



On Leadership

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It's Our Why, Not the Where

Everyone is trying to figure out the workplace these days. And it's not about the *where*—it's all about the *why*.

For employees, it's about community and opportunity—how they can be part of something bigger than themselves and receive the coaching, mentoring, and sponsorship they need to advance. For organizations, it's about connection, commitment, and culture—how things get done.

To be honest, my own thinking on this has evolved. Physical, virtual, hybrid—I used to have an old-school view. Earlier in my career, when I served a West Coast investment bank, I noticed that the CEO usually looked a bit disheveled by midafternoon. Then I discovered that the CEO routinely came into the office at 4:00 in the morning—and sometimes after his daily jog. He came in two and a half hours before the stock market opened because that was the way he liked to operate, including monitoring the overseas markets.

This mentality stayed with me. When I first joined Korn Ferry, I made it a habit to be in the office by 6:00 or 6:30 each morning. But today, my thinking has absolutely gone 180 degrees. It's possible to be all-in, all the time, without being physically present. After all, it's not about activity; it's about accomplishment.

Now, as we figure out what comes next, it's time to unearth and eliminate outdated thinking. If we are

overly focused on location, we're applying an old mentality to a new world.

It's like when we were in junior high and high school, and the day started in homeroom, where everybody had to be at a desk so attendance could be taken. Ironically, though, it was a positive experience back then and for one important reason. Homeroom wasn't a class—it was a "horizontal community" of students who often were not in classes together during the rest of the day.

Today we need to make sure we have that "horizontal homeroom" so that community and opportunity are omnipresent and available to everyone, no matter where or how they work. There is no one-size-fits-all solution that applies to every organization—or even within an organization.

Everywhere, the circuit breakers have been tripped. Now it's the big reset—including where and how we



work. As we're all discovering, there are people who want (and need) to continue working remotely—in fact, recent surveys have indicated that some of them might even quit if their employers aren't flexible.

At the same time, there are people who view returning to the office as a long-awaited escape from isolation. *I'm lonely.... I don't feel connected....* We've all heard these comments. I remember speaking with someone several months ago who told me through tears, "My life is all in one room—I feel boxed in."

As we move forward, it's not *either/or*—today's workplace is all about *and*.

The center of gravity is shifting from a place of work to a location for collaboration. It's headspace and heart space. The *why* will always point to the *where*. Here are some thoughts:

Words motivate, actions inspire. "Our people can work from anywhere." That may be the message spoken. But if the tone, nonverbal cues, word choice, and actions convey a different meaning—for example, those who come in almost every day get recognized or advanced more than peers who work remotely—guess what people will pay attention to? In other words, we

need to say what we mean—and mean what we say. And it starts with the leader.

The importance of being SEEN. No matter why, how, or where they work, people need to be SEEN. That means *self-awareness*, starting with the leader; *empathy* for others; *energizing* people; and *never* leaving anyone behind. We must see others equally—no matter where they are.

Mentoring—here, there, and everywhere. Mentoring, coaching, and sponsorship—each uniquely opens the door to new opportunities. As an executive shared with me recently, "Coaches speak *to* you; mentors speak *with* you; and sponsors speak *for* you." In the past, people often found mentors, coaches, and sponsors among those they interacted with in person. But not anymore. Connections can be made everywhere. We need to re-up on mentorship, coaching, and sponsorship—broadly and for everyone—here, there, and everywhere.

Employees yearn for community and opportunities, and employers thirst for commitment and connection. Culture is the bridge—a bridge we all must walk, while never forgetting that where we are is not who we are. Indeed, the *why* will lead us to the *where*. ▀

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