge, and recover.*

Demanding. Draining. Relentless. That’s how many people experience work as they step up, say yes, and strive to succeed. It’s a cycle woven into the non-work aspects of life, too, as people pursue personal goals and juggle numerous commitments. Even the best of days can be overloaded and exhausting.

In an always-on world with unlimited tasks and responsibilities but limited hours in the day, many of us feel obligated to work harder and longer to get ahead — or, to stay afloat. Even as we remain in motion, it’s as if we’re sleepwalking through our days, not noticing that we’ve faded from fully present to faintly focused.

The current environment has compounded this experience. The COVID-19 pandemic, social injustice and unrest, and extreme uncertainty have amplified the pressures and challenges faced by colleagues and communities around the world. People are striving to be effective at work, even as their roles and contexts change. Demands and commitments outside of work have changed, too, leaving many people highly stressed and running on empty.

Yet, we keep going down the same path, driven by the belief that the more hours we put in, the more we can accomplish. But it’s not true.

This idea has permeated work culture and is the norm in many organizations. The need to push harder, work longer hours, skip lunches, and limit breaks is a message that’s intentionally or unintentionally spread from leaders at the top and is adopted throughout.

The problem is that **every additional hour of work does not equate to an increase in productivity.** In fact, working too many hours undermines individual and team effectiveness, and diminishes performance over time. **The better approach is counterintuitive: employees must rest, recharge, and recover.**

The “more is more” work ethic wasn’t helpful before the coronavirus pandemic, and it’s even more damaging now.

THE RISK: Large-Scale Burnout

Employee burnout is widespread. With over two-thirds of employees reporting burnout *before* COVID upended the experience of work and life, it's a significant challenge, with global costs in the tens of billions.

The impact of overwork has become so problematic that in 2019, “burnout” became an official World Health Organization diagnosis associated with chronic workplace stress. It's characterized by the following symptoms:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion.
- Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job.
- Reduced professional efficacy.

A recent survey from FlexJobs and Mental Health America (MHA)¹ reported that 75% of workers have experienced burnout, and 40% of those polled said it was a direct result of the coronavirus pandemic. Despite the increased work hours and stress, just 21% say they were able to have open, productive conversations with HR about solutions to their burnout.

Burnout can be especially amplified for people of color amidst police brutality and a period of intense racial unrest, as well as parents of young children forced to divide their time between work, domestic responsibilities, and a new role of homeschooling.

Overwork and burnout not only decrease the ability for your people to perform at peak levels, it also degrades morale. **Employees who are slipping into burnout are flight risks; they may leave your organization for a company or role that seems more flexible or more aligned with their career goals.** Now, at a time when you need direction, alignment, and commitment from your teams more than ever, you can't risk losing top talent because your organizational culture breeds burnout.



VIRTUAL TIP

SET YOUR BOUNDARIES WITH

EMAIL: Create a daily out-of-office email reply for after-work hours letting team members know you won't be answering emails during this time. Not only will it let them know not to expect a response in the evening, it will reinforce that you're committed to creating boundaries between work and personal life, and they should be too.

Not sure what it should say? Use this template as a starting point:

Thanks for your email! I've already powered down my computer for the evening and make a point not to check email on my phone between the hours of 6pm and 6am EST to ensure I have time to rest and recharge. Unless this is extremely urgent and cannot wait until tomorrow, expect to hear back from me then. If it is extremely urgent, please give me a call. 😊 Have a nice evening.

PIVOT POINT: Resilience

To prevent burnout, leaders can — and must — replace the “more is more” culture with one focused on resilience. Employees across roles and levels must be encouraged — even expected — to rest, recharge, and recover as a matter of **personal effectiveness and well-being** and a way to create a culture of **sustainable peak performance**.

A resilient workforce is created when high-activity or high-intensity times are navigated by managing personal energy and balanced with periods of recovery.

Elite performers in every field and discipline — from athletes and artists to C-Suite leaders — understand that peak performance and productivity do not come from blindly pushing harder and working longer. They establish and maintain practices that fuel their success. They prioritize habits that allow them to create focus and pace their effort.

Energy management and recovery, however, aren't only about physical stamina or capability. Our brains require restoration to operate at a high level. In our organizations, individuals and teams experience daily “brain drain,” as they constantly grapple with complex issues such as leading change; dealing with conflict, ambiguity, and uncertainty; listening deeply and acting with empathy; fostering creativity and agility; adapting skills and systems; and leading diversity and inclusion efforts. The mental and emotional energy required to navigate the ever-shifting impacts of COVID-19 is adding much weight to the load.

The good news is that **with intention and attention to regular, reasonable, and researched energy management tools and tactics, we can create replicable routines and rituals that build resilience**. When you help your organization shift away from the old “work harder” belief to a culture that values resilience, employees are given permission to take care of themselves and recharge. They can bring their best selves to work (and home) with greater frequency, fend off burnout, and create conditions to instead “burn bright.”



VIRTUAL TIP

CHANGE UP THE SCENE: When working remotely, reinforce your commitment to resilience by being open about taking some calls outdoors. If following along on a screen is not required and open conversation is the intent of the discussion, consider joining from your porch or balcony, a nearby park, or on a walk around the neighborhood.



RESOURCES TO HELP YOU GET STARTED

EXPRESS GRATITUDE:

The benefits of gratitude are supported by an ever-growing body of research. People who are grateful feel happier. They have an improved sense of well-being and higher self-esteem, and experience less depression and anxiety.² They also sleep better.³ And one study even found that differences in levels of gratitude are responsible for about 20% of individual differences in overall life satisfaction.⁴

Here are 3 simple exercises that have been scientifically proven to boost your sense of gratitude and foster your resilience:

- 1 Send a note expressing your gratitude.** Research shows that writing a letter thanking someone for the positive impact they have had in your life is a great way to boost your gratitude.⁵ Or send a simple text, if you prefer. Take out your phone right now (if it's not out already) and let someone know you're grateful to have them in your life and that you're thinking of them. Whether in a letter or text, let the person know what they did and the impact of their behavior on you. Be concrete, specific, and brief. Once your note is complete, pause and notice how writing the note made *you* feel.
- 2 Keep a gratitude journal — or a gratitude list.** Gratitude journals are popular these days, and for good reason. Keeping a journal of people and things for which you are grateful can boost your feelings of gratitude. If you're not the journaling type, don't worry; research shows that making a short list works, too. Some research suggests that a short list once a week might actually be *more* effective than doing it daily.⁶ Just jot down 3 things you're grateful for on a Post-it note. Stick it somewhere you'll see it often and refresh it weekly.
- 3 Take time for reflection.** Research has also found that simply reflecting on the many aspects of your job — large and small — for which you're grateful can boost gratitude levels.⁷ These might include supportive work relationships, sacrifices or contributions that others have made for you, advantages or opportunities, or gratitude for the opportunity to have your job in general. Going on a short "gratitude walk" is a great way to take a time out for this reflection. Consider repeating the exercise and think about the many aspects of your life for which you're grateful (family, friends, hobbies, etc.).



BOOKMARK SOME BREAKS:

Turn the random 7- and 12-minute breaks between meetings into opportunities to recharge. In our [Burn Bright: The Resilience Advantage](#) online program, we call those unforeseen pockets of freedom “time confetti” — moments that, without a plan, end up getting wasted. We may mindlessly check social media, scan headlines, or scroll through email. But you can claim these lost minutes for something purposeful.

Plan ahead by creating at least 3 bookmarks in your internet browser or group your apps so you have resources you can quickly access when some unexpected time confetti is thrown your way. Not sure where to start? Consider these:

- 1 Your Resilience Theme Song:** Music activates more areas of the brain than almost anything else. Think of a favorite song — one that either calms your mind or pumps you up — and bookmark it on YouTube so it’s just a click away next time you have 4 minutes to spare.
- 2 Meditation Timer:** Meditation is such a powerful practice to help build resilience and mindfulness. Bookmark a 5-minute Google Timer and next time you have a short break, close your eyes, be still, and breathe. You’ll hear a beep when it’s time to open your eyes — and feel refreshed for whatever is next.
- 3 Virtual Nature:** Broaden your perspective by watching a live feed of a beautiful place you’ve never been before. Earthcam.com offers live footage of hundreds of destinations, and timberfestival.org.uk allows you to listen to sounds of the forest from around the world. If you don’t have enough time to get outside for a walk, consider these virtual alternatives.

If you’re parenting while working from home, you’ll probably check in on the kids during your mini-breaks or manage an online learning issue. But try to make some of these mini-breaks restorative: give a hug, play with the dog, share a quick snack. Add some bookmarks that you can do together, or help kids create their own version of time confetti breaks.



COMMUNICATE RESILIENCE:

Organizational leaders may say they are committed to the well-being of their employees. But without consistent messages and actions, employees at all levels are likely to default to the “more is more” approach to work. To foster culture change around the importance of rest and recovery and affirm your commitment to resilience, use your existing communication and learning channels. Look for ways to educate all employees and show managers what they can do to support and reinforce their teams. Not sure where to start? Consider these suggestions:

- 1 Give authentic examples.** Ask leaders to share a personal anecdote about a hobby they’ve rediscovered, an exercise routine they’ve tried, or a strategy they’ve used to manage their focus and energy while working from home. It may be especially helpful for a respected colleague to tell a story of personal burnout and steps they have taken to recover.
- 2 Give a delightful surprise.** If your organization is experiencing rapid change and transformation, consider sending a communication that encourages employees to start the weekend early and take a Friday afternoon off.
- 3 Highlight non-work activities.** Reinforce the message that people are expected and encouraged to have lives outside of work. Look for opportunities to showcase colleagues who are pursuing hobbies and interests, and prompt non-work-related activities throughout the work week. Encouraging virtual book clubs, yoga breaks, and walk-and-talks are just a few ways that organizations can reinforce their commitment to resilience.
- 4 Support different experiences.** By circumstance and preference, employees will need and want different ways to recover. And some will be stretched so thin with work, family, and community, they can barely make it through the day. Communicate the need for rest and recovery in ways that recognize the range of stressors employees face, provide flexible support, and encourage leaders and teams to frequently review workload and work practices.



REINVENT MEETINGS:

Non-stop meetings are not only annoying, but can also cause serious cognitive drain. And the strain of too many video meetings is real.⁸ Organizations should be intentional about enforcing meeting guidelines that help their employees reclaim some space on their calendars. Again, leverage your existing platforms to acknowledge the burden of inefficient meetings, set guidelines, and support colleagues in pushing back on what isn't working. You'll want to tailor guidance to your organization, but here are some ideas you could recommend:

- 1 No-meeting Fridays.** Encourage teams to protect their Fridays. Don't schedule meetings, and if others do, politely suggest an alternative. There will be exceptions, but making this the norm will allow people to use the time as needed to get work done, focus, plan, or simply recharge on their own terms. They'll end the week stronger and with greater clarity about what they've accomplished and what lies ahead. This will allow them to start the weekend with much less stress.
- 2 Agendas are required.** An agenda can be just a few bullet points; it doesn't need to be a minute-by-minute breakdown. But, remind people of its value. An agenda gives attendees an understanding of what to prepare for, what's expected of them, and a way to determine whether they need to even attend. Sometimes the simple act of writing out an agenda will make the organizer realize they don't actually need the meeting in the first place!
- 3 It's OK to decline and protect your time.** Send the message that people have choice. Just advise people to communicate to the organizer why they don't think they need to attend in case there's a critical reason that perhaps hasn't been communicated.
- 4 Allow breathing room.** Everyone needs a moment to reflect, prep for the next call, take a break, or check on their kids doing virtual learning. Create a new norm by scheduling slightly shorter meetings: 30-minute meetings are just 25 minutes; 60-minute meetings become only 50. Then end on time. Suggest people update any existing meetings and use this new approach for future meetings going forward. And encourage discipline: a couple of minutes prior to the scheduled end, the organizer should note the time and suggest wrap-up and next steps.
- 5 Examine your standing meetings.** Recurring meetings can be a major time drain. Suggest team leaders audit all their standing appointments. Some might be a carryover from before an organizational shift or before a new strategy was adopted. Assess whether each meeting is still necessary, whether it could take place less frequently, or whether you could reduce its length. Removing just one standing meeting or shortening it by 30 minutes returns significant time back to yourself and others.

Help your leaders avoid burnout, and instead, burn bright with our online program, [The Resilience Advantage](#), based on science-backed principles and an application-based approach.

A woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored shirt, is seated in a wheelchair at a white table. She is looking to her right and holding a mobile phone to her ear. The table in front of her has several papers and a laptop. In the background, another person is partially visible, and the setting appears to be an office or meeting room. The entire image has a blue color cast.

UNLEARN:

THE “**AWARENESS IS THE SOLUTION**” APPROACH TO EQUITY, DIVERSITY, & INCLUSION

UNLEARN: The “Awareness Is the Solution” Approach to Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion

Embedded Belief: *To ensure equity, diversity, and inclusion, organizations can count on awareness to drive change.*

Bold New Belief: *To ensure equity, diversity, and inclusion, organizations must take targeted action.*

Accessing the full potential of all of your talent is a strategic imperative. Studies have repeatedly shown that diverse teams drive better business performance, and companies with more diversity become innovative, resilient, and better able to respond to the ever-shifting challenges in an unpredictable and virtual world.⁹

CCL research shows that executives often understand the benefits of diversity and recognize the importance of greater equity and inclusion.¹⁰ They also see that past efforts have been insufficient and are seeking strategies that would produce more meaningful results for the organization — and a better work and career experience for all employees.

For years, many of us assumed that knowing the value of a diverse workforce and related efforts to generate awareness of the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) would drive desired change in many organizations. **But the belief that awareness is the solution to overcoming bias and enabling EDI has gotten in the way of actions that could have greater impact.**

Implicit biases are deeply set and often learned from a young age, and uncovering them is only the first step in the right direction. It’s not enough to provide training to employees about recognizing their own biases. You must go beyond **recognizing** — and show people exercises, tools, and actions they can take to **replace** the biases they have in order to create cultures and teams that are truly equitable, diverse, and inclusive.

By letting go of the “awareness is the solution” approach, your organization can see more clearly what’s required and identify targeted, specific action to infuse EDI into daily work and decision-making — the place where culture transformation takes hold.

THE RISK: Lost Human Potential and Increasing Irrelevance

Ensuring fair treatment, representing all identities and differences, and building a culture of belonging are actions that are expected today by not only job candidates and employees, but also savvy clients, customers, and markets. They're expressing a moral imperative that's long been overlooked.

As the experiences of marginalized people and communities make headlines all over the world — again and with urgency in 2020 — employees in your organization are frustrated. Many are grieving. They're looking for real change and clear action.

Check-the-box EDI efforts are insufficient. Most diversity programs aren't increasing diversity¹¹ — at least, they're not getting results in terms of numbers or strategic objectives. Another recent study found nearly 75% of employees in underrepresented groups — women, racial and ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ employees — don't feel they've personally benefited from their companies' diversity and inclusion programs.¹² That doesn't even address a broader array of traits and identities, such as national culture, or people with disabilities, that may be relevant to an organization's workforce.

Accepting the status quo or giving up on creating a culture of greater equity, diversity, and inclusion is not an option. **Lack of meaningful action contributes to inequality in society at large. It leads to lost potential and causes real damage to your colleagues and employees.**

Getting this wrong is also a risk to your organization's success. **You may tarnish your brand's reputation and pave the way to irrelevance. You weaken your ability to attract, retain, and advance top talent.**



VIRTUAL TIP

DEFINE CAMERA EXPECTATIONS AND OPTIONS: Recognize and respect that not everyone is comfortable sharing their home environments on camera all the time. Set expectations before meetings or collaborations: begin by including in the agenda the options for cameras on, virtual backgrounds or cameras off, etc., so people know what to expect. Start by asking yourself:

- What are the virtual environment expectations?
- Are cameras required?
- What are the options instead of the camera?

PIVOT POINT: Targeted Action

We've learned from our clients — and our own experiences — the power of targeted action to change patterns in your organizational culture and foster real progress. There is a better way forward. Remember, progress requires changes in habits and learned human behavior, so choose initiatives that go **beyond bias** awareness, to replacing those biases with new perspectives and behaviors.

At CCL, we use our proprietary REAL™ framework to help organizations understand the dynamics of equity, diversity, and inclusion in their particular context and to identify specific actions they can take.

REVEAL relevant opportunities. The first step is about discovery — not setting an agenda or duplicating diversity initiatives that seemed effective in other organizations. Using a curious and open mindset, begin to investigate facts, data, and history from a local, national, and global perspective and the context in which EDI plays out for individuals, teams, and the organization.

Top organizational leaders have a critical role; without their commitment, EDI efforts will be disconnected from business strategy and culture change will not be supported or sustained. Senior leaders' work is to articulate their individual and collective perspective, identity, and values; consider how experiences of power and privilege may affect their approach and effectiveness and those of others; and evaluate how dynamics of EDI affect their marketplace and their business strategy.

By exploring their specific context, senior leaders can then engage others in the organization to identify the most relevant opportunities for change — knowing that possibilities emerge from the perspective of both the oppressed and the privileged.

ELEVATE equity. The next step is to prioritize equity: the fair and contextually appropriate access to the resources and opportunities required for every individual and group to attain their full potential.

To make progress, senior leaders must acknowledge societal inequities and recognize that, even if unintentionally, their organization isn't a level playing field. People enter the world of work and advance through their careers with unevenness of advantage, opportunity, privilege, and power — so what is “fair opportunity” is not the same for everyone. With this lens, leaders can identify the large and small ways in which inequity is experienced, set goals, remove barriers, and change practices.

ACTIVATE diversity. This step involves acknowledging and celebrating differences — and catalyzing the blend of characteristics, values, beliefs, experiences, backgrounds, and behaviors within the organization, or larger community.

The process requires equipping managers and teams with the skills to explore the impact of diversity on perspectives, assumptions, and approaches. They also need tools and support as they improve their ability to identify and mitigate bias, respect differences, build empathic relationships, manage conflict, and bring out the best in others. Activating diversity also involves defining expectations, establishing systems, and identifying metrics that will enable all employees to contribute and perform at their best.

LEAD inclusively. A fourth — but not necessarily last — step is to envision and enact new ways of leading. At CCL, we believe leadership is about creating Direction, Alignment, and Commitment (DAC):

- **Direction** is agreement on goals that the collective group is trying to achieve together.
- **Alignment** is coordinated work that supports integration across the group.
- **Commitment** is mutual responsibility within the group for its success and well-being.

Leading inclusively requires active, intentional, and ongoing efforts to promote the meaningful, authentic participation of, and investment in, every employee, customer, or strategic partner to create DAC. Doing so enables people to work together to achieve results they would never accomplish on their own.

The REAL framework is one that acknowledges that every organization's way forward is different — but that specific actions are needed as levers for change. By going through the discovery process, you can map out what EDI efforts should look like in your organization and context and take steps to change the way leadership, culture, and day-to-day work are experienced by all employees.



VIRTUAL TIP

BUILD IN SAFETY: When moving to virtual meetings — especially with new people and teams — check your assumptions before and during sessions. To be sure everyone is able to contribute, pay attention to:

- ADA compliance. How might virtual be different than in-person?
- Training. Make sure people have the opportunity to learn the virtual platform (how to upload a photo instead of a video, how to use green screen, how to screen share, etc.), and/or how to lead virtual meetings.
- Limited internet accessibility or technology variation. Give consideration and leeway to accommodate easily.
- Time zone differences. Balance the burden and accommodate scheduling conflicts.
- Gender and family assumptions. Be aware that identity and experience are diverse as the boundary between work and home has blurred.
- Language or accents. Ensure all participants are encouraged to, and feel comfortable about, contributing.
- The invasion of personal space. Manage reactions to the observation of people's homes and cultures.

RESOURCES TO HELP YOU GET STARTED

MAP YOUR SOCIAL IDENTITY:

If you want to harness the power of your employees' diverse experiences and succeed in the new talent economy, you must understand and consider people's different lived experiences to help their teams achieve their full potential. This starts with understanding your own social identity.¹³ Social identities are labels that people use to categorize or identify themselves and/or others as members of specific groups. Some common social identities include: generation, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, (dis)ability, political affiliation, relationship status, profession, and socioeconomic status. To understand how social identities can inform your equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts, it's helpful to remember that social identities are dynamic, sociological, salient, and that everyone has multiple. Social identities are powerful because, as humans, we categorize ourselves and each other into groups along social identity lines. This categorization often lays the foundation for bias, stereotypes, prejudices, and favoritism. It also often serves as a catalyst for motivation and action (e.g. we may feel called to mobilize, speak out, or organize based on social identities).

To bring focus to the way social identity impacts how you work and lead others, try this 3-step exercise:

- 1 List your social identities.** Consider categories such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, generation, social/relational roles, occupation, nationality, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, neuro-typical status, etc.).
- 2 Reflect** on these questions:
 - Which social identities are most central to how you see yourself as a person? Why?
 - Which social identities have the biggest impact on how others treat you? Why? Does your answer change depending on context (e.g., at work, at home, with your friends)?
 - Are there aspects of your identity that you keep hidden at work? What impact might that have on you and those around you? Are there aspects you try to make explicitly known about you? What impact does that have on how you move through the world?
 - What assumptions do you think other people make about you based on your social identities? What assumptions may you have made about other people based on their social identities?
- 3 Consider** how the various social identities have an impact on your:
 - Access to resources and to people in positions of authority;
 - Ability to direct your own and other people's work;
 - Authority to make decisions; and
 - Ability to influence through position or relationships.

RESHAPE BOUNDARIES:

Most employees have regular meetings with the people on their immediate team or within their immediate group. In order to create a culture that truly promotes equity, diversity, and inclusion, it's important for leaders to be intentional about collaborating across boundaries.¹⁴ That starts with connecting with people who offer different perspectives. They might hold a different seniority in the organization, work in a different geographic location, or have a different cultural background, but forming a relationship with people outside your immediate comfort zone is an essential first step to collaborating across boundaries and cultivating an equitable, diverse, and inclusive culture.

Consider setting up a **virtual 30-minute coffee break** with someone outside your immediate team with no agenda other than getting to know each other and build ties across social identities at work. Not sure what you'd talk about? These questions may help kick off your conversation:

- *What brought you to your profession (or to this job, or to your company)?*
- *What do you enjoy most about your work?*
- *What do you wish you were doing more of?*
- *How do you like to spend your time when you're not working?*



SPARK CONVERSATIONS ABOUT EQUITY:

Equity is a systemic issue. Real change requires getting the whole organization involved. Organizational or functional leaders can implement key practices to overcome barriers and truly unlock the potential of equity in the workplace. Use this equity checklist to spark proactive conversations:

Encourage each person on your team to complete this checklist for themselves and then have a group discussion afterwards. Check “yes,” “no,” or “not sure” for your organization on each of the following organizational practices:

| | Organizational Practice | Examples of what this could look like ... | YES | NO | NOT SURE |
|---|--|--|-----|----|----------|
| 1 | My organization provides equitable opportunities for success. | <i>Leaders of all backgrounds have access to opportunities for promotions, pay raises, and leadership development. In addition, people with specific identities and needs (women, non-binary people, new parents, etc.) may be given access to development opportunities specifically designed to address their unique challenges.</i> | | | |
| 2 | My organization’s HR policies support work-life balance and reflect the realities of home responsibilities. | <i>Care taking and parental leave policies are available for all genders and are aligned with individuals’ needs.</i> | | | |
| 3 | Leaders in my organization are intentional about sponsoring marginalized groups. | <i>Senior leaders in my organization are vocal about promoting diverse talent and advocating for them, even — and especially — behind closed doors. This is critical because research shows that women in particular are often ‘mentored’ (given advice and relational support) but not sponsored (advocated for and given opportunities).</i> | | | |
| 4 | My organization uses data to ensure diverse talent is prioritized and retained. | <i>My organization periodically reviews employee engagement, retention, and promotion data to look for trends and insights. Do women comprise 50% of your workforce, yet less than 5% of senior leadership? Where in the organization is diverse talent advancing, or not? My organization is asking these types of questions.</i> | | | |
| 5 | My organization has taken steps toward ensuring pay equity. | <i>For example, conducting pay equity reviews and making adjustments, creating standardized policies around negotiation, and increasing salary transparency.</i> | | | |



SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR A CONVERSATION WITH YOUR TEAM:

Once your team has filled this out individually, go through each item on this checklist and discuss how people responded.

If your team said “yes” to an item:

Great! Your organization is taking important steps to prioritize equity and diversity and it’s being noticed. Consider asking your team whether most people in the organization are aware of these steps. Are there things you could do to make sure that others — both inside and outside your organization — are more aware? Transparency and communication are important aspects of promoting equity.

If your team said “no” to an item:

This is an opportunity to boost your organization’s equity. Discuss with your team whether these items are appropriate for your organization to address, and brainstorm how your organization might make progress. Be sure to consider possible barriers to change (culture, policies) and who needs to have a seat at the table for changes to be made inclusively and effectively (executive team, HR, those most impacted by the changes). Remember that leading with equity requires thinking critically about how the same policies can impact people differently, and making sure that your organization offers people with diverse needs and backgrounds opportunities to perform at their best.

If your team disagreed on their ratings for an item:

This may be a sign that your organization has some work to do to ensure equity is actually being experienced by all. Engage your team in an honest and open discussion about their reasons for their responses. Create a safe environment for the discussion and be sure to use the 4 core behaviors for better conversations. Importantly, avoid being defensive and focus on listening to understand. During the conversation, try to get to the root of the problem. Are there policies in place that some people are not aware of? Are there ways that the organization could be more transparent about these issues? Are there implicit assumptions being made? Do people with different backgrounds, leadership levels, or identities report having different experiences or perspectives?

If your team said “not sure” to an item:

If your team is not sure whether certain policies, practices, and opportunities are in place at your organization, then it’s time to do some investigating. Ask your team to elaborate on why they said “not sure” and also use this as an opportunity to find out what your organization has actually done. It’s possible that your organization has not discussed these issues yet. It’s also possible that your organization has already taken some steps on these issues, but that these steps haven’t been updated lately or communicated broadly. Once you learn what’s been done (or what hasn’t been done), review the relevant previous sections above to figure out next steps.

ENGAGE YOUR EXECUTIVE TEAM IN RADICAL REFLECTION:

Your organization's EDI efforts are exponentially improved when your Executive Team is aware of, and committed to, recognizing their own biases. **Consider asking your Executive Team to individually and then collectively reflect on these 3 questions, keeping in mind that radical reflection is the road to building a culture of diversity and inclusion.**

THREE QUESTIONS FOR YOUR EXECUTIVE TEAM

| QUESTION | CONSIDERATIONS | REFLECTION NOTES |
|--|--|------------------|
| How self-aware are you? | <i>How well do you know your own identities and cultural background? Gender, race, and many other dimensions of diversity make a difference in people's experiences. How does your background influence how you experience the world? In what settings do you share aspects of this background? How aware are you of your biases?</i> | |
| Who is in power in your organization? | <i>How are authority and power used? How are they distributed in your organization? Note other dimensions of diversity, inclusion, and equity as you go up and down the hierarchy. What might you need to do to shift power so that diverse voices shape strategy, policy, and execution in your organization? What opportunities are there for different types of people to speak up and show up? For example, look at who leads teams. Determine how various tasks and roles are allocated and what rewards are based on.</i> | |
| What internal conversations have you had? | <i>How do you discuss creating a culture of inclusiveness and equity? Are diverse ideas being incorporated into your organization's mission, values, design, policies, and norms? What positive adaptations might you make to systems, policies, and mindsets that are in your sphere of control? How might you foster more equity by activating the lessons from your own and others' lived experiences and histories? What steps are you taking to note how privilege is distributed, and how this maintains intergroup hierarchies?</i> | |

Powered by decades of our global research and in-the-field experience, our [Equity, Diversity & Inclusion solutions](#) can equip your leaders to work together more effectively, move beyond bias, and build a stronger organizational culture.

UNLEARN:

THE “**QUANTITY OVER
QUALITY**” MODE OF
COMMUNICATION



UNLEARN: The “Quantity Over Quality” Mode of Communication

Embedded Belief: *To communicate well, leaders must talk more.*

Bold New Belief: *To communicate well, leaders must facilitate better conversations.*

Effective communication remains foundational for a healthy organizational culture. During times of change and disruption, leaders rightly should want to communicate with their teams, and do so more often. In today’s unpredictable environment, as information changes and decisions are made quickly, clear communication with employees is critical.

However, in this drive to communicate, **most of us naturally concentrate on writing and speaking in ways that ensure we’re understood. Few of us focus nearly as much on listening.** Many leaders push key messages, their own ideas or agenda, and final plans. When employees are dispersed and communication is virtual, communication is even more likely to be a one-way street. Video messages, virtual town halls, and online meetings are all forums through which leaders can talk more and listen less.

Unfortunately, this approach gets in the way of deeply understanding what’s going on throughout the organization, or in the environment. **Only through effective all-way communication can insights be unearthed and best solutions emerge.**

If you can unlearn the “quantity over quality” mode of communication and drive higher-caliber conversations in your organization, you can shift your culture and accelerate positive business outcomes.

The Risk: Missed Opportunities and Failed Strategies

A generation ago, leaders at the top had more information about how to run the business and compete in the marketplace than anyone else in the organization. They would often impart that knowledge and provide direction through hierarchical structures as needed. In today's organizations, however, insights are spread across functions, groups, and levels, and frontline employees have access to information critical to the business.

Now, in this time of crisis and change, it's even more important that the top of the organization is connected to what's going on throughout the organization. And employees (many who are literally isolated) need to know that senior leadership is making decisions based on reality. Effective all-way communication is necessary to uncover the best solutions and continue moving forward.

Think of conversation as the underlying operating system of your organization. Key business priorities — such as adapting systems, improving logistics, strategic planning, driving innovation or growth, and investing in diverse talent and culture — are like individual software applications that run on it. Just as with a computer, the success of the individual priorities is reliant on the adaptability, responsiveness, and capacity of the overall operating system.

If you fail to prioritize your operating system — the conversations that occur within your organization — you'll sacrifice forward progress and success. **Top-down messaging and poor-quality conversations foil the best strategies, frustrate employees, demotivate top talent, block opportunities, and stall change and transformation.**



VIRTUAL TIP

ELIMINATE DISTRACTIONS:

Cover your keyboard with a notebook, turn your phone over, and close your email when you're in your next one-on-one conversation or group meeting. Doing what you can to minimize interruptions or the temptation to accomplish other tasks will surely improve your active listening skills.

Pivot Point: High-Quality Conversations

At many organizations, the quality of conversations has evolved little in the last 25 years, even as the competitive environment has changed dramatically. The leaders-must-talk-more mindset is hard to shake.

CCL's research has shown there are a few specific conversational behaviors that can make an outsized difference, and anyone — from the CEO to entry-level workers — can learn and practice these behaviors. Better conversations are built on 4 core skills:

- **Listening to understand.** There are multiple levels of information we must tune into during conversations. Paying attention to the *facts, emotions, and values* will unlock a deeper understanding of what's truly going on.
- **Asking powerful questions.** Powerful questions prompt unscripted discussion, uncover insights, and move people beyond their original understanding of a topic or issue. Questions like, *How do you think this will change the customer experience? What's another way we could respond?* or *How do you want your team to feel when you announce the new initiative?* are likely to spark more reflection and lead to greater insights than asking for a nailed-down plan.
- **Balancing challenge and support.** Challenge can stress-test ideas and uncover unexamined assumptions. But taken too far, offered at the wrong moment, or perceived as punishment, challenge will cause damage. Providing support includes assuring people that they've been heard and that their feelings and values are understood.
- **Establishing next steps and accountability.** Connect conversations to action by establishing next steps and accountability. This ensures that the value, insights, and decisions created by a better conversation aren't lost. Simple techniques can help people move from overwhelmed and confused to empowered and ready to take the "first, right, next step."

While these principles may seem unsurprising at first glance, our research has found that most of us have significant deficiencies in one or more of these areas, and people who practice all 4 of these skills are rated as more effective by their superiors than those who don't.¹⁵

When leaders can learn these skills and facilitate better conversations, communication flows freely and accurately up, down, and across the org chart. They become better equipped to engage their people, understand and respond quickly to changing needs, and drive accountability. Teams perform at a high level; they're able to create, innovate, and strategically lead your organization into the future.

Building conversational capacity — and unlearning the "quantity over quality" mode of communication — is also a powerful mechanism for unlearning the other beliefs that are blocking needed change. When conversations are richer and more nuanced, and people listen to each other, they uncover assumptions, objections, reservations, and barriers. They discuss difficult topics and explore possibilities. High-quality conversations are the foundation and pivot point for building a more resilient workforce and enabling an effective equity, diversity, and inclusion strategy.



VIRTUAL TIP

CHANGE UP THE SCENE: In larger group meetings, encouraging the use of chat when asking for input or encouraging questions is a great way to enable hesitant participants to chime in with questions or feedback that they might otherwise not share. Chat enables them to be more intentional about the wording and gives others the chance to review and process, then react.



RESOURCES TO HELP YOU GET STARTED

CHECK YOUR LISTENING

Active listening isn't easy. Daily pressures and demands often overtake our work, leaving limited time and energy to focus on simply listening during one-on-one conversations or in group meetings. Active listening allows you to thoroughly absorb, understand, respond, and retain what's being said.

To hone your active listening skills, review this checklist before your next meeting. Be aware of your behaviors and whether you followed the 6 elements of active listening. Use your answers to set an intention for better listening in subsequent meetings and conversations.

Meeting:

Date:

Active Listening Checklist

| | | YES | SOMETIMES | NO |
|---|----------------------------------|-----|-----------|----|
| Pay Attention: Allow "wait time" before responding. Don't cut people off, finish their sentences, or start formulating your answer before they've finished. Recognize your body language as well as your frame of mind. Be focused on the moment, and operate from a place of respect as the listener. | Did I focus my attention? | | | |
| Withhold Judgment. Active listening requires an open mind. As a listener and a leader, be open to new ideas, new perspectives, and new possibilities when practicing active listening. | Did I withhold judgment? | | | |
| Reflect. When you're the listener, don't assume that you understand someone correctly — or that they know you've heard them. Mirror information and emotions by periodically paraphrasing key points. | Did I reflect? | | | |
| Clarify. Don't be shy when it comes to asking questions about any issue that is ambiguous or unclear. As the listener, if you have doubt or confusion about what your coachee has said, say something like, "Let me see if I'm clear. Are you talking about ...?" or "Wait a minute. I didn't follow you." | Did I clarify? | | | |
| Summarize. Restating key themes as the conversation proceeds confirms and solidifies your grasp of the other person's point of view. It also helps both parties to be clear on mutual responsibilities and follow-up. Briefly summarize what you've understood while practicing active listening, and ask the other person to do the same. | Did I summarize? | | | |
| Share. Active listening is first about understanding the other person, then about being understood as the listener. As you gain a clearer understanding of the other person's perspective, you can begin to introduce your ideas, feelings, and suggestions. You might talk about a similar experience you had or share an idea that was triggered by a comment made previously in the conversation. | Did I share? | | | |

LISTEN TO ASK POWERFUL QUESTIONS

In your next one-on-one meeting, don't assume you know what the conversation is about or what path it should take. Truly listen to understand, allowing space for others to think, reflect, and express themselves.

Use the chart below to take notes, intentionally listening for underlying **facts, feelings, and values**. Can you identify whether they tend to focus on the situation, their emotions related to the situation, or what is most important to them about the situation? Recognizing what their communication preferences are will help inform which questions will be most powerful to ask. The column with the most blank spaces should be where you focus your questions. In this chart example, this leader should consider asking: *How are you feeling about having to train this new employee during such a hectic time?*

Meeting:

Date:

LISTENING CHART

| FACTS | FEELINGS | VALUES |
|---|---|--|
| EXAMPLE: <i>We're launching a new product in 2 weeks.</i> | EXAMPLE: <i>Concern there is not enough time. Anxiety about all that needs to get done.</i> | EXAMPLE: <i>Quality. Attention to detail. Brand integrity.</i> |
| EXAMPLE: <i>Training new employee on new software.</i> | | EXAMPLE: <i>Efficiency.</i> |
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ESTABLISH TEAM NORMS

To have better conversations, it's important that teams have a shared understanding of what's expected of them and an opportunity to provide feedback on the behaviors that they think will lead to success. Encourage managers and project leaders to incorporate discussions about team norms into their routines when beginning a new project or pulling together a new group. Instead of scheduling an official "Team Norms Meeting," use the activity below during one or more of the team's first gatherings.

Meeting:

Date:

10 STEPS TO ESTABLISHING TEAM NORMS

| | | Complete | Notes |
|---|--|----------|-------|
| 1 | Spend a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting asking your team to share attributes of the worst team they've served on. They can share verbally or via chat. Any group counts — a work team, a volunteer group, a sports team — as long as the members depended on each other to produce results. | | |
| 2 | Next, have each member reflect on what made that experience so terrible. Were the attributes they listed linked to specific behaviors? If yes, ask them to share those behaviors verbally or via chat. | | |
| 3 | Next, do the same activity for the best team experience they've had. As with the negative experience, each team member should spend a few minutes reflecting on the attributes and behaviors that made the experience so good. | | |
| 4 | What themes have emerged from these exercises? Based on the most common responses, ask team members to suggest behaviors and norms that would contribute to the current team's success. Pay attention to the most relevant issues or actions that could affect the team's biggest challenges. Be sure to keep track of suggestions on a screen or large sheet of paper that all team members can view. | | |
| 5 | Discuss the suggestions as a group and decide as a group which ones the team can support and adhere to. Flag any concerns or challenges that the team thinks they may struggle with. Even if you can't identify a solid solution, doing this keeps reality at the forefront. | | |
| 6 | Discuss how to respond to a team member who doesn't follow the norms. What's the mechanism for dealing with this situation? Ideally, the team members will take ownership of team norms, calling out inconsistencies and violations rather than expecting the team leader to police the process. | | |
| 7 | Transfer the team's list of "must-do" behaviors into a document so all team members have access to it. Your team may choose to post the list of team norms electronically or in the regular meeting room for quick reference. | | |

CLARIFY ACCOUNTABILITY

The quality of the communication that takes place in a meeting depends on the actions that it inspires. Encourage leaders to create a list of standard questions that meeting organizers and attendees should review at the end of every meeting to inspire accountability. These questions will likely vary based on the organization, but this checklist is a good place to start:

| | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|--|------------|--------------|-----------|-----------------|
| Meeting: | | | | | |
| Date: | | | | | |
| Meeting Review Checklist | | | | | |
| | | Yes | Notes | No | Why Not? |
| 1 | We achieved the desired outcome for this meeting. | | | | |
| 2 | I understand why my perspective was valuable and needed in this conversation. | | | | |
| 3 | I understand the commitments I made and what's needed to move forward. | | | | |
| 4 | I understand the consequences of not completing my commitments in the prescribed time frame. | | | | |
| 5 | We've scheduled our next meeting or have another plan in place to review progress. | | | | |

Upgrade your culture and make learning stick with [Better Conversations Every Day™](#), our proprietary, powerful, and proven methodology for developing conversation skills.

CONCLUSION

Leaders and the organizations they serve must prioritize the capacity to grow, adapt, and evolve. It's become more clear — in this moment in history than ever before — that leadership never stops.

Through decades of research and experience with clients, CCL has identified themes, patterns, tools, and models that help leaders, organizations, and communities to **learn and unlearn** what it takes to transform their cultures.

Transforming culture isn't simple, but we know it's possible.

We know that a **resilient workforce**, a commitment to **equity, diversity, and inclusion**, and **better conversations** every day are powerful ingredients of a strong organizational culture.

We know that when outdated beliefs are replaced with **new understanding and bold action**, leaders can navigate the crisis of the moment, shape what comes next, and **ignite transformational change**.



READY TO TAKE THE **NEXT STEP?**

At CCL, we believe in the power of leaders to ignite transformational change and navigate the crisis of the moment while preparing for the changed world that comes next.

If you're ready to unlearn the cultural beliefs that are getting in the way of organizational change, CCL is ready to partner with you and help you thrive in the face of disruption. Our leadership solutions — offered in a variety of modalities including face-to-face, virtual, and licensed formats — can be customized to meet the unique needs of your organization.

Start your journey to cultural transformation with leadership solutions designed to address topics of critical importance in this moment.

RESILIENCE

The hardships placed upon your people during turbulent times can be transformative, but only if handled correctly and with a resilient mindset. Burnout doesn't have to be inevitable. Resilience — maintaining equilibrium under pressure — is one of the most important skills for leaders at all levels to master. A culture that educates team members on ways to maintain resilience and supports those practices from the top down will reduce turnover from burnout and keep your team members engaged and productive.

[Help your leaders avoid burnout, and instead, burn bright with The Resilience Advantage.](#)

EQUITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Our Equity, Diversity & Inclusion practice is rooted in decades of research and experience developing leaders representing different identity groups, as well as understanding diversity at both the team and organization levels. We can craft a strategic approach to diversity and inclusion for your business, customizing our content on network analysis, social identity, and leading across differences for initiatives tailored specifically to your organization's unique context.

[Go beyond bias awareness, and make REAL progress on your Equity, Diversity & Inclusion initiatives.](#)

BETTER CONVERSATIONS

We've distilled learnings from the 20,000+ hours of 1:1 coaching we deliver each year to clients around the globe into a simple yet potent approach that's accessible and applicable far beyond a formal coaching conversation. Our proprietary, powerful, and proven methodology for developing conversational skills is called Better Conversations Every Day™ (BCE). We can partner with you through the phases of the culture change journey, helping you navigate key choice points, and can lead the experience for you or equip you to leverage your own internal resources.

[Upgrade your culture with Better Conversations Every Day™.](#)

LONG-TERM CULTURE TRANSFORMATION

While we know that big change begins with small steps and we believe that resilience, EDI, and better conversations are the most impactful steps you can take immediately, lasting cultural transformation is a journey. Embark upon that journey by partnering with our organizational leadership group to discover the unique values and beliefs that drive your leadership strategy and influence your business priorities.

[Discover more about how to create and maintain an interdependent culture in your organization.](#)

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Center for
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The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL)® is a top-ranked, global, nonprofit provider of leadership development. Over the past 50 years, we've worked with organizations of all sizes from around the world, including more than 2/3 of the Fortune 1000. Our cutting-edge solutions are steeped in extensive research and our work with hundreds of thousands of leaders at all levels.