Responsible Management of Shifts in Work Modes – Values for a Post Pandemic Future, Volume 1

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Responsible Management of Shifts in Work Modes – Values for a Post Pandemic Future, Volume 1

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emerald
PUBLISHING

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This volume is dedicated to all the overlooked workers and the overworked people in a pandemic.
The experience of COVID-19 has been life-changing for most, but in a special way the workers who have laboured to keep their values upright have positively touched lives more deeply than can be acknowledged.
This book is for them.

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Foreword

Two perhaps shared characteristics of major disruptions are that, firstly, they are unearthing weaknesses of the status quo ante, much more than causing those weaknesses and that, secondly, they test our resilience while providing both opportunities and challenges. Work values are at the heart of both of those characteristics as they can be the root cause of weaknesses that become apparent with disruption, and they are a driver of organisational resilience and its capacity to innovate so that the opportunities disruptions hold can be spotted and seized and the challenges they provide can be mitigated.

Given their outstanding track record on researching and working with executives on these topics, Kemi Ogunyemi and Adaora I. Onaga are uniquely positioned to help us reflect on those inherent connections between values in general and work values specifically. Furthermore, the integrity with which they conduct their work allows for valuable insights into the normativity of work values and how they relate to an organisation's capacity to respond to disruptions in a productive way.

And disruption we have seen over the last years. The speed, depth and breadth at which the COVID-19 pandemic had propelled us into the unknown was overwhelming to say the least. I had written in early 2020 that we have been propelled into a state of hyper-VUCA as we experienced much heightened Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity. While I still think this was an accurate depiction, I was wrong on two counts. At the time I had underestimated the duration and severity of the pandemic, but at the same time I had over-estimated the negative impact it would generate on our global community. Today I think that by and large we are coming through this pandemic surprisingly well, we are strong, we are resilient. Of course, tremendous human losses and suffering have occurred, and each corona death is an immeasurable tragedy. Authorities have not informed globally and transparently, as is their obligation, at the very beginning of the pandemic; governments around the world were painfully slow at times in debating the economic cost of a lockdown versus the lives it could save as if there was a choice to be made between the two; or the availability of vaccines still is unacceptably uneven around the world. But the world has not collapsed; states have not failed; supplies with basic goods and services have been upkept; while health systems have partially collapsed in parts of the world, they have also recovered; and most people around the world acted with discipline and solidarity in following strict rules that were imposed to slow down the spread of the disease.

These rules meant for millions of employees to no longer work in an office but to stay at home and somehow create a productive working environment in their homes and get on with their jobs. Remarkably they did. We have learned over the last couple of years that most people who can do their job anywhere, will do their job anywhere. Employees around the globe stayed productive, focused and willing to contribute to their organisations when they were forced to work from home; most did not view working from home as an invitation to do less, most did not drop in productivity and most were using their newfound autonomy responsibly.

Most employees welcomed working from home for saving commuting time, being more flexible in organising the workday and gaining a feeling of empowerment from autonomy. However, this adaptation has not been without challenges, and shifting work values are closely linked to both, how we master those challenges and also how we best benefit from the welcomed aspects of working from home.

Without a physical separation of work and private life we need to reevaluate how we want to determine office hours. Increased flexibility for employees regarding their working hours is great but understandably employers want to be confident that they can reach out to an employee when needed. Work-related mental health problems that have been on the rise already before the pandemic will have to be monitored more diligently as a healthy work–life balance is harder to achieve when work and personal life is increasingly blended, overlapping and interwoven throughout the working day. A culture of caring for each other seems harder to maintain in a virtual workspace. I also observe very clearly that the initial excitement of working from home has worn off somewhat. Many of us miss the social interaction, the coffee breaks, the informal meeting opportunities, the little ad hoc conversations that can solve big problems, all of which are very difficult to replicate in a video conference. Many workers really want to go to the office. Not every day, not on a fixed schedule, but they want to have the option for doing so.

It is, however, not only employees who need to adapt to these new circumstances but also management must learn to lead remotely. In fact, my observation is that those who have encountered the greatest difficulties when moving to a home office environment were middle managers of large organisations. They suddenly experienced that walking the floor and checking that everyone in the team was doing alright was no longer possible. Be it to genuinely offer support or to have a look over everyone's shoulder, many middle managers thought of this as a vital part of their leadership role and then found things running just fine without their physical presence, direct support and supervision.

There are also financial implications for both the business and the individual employee. Who, for example, is responsible for ensuring that health and safety standards at the workplace are maintained in a home office environment? When a bar stool at the kitchen counter becomes the home office, it is not difficult to see an employee developing back problems in a decade or so, but who will cover the cost for a healthy home office environment? There are also facility managers intensely looking at ways to downsize their office space. Employees working from home can create substantial cost savings but are there corresponding plans to pass

on some of those savings to employees so they can afford bigger housing that includes a dedicated home office space?

These are but a few themes where strong work values are needed to drive decisions by which all of those people who create value in an organisation are respected, and their contributions are appreciated. Work values are also at the heart of our activities at the Humanistic Management Network. Respect for our dignity, integrating ethical considerations in management decisions and the ongoing exchange with stakeholders are in fact the three main pillars of how we define Humanistic Management. We strongly believe that businesses will succeed in competitive market environments and overcome disruption when they step up efforts to strengthen their positive impact towards a more equitable and more sustainable planet. We know that strong work values, shared throughout an organisation, are foundational for those efforts.

Undoubtably the world would be a better place without the COVID-19 pandemic, but what a waste it would be to not use the disruptions it has caused to also reflect on the values that drive us at work. Simply returning to the status quo ante would mean giving up the opportunities it holds to create more meaningful workplaces in businesses that better serve us all, and this book can help us in doing so.

I therefore want to wholeheartedly congratulate all authors and the editors for writing such an insightful, timely and relevant book, and I am wishing you, the readers, plentiful inspiration and insights for using values to manage the new shifts in work modes in ways that are beneficial to your organisation as well as all of its stakeholders.

Ernst von Kimakowitz
Co-founder and Managing Director, Humanistic Management Network