



# Building a Strong Culture in a Dispersed Work Environment

by **Cassandra Roth** | *Segal Benz*

Culture used to be the in-person vibe of a workplace. But today, with so many people working remotely, culture is much more than what happens when people gather in the same location—It’s an intentionally crafted experience rooted in how you treat your people. From the expectations leadership sets to the support people receive as they go about their days, culture in a dispersed work environment is a foundational element that requires ongoing maintenance to be kept in working order.

Employee benefits play a big role in building a strong culture. Employees may use their benefits for the basics, such as health care and retirement savings, but the true differentiator is when they use their benefits to fulfill their personal dreams and aspirations. Examples might include taking time away for memorable vacations; using surrogacy, fertility or adoption support to add to their families; or getting legal help when purchasing their first homes. These milestones make an impact and enrich people’s lives. Playing a role in these life-affirming moments can set you apart from other employers. Your company provided the support, and employees get to thrive. It’s a virtuous cycle that can develop and support a culture of growth and positivity—and often leads to better results at work, too. People who are happier are typically more productive—12% more, according to one study.<sup>1</sup>

Often, organizations assume that their people value and appreciate the benefits they have just because the benefits exist. But the MetLife 2024 *Employee Benefit Trends Study* states, “Nearly two-thirds (62%) of employees are not com-

pletely confident they know about all the benefits and/or workplace perks offered to them, while almost half (45%) do not fully understand their benefits package.”<sup>2</sup> Employees need reminders about what’s offered so they can use their benefits when a need is top of mind. Also, your organization likely put a lot of time and effort into carefully selecting the best benefits—but employees don’t know that unless you tell them. Showing how your benefits help employees in their day-to-day lives and sharing other aspects of total rewards are the best ways to communicate their value.

How do you communicate your benefits and total rewards in a way that connects the support you offer to the culture you’d like to cultivate? And how do you build such an envi-

## AT A GLANCE

- Now that so many employees are working hybrid schedules or remotely full-time, it may be time for employers to rethink how to build organizational cultures.
- Establishing a strong culture in a hybrid environment likely requires a new mindset and approach that emphasizes shared values, attitudes, behaviors and standards of the workplace or organization.
- Storytelling helps shape culture, and identifying an organization’s unique story is essential. Messages might include communicating how benefits support employees. Delivering the message effectively requires a communication strategy and a plan.

ronment when it seems like everyone is working in a different place?

### Your Location Is Not Your Culture

First, let's tackle the myth that a solid workplace culture requires an in-person element. We used to think that culture was what happened inside the office, but technology has made it possible for the office to be almost anywhere. This can feel overwhelming on a few levels. If the office is everywhere, what is the responsibility of the workplace to create and build healthy habits? And, if we work where we live, can we ever really leave the office?

Understandably, some workplaces have had a gut reaction to bring everyone back together in person since that's what's always worked in the past. However, people value flexibility and remote working opportunities more than ever. When offered a chance to work remotely, 87% of people take the option,<sup>3</sup> indicating a strong desire from most to work from home. While it's not known exactly how many people are working from home now (the Massachusetts Institute of Technology says there is a measurement problem), the figure is believed to be as high as 50% of the workforce.<sup>4</sup>

So if you can't depend on gathering in person to build and maintain culture, how do you do it?

### Shape Your Culture by Telling Meaningful Stories

Your culture is the shared values, attitudes, behaviors and standards of your workplace or organization. While having statements and policies about culture is an important component, these written statements are not enough to shape your culture. It's how these shared beliefs play out over the course of a day or a career that informs others of how to feel and behave at work. Sharing these experiences through stories can be a powerful way to build or change culture. In fact, as one researcher states, "People are more likely to change their lifestyles when they see a character they identify with making the same change."<sup>5</sup>

First, identify people who exemplify the culture you want to promote. Perhaps employees are struggling with stress management. Choose a few leaders or other respected individuals in the organization who practice healthy habits and highlight their stories with a campaign that connects the dots

between excellent work, lifestyle behaviors and the support they receive from the workplace.

You can tell these stories in a variety of ways. It can be done as a "day in the life" campaign, or it can focus on one area of culture. For example, if one of your values is community, you can craft a campaign that shows how workers create community both inside and outside of work.

Perhaps you have a volunteer day that can be featured in this campaign or an initiative led by an employee resource group to highlight. Maybe one of your employees leads a work group and also volunteers where they live, and your organization's policies and benefits help create extra time to volunteer. Showing how the organization embodies a value and supports it beyond the workplace is a testament to your culture.

Consider this scenario: Alex is a working parent who is juggling high-level responsibilities at work and big, important moments at home. You can tell them all about resources like well-being and lifestyle spending accounts. But what they hear is, "Here's another thing to do." And with a never-ending to-do list, that's not particularly helpful.

Instead, you can have a meaningful conversation while sharing the support you offer as an employer. It helps to be conversational and share real-life examples when possible. You might say something to Alex like, "Do you know Morgan in accounting? They also have a three-year-old. They block their calendar on Friday mornings to take a yoga class after day care drop-off and pay for the class with the company-provided funds in their lifestyle spending account. Isn't that great?" That's a much more relatable experience, and you've still shared all the same details. You've also planted the seed that not only is it OK to use your benefits this way, but it's celebrated and encouraged by leadership. Alex will be more likely to use their benefits if usage is modeled and reinforced by having this information shared either in conversation or through communications. Help business partners and managers in human resources facilitate these conversations by creating talking points that include what to look and listen for as well as real-life scenarios to share.

The stories you tell help mold and hold the working environment. Whether that's through real individuals' testimonials or fictional scenarios, the most important element is telling a story that sticks.<sup>6</sup>

### Showcase Your Support by Highlighting Benefits

You know you want to use storytelling and testimonials, but what should your communications focus on to build a great culture? Consider centering your story around the support you offer your people. Benefits that go beyond basic health and wealth offerings can be strong foundations for your culture.

The following are examples of benefits that employees may appreciate.

- Education and tuition benefits (these may be particularly appealing to younger workers)
- Expanded mental health support that includes traditional elements, such as counseling, and new methods of support, such as meditation and sleep habit apps
- Chronic condition management programs that ease the burden of coordinating medical care and day-to-day needs for conditions such as diabetes and hypertension
- Inclusive benefits for a variety of needs. This could be determined based on participation in affinity groups, such as those for LGBTQIA+ or neurodivergent individuals, or specific to your population's health needs. For example, if employees have a high level of musculoskeletal issues, highlighting those benefits that may address those concerns can be especially helpful.

To decide what to highlight, take a look at your data and ask the following questions.

- Who are we hoping to attract and retain now?
- What is the current makeup of the organization by age and location?
- How healthy are employees?
- Do people living in certain areas face particularly high cost-of-living pressures?
- What benefits would most improve employees' quality of life?

By answering these questions and others, you can shape personas of your people and develop meaningful communications that connect the most valuable benefits to those who need them most.

By making benefits a part of the culture, you communicate that you care about employees as people. This often-re-

peated statement frequently rings true: "If you take care of your people, they'll take care of your business."<sup>7</sup>

### Connecting Your Culture and Your Benefits by Communicating the Total Package

OK, we're rounding the bases: We know that storytelling is powerful and great benefits can have a big impact on supporting workers. Third base is connecting the two to influence how people feel. As an organization, you've put a lot of thought and effort into a total rewards package. It's likely this package has been assembled with great care and consideration around employees' needs, their contributions and the organization's plans. Tell that story.

It can start with a total rewards philosophy. You may already have a total rewards philosophy or statement that is exclusive to leadership but not shared with all employees. Build on that leadership-facing statement, but make it people-facing and share it with your employees. This philosophy should answer questions like: Why are your people here? What does your organization value? How has it decided to reward its people? What should your employees know about how much your organization cares?

Layer that with testimonials about what's offered. Who's knocking it out of the park and really making good use of their benefits? What about that person who had a life-changing experience thanks to their benefits? How have people used their total rewards to retire? What is the thread in all of these stories that helps employees bring their best selves to work? Communicating these stories is critical to culture building because happiness, productivity and flow are contagious.<sup>8</sup> When you're building and maintaining a culture across in-person, hybrid and fully remote environments, it's likely best to be proactive in sharing stories. These stories should spread the word about the culture you want to hold, and they should encourage people in all locations to use their benefits, not just the people who are working on site.

Going on one run doesn't make you ready to tackle a marathon. To compete in that race, you need to put in the miles and build your endurance over time. Culture is no different. Saying you have a culture or stating what your culture is won't build the foundation to support the culture you want to have. Culture isn't what you say, it's what you do—and how everyone behaves and

acts. It's important to live and breathe the culture and communicate it on a regular basis to ensure that it can succeed.

This can feel foreign, since much of past culture building revolved around office walls or campus boundaries. The days of gathering in a conference room to celebrate a birthday or getting together after work for dinner and drinks may be gone in many workplaces.<sup>9</sup> And it's true that without social opportunities in the workplace, the world has become a lonelier place. In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General released an 82-page report, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community*,<sup>10</sup> which prompted many to assume that the answer might be a return to offices and on-site work.

But hybrid and remote work has many benefits that a lot of people are not willing to give up. Conveniences such as being available for school pickup or the ability to schedule a midday doctor appointment without taking a whole day off from work have positively contributed to people's mental and physical health. All signs (and studies<sup>11</sup>) point to the future of work continuing to include hybrid or remote options. It's increasingly important to build a culture that exists both inside and outside a physical workplace. That means less in-person demonstrations of culture and more intentional outreach to share your values, making telling your story critical.

### Keep the Communications Flowing With a Detailed Strategy and Plan

Once you've got the foundation built, it's time to set up a plan. Which communications channels are most effective for your population? Do you need to use multiple methods of communication? How often is too often? How much is not enough?

All these questions should be answered in a strategy session that leads to a communications plan. Depending on your organization, this might mean monthly emails and quarterly digital campaigns. Or, you may need to incorporate some traditional ways of communicating, such as on-location fliers, in-person handouts and home mailers.<sup>12</sup> If you have a variety of people in different locations at your workplace, it may be a combination of methods of outreach, such as the following.

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- Provide printed communications for people who don't work at computers.
- Send materials to homes for family members/dependents.
- Create responsive websites that can be easily accessed anytime, anywhere.

The most important thing to do is what's most effective for your organization. It comes down to knowing your employees and supporting them best, both through their benefits and how they are communicated.

### What to Expect When Crafting and Communicating a Positive Culture

The side effects of a healthy culture—and sharing its success—may include the following.

- **Improved retention.** Organizations with employees who feel a sense of belonging at work see a 62% increase in employee-estimated tenure.<sup>13</sup>
- **Contagious productivity.** Happy and productive employees enter a “flow state”<sup>14</sup>—They're in the zone, and they're happy to be there.
- **Reduced health care costs.** Since 75% of medical costs are due to preventable conditions,<sup>15</sup> promoting a culture of well-being can lead to significant cost savings in addition to better, healthier outcomes for employees.

It's up to your organization to define and maintain culture in a dispersed work environment. And that's great news, because it's within your power to create a strong story that shows your people how much they're valued and how their work aligns with a bigger purpose. So as you begin your journey to build a culture that's accessible anywhere, start with this question: What story will you tell to connect your people? 

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