

Preparing the workplace for 2021: 5 tips from people leaders

FIG 1. BUILDING CONFIDENCE



Useful insights and practical tips for supporting teams and individuals moving forward.

 **Culture Amp**



It's no secret that 2020 disrupted the world of work. We've all had to adapt, experiment, and become increasingly vulnerable. Fortunately, it's a new year, and the challenges of 2020 have provided a lot of insight to help us navigate the future.

While every individual and organization has faced unique hurdles, there are common learnings that can help us all move forward and build a better future of work.

After significant losses and a hit to the economy, organizations are faced with a critical balance to strike between rebuilding business success and supporting weary individuals. The same strategies won't work in these new circumstances, so we must consider new approaches. But to be effective, we should start at the top. Organizations with highly effective managers are 3x more likely to be on track to meet or exceed post-COVID business goals.

In this guide, we'll hear from five industry thought leaders preparing for what lies ahead. By bringing together various perspectives – including a CEO, head of talent & DEI, and multiple people leaders – we've compiled five approaches and considerations for a successful 2021.

1. Hang on for a bit

Shannon Ferguson is the Head of People at Blueboard. As a trained social worker, her HR work involves thinking about how to create a work environment that feels personalized, safe, and stable for individuals to bring their whole selves.

“My background and social work influence how I do HR. As we look into 2021, it’s going to be a bit more of the same for a while. We still face a lot of the same challenges, and there’s a level of uncertainty that we have to acknowledge. Everything going on in the world is influencing and impacting employees, so resilience is critical as we enter the new year.”

Shannon acknowledges that uncertainty has also led to some positive developments that have pushed many people to consider their personal values in a more profound way.

“When you’re spending more time isolated at home and shifting your whole way of living, you start asking yourself questions and as humans. We’ve been thinking about our values and how they tie into our work for a long time, but it’s never been clearer than it has in the last several months, and that’s just going to continue.

We’re all asking ourselves these big questions about what motivates, inspires, and engages us and reimagining our lives accordingly. As we enter this new year and see change on the horizon, we start to feel optimistic about vaccines and a return to what used to make us happy. But we have to acknowledge that there are also new things we’ve incorporated into our ways of living, and there’s still going to be uncertainty for a little while. This year we’ll be asking a lot of bigger questions about who we are and what matters to us, and then looking at how to incorporate that into the new world order.

FIG 2. RE-EVALUATE AND RE-ENERGIZE



“It’s going to remain uncertain for a good part of your 2021 planning, so team leaders should use this time to help people identify what’s driving them.”

— Shannon Ferguson, Head of People, Bluebird

My main advice is to hang on for a bit longer. It’s going to remain uncertain for a good part of your 2021 planning, so team leaders should use this time to help people identify what’s driving them. This is an old social work maxim, but start where the person is – where your employee is – and recognize that everyone on your team is coming from different places and perspectives.

When thinking about what lies ahead, it’s critical to recognize that everybody has different starting points, energy levels, and demands on their daily life. Find individual ways to recognize achievements and motivate your team about the tasks ahead rather than merely trudging forward.”

2. Forget the old model

Marrick McDonald is the President of the 700 member Toronto chapter of the Associated Students Supply Chain Management. Starting on the front lines as a forklift driver, Marrick worked his way up and now oversees 24 warehouses across Canada.

“We’re all looking for stability in these unstable times. When I talk to my leaders and the facilities that I manage, I don’t focus on large problems. Instead of looking at it as a mountain, I try to see a million small stones instead. And that’s what we have in front of us looking into the next year. I’m focused on building stability, and that starts with the individual.

Driving and inspiring a team starts with self-honesty – looking internally and acknowledging that we don’t know how to get where we’re going. Regardless of title or position, we need to forget hierarchy and just be honest. If you try to play the same old game, then you’ll get the same results. I always tell my team that’s not going to get us through 2021.”

As a leader, Marrick strives to model the behaviors that he wants to see in his teams. When leaders are honest and can acknowledge what they don’t know, their teams will see that it’s okay to be uncertain, which builds stronger trust and communication.



FIG 3. LISTEN AND LEARN

“As we go into 2021, we need to forget the old model. Of course, we have customers to please and financial targets to hit, but forget about the numbers. If every leader at every level is listening to their team, then they hear what they need to hear, and the results will come. Building confidence and communication within the team is what’s going to get you through the year.”

3. All roads lead back to DEI

Tara Turk-Haynes is the Vice President of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion and Talent Management at Leaf Group. Leaf Group is a parent company to lifestyle companies with a mission to help connect people to what they love like Well and Good, Livestrong, and Society6.

“It’s more important than ever for us to shift the lens and educate our people on diversity and social justice. We want to avoid going on autopilot and falling back into the way we previously did things. The status quo is not going to work, and we have to change our approach.

Talent management and D&I starts with the first interaction. We want to create an environment where individuals can prosper within our company, no matter their background. Talent acquisition and D&I extends throughout the employee lifecycle, so we’re training our people to be more cognizant at every stage.”

All roads lead back to diversity, equity, and inclusion. There are actual people behind every headline, and we need to embrace the fact that our teams are likely affected by current events. We can no longer separate the work self from the personal self – we’re whole people, and we have to take a fresh approach to give individuals the space and support they need.

“I often think about this quote from James Baldwin that says ‘I can’t believe what you say because I see what you do.’ Many people and organizations took to social media to share their views on racial injustice, but there needs to be action behind that. It doesn’t have to be grandiose, but every small action adds up to a better employee experience.”

4. Don’t be afraid to start small

Nina Bianchi is the Chief of People and Culture at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Her work involves leading a significant culture change in a historically traditional sector.

“We’re focusing on listening, understanding, and acting. Listening improves how we engage with our workforce, which leads to a stronger sense of belonging. When we begin by listening, we can uncover people-first issues and opportunities. Listening and understanding enable action, and as leaders, we’re best positioned to put our learnings into practice.”

Nina’s team focuses on [employee experience](#), employee learning, and new ways of working to improve collaboration and keep people at the center of everything they do. This includes offering employees the space to experiment and collaborate, breaking through silos, and fostering a culture of learning.

“The pandemic has really nudged bureaucracy forward. Before COVID, we were comfortable with the status quo, but now we’re forced to look at the employee experience with a customer experience lens. This has led us to reevaluate our traditional approach.

It’s the small steps that lead to big change. Working in a public agency is a long game. Showing up and trying simple changes day to day, like turning on your video and engaging face to face has been a new development in my world. Elevating voices by allowing folks to weigh in via polls or surveys, having them engage in chat functions – it’s all pretty new. But these small steps are driving big changes.”

5. Start with yourself

Rich Fernandez is the CEO of Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute (SIYLI), a program designed to support leadership development. As a trained psychologist, Rich is focused on an inside-out process of self-reflection to help leaders navigate uncertain times.

“We use a framework that’s been around for a while: I, we, and it. First, what do I need to do to take care of myself and to be my best? It’s not easy. I’ve had to reach deep and process my own thoughts and emotions about all of this. How am I exercising self-compassion, knowing that I’m doing my best? How do I think about self-care as a practice? It’s easy to lose hope in times like this, so what are you doing as a leader to spark yourself into radical self-care?”

The next layer is “we” – what are we doing as a team, as a culture, as an organization? Transparency, authenticity, and vulnerability are a big piece of that. Rich started writing weekly updates to the team, beginning each update by sharing thoughts, inspirations, and poetry that helped bolster him as a leader in these times.

“As a business, we’re considering how to plan for the future despite uncertainty. Again, authenticity and transparency are key. We created a forecast for the next six months to send to our board of directors with the framing that we can’t know what’s ahead: this is our best guess, and asking for patience as we continue to navigate all these changes.

Starting with yourself allows you to show up better for others. Only then can you take it out to the collective ‘we,’ and ultimately, the world.”

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— Rich Fernandez, CEO, Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute (SIYLI)

Cultivating resilience

Providing an excellent employee experience and taking care of your people is critical to business success. Your people are your biggest assets. As a leader, consider what you can do for your department. If we can play outside the script a little to help take care of people, that will build more nimble and resilient teams.

The approaches shared in this guide apply to every kind of workforce and employee. This year, it's critical to create a healthy work environment that cares for individuals, regardless of the context. We see that the best way to do that is to take care of yourself first.

For more tips and tactics, check out our guide to [working through crisis](#).

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