

CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN THE VIRTUAL BUSINESS WORLD

Companies today need to deliver more change faster than ever before. They're not only facing an everchanging business climate; trends in globalization and dispersed workforces are changing the way we work in ways never imagined. A recent report released by the World Economic Forum (WEF) indicated that this trend toward flexible work is "one of the biggest drivers of transformation of business models in many industries." As a result, WEF also describes it as one of the biggest concerns for organizations¹. In addition, worldwide quarantine measures to combat the coronavirus pandemic mean that workplace flexibility, which had been an aspirational strategy for many companies, suddenly became a necessity for corporate survival.

Many companies significantly changed the way they operated to weather the coronavirus storm—from ramping up production of goods for essential needs, to reinventing themselves in industries that were suddenly forced to close their doors. Overall, companies that were already grounded in solid change management practices were able to transition more smoothly. While coronavirus was certainly the most dramatic upheaval to date, it's not the first—nor will it be the last—swift transformation companies will face. Businesses can be well-poised for both planned and unplanned virtual transformations by laying a solid change management foundation and tailoring it to the unique challenges faced by virtual teams.

LAYING A SOLID CHANGE MANAGEMENT FOUNDATION

Pinnacle Performance Group has worked with many leading companies to establish change practices and support global transformational initiatives. Our approach to establishing a successful change practice rests upon several foundational components. These include (1) developing strong change leadership, (2) clearly defining processes and change impacts, (3) delivering meaningful learning and development programs, and (4) clearly communicating the vision.

Developing Strong Change Leadership

Change leadership includes developing behaviors and mindsets that support rising to the occasion in times of change. Growth mindset and perseverance can be developed and strengthened in individuals, and when ingrained in a corporate culture can enable companies to thrive when it matters most. Our approach involves teaching, supporting, and rewarding these behaviors, resulting in resilient organizations. Leaders of virtual teams face an added challenge of maintaining employee engagement due to lack of physical interaction. Virtual leaders should be particularly attentive to making themselves available, being approachable, soliciting feedback and be responsive.

¹ [World Economic Forum: Employment Trends](#)



Clearly Defining Processes and Change Impacts

Pinnacle has found that a critical component of change is clearly defining the new ways of working. When the focus is on telling people to do things differently without holistically identifying changes needed, gaps appear between the messaging and the reality of day-to-day work. This can leave employees feeling disconnected from the “new” way, continuing to work the “old” way to ensure no gaps are created by the change. Successful transformations avoid this dilemma by digging deeply to identify new behaviors, processes, and cross-functional intersection points. Bringing representative employees into the work early can provide vital feedback and help identify any gaps. As the transformation progresses, the representative employees can become advocates who evangelize the new ways of working.

When employees are working remotely and more disconnected than usual from their typical work routines and colleagues, they can have an even stronger tendency to do things the old way. Strengthen connections and reduce gaps by strategically selecting representative employees from geographically dispersed areas to offer broader perspectives, including local and regional variances, when mapping new processes and behaviors.

Delivering Meaningful Learning & Development Programs

Once processes have been defined, the training strategies should be flexible and tailored to various learning environments to get employees up to speed quickly. Leading companies recognize that transformations involve far more than technical training. Learning and development should be focused on new ways of working, in addition to new processes and skills.

Hands-on workshops, in which leaders co-create new ways of working together have proven successful with Pinnacle’s clients during transformation initiatives. When pivoting to virtual work during the pandemic, we added ice-breakers for quick engagement, shortened longer sessions and used a variety of collaboration tools to bring sessions to life.

Clearly Communicating the Vision

For employees to rally around the new ways of working, it’s vital to have a clearly articulated vision that resonates with them. People need a strong sense of purpose: how does this change make the company—and perhaps even the world—a better place? Paint a picture of where team members fit into the vision and communicate it often.

When it comes to communicating the vision, communication channels should be varied and adaptable. Build on already established channels that reach a variety of audiences and their unique preferences. Virtual channels were already critically important before coronavirus and are even more so now. Don’t expect that to change after the pandemic ends. At the outset of the pandemic, teams who had already established channels were able to transition more smoothly, without having to learn new technology and behaviors overnight.

TAILORING CHANGE MANAGEMENT TO VIRTUAL TEAMS

Transitioning to virtual work is a dramatic shift with unique challenges. Applying change management principles to virtual teams involves a unique approach. Pinnacle recommends several success factors that can help you transition to a more virtual work world:

- In a virtual environment, people don't have the opportunity to connect and clarify their day-to-day work through hallway conversations. Roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined and communicated. Detail areas of potential overlap to avoid frustration and rework. Decision rights and decision styles should be identified and communicated, especially on global teams where cultural considerations influence decision styles.
- Virtual teams are connected not necessarily by geography, but by a sense of common purpose. When it comes to communicating the vision, do it early and often, erring on the side of over communicating. Be aware of unique group dynamics at play in globally dispersed teams. For example, a majority of team members sitting at one location can inadvertently dominate the minority group.
- Find novel ways to develop a sense of community, fostering a "we're all in this together" spirit. In globally dispersed teams, having team members teach each other about their respective cultures helps build trust and avoid misunderstandings.
- Shifting to virtual communication involves re-thinking your communication strategy. The focus should shift toward gauging employee engagement by listening, soliciting feedback, and reaching out to team members individually. Set engagement guidelines and expectations for video calls and follow up with people who seem to be disengaged from the meeting. When holding video calls, be thoughtful about nonverbal cues and use physical movement to show engagement.
- Learning and development tactics need to bear in mind the differences that occur in distance learning. For example, transitioning a full-day hands-on workshop to virtual learning may involve breaking the session into multiple, shorter sessions and using technology to enhance participation. Polls, break-out groups, and virtual whiteboards all help keep the learning meaningful and collaborative.

HOW WE CAN HELP

At Pinnacle, we believe in collaborating with the best and the brightest minds regardless of location and have been successfully leveraging virtual work for years. Contact us today to discuss how we can support your transformation.

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