

# How EAs can lead the road to recovery in 2021

Did you hear it? You know, the palpable collective sigh as clocks struck twelve and calendars turned over—Phew! 2021



## THE EXPERT

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**We're smart enough** to know any initial positivity associated with a date change is merely a surface level mindset strategy to help wipe away persistent stubborn stains from 2020. There's much done by way of inspired practical action to help navigate trailing challenges or further hurdles. The bright side is companies are getting ready for recovery as economists predict a likely synchronous global economic bounce back.

For many years now it's recognised an EA's and PA's impact goes well beyond typical expectations associated with legacy roles. Indeed several critical business pillars are directly in their sphere of influence. One in particular will benefit significantly from your contributions. The initiatives you champion ideally being a combination that's logically constructive and creative. That pillar is culture.

Company cultures have been tested this past year. In the same way external forces may constantly interrupt a playful puppy otherwise happily exploring and interacting with life. Okay, in the case of the cute puppy the external force is frequently in the form of cuddles, hugs and love from us. Whereas culture interruptions from lockdowns have been the equivalent of brutal aggression.

Whether it's bringing values to life, hands on project collaborations, or improved communications through regular town halls and events, they've all been built with the basic tenet of human connection. Something we're all hardwired with to varying degrees. Yes, there's possibly some among us loving the idea of Macaulay Culkin 'home alone' remote work: no commute, camera off, leave me be to get on with things. Yet even then, people are not designed to be islands.

We know 2021 is likely to be a hybrid-style scenario: split team shifts or combined office versus home time. Offices are opening and teams are gradually winding their way back into workspaces. This is not unlike 'bring a pet to work' day! Some folks can't wait; imagine the newness, novelty, even excitement of it all after such a hiatus. Simultaneously others may experience returning transitions with investigative curiosity: the strangeness of it all, what was once familiar feels like a whole different environment. And for some, wide-eyed shell shock!

## Creativity in continuing traditions

There're many layers to what constitutes business culture. A starting point is relating to business culture no different than where the word originates. In an ethnological sense, culture is defined as the ideas, customs and social behaviours of a particular group of people where they feel part of the tribe.

Having traditions or a common language are two examples. The traditions that bond your people may require upgrades or a little creative flair to keep them alive. There are four basic arenas: to celebrate (birthdays, successes), to honour (tenure, milestones), to rejuvenate (quarterly, annual or product launches), or to mourn (team members moving on to new pastures). All can still be ceremoniously conducted in the hybrid world; it just takes a little creativity, planning and tenacity. Internal trophies may still be physically distributed (regardless if they're cheesy or a little more sophisticated) to worthy recipients to decorate home shelves.

We often give meaning to distance in relationships being difficult, but don't let the

nature of hybrid take away such fundamental bonds of strong culture or connection. Keep your traditions thriving. There may be an opportunity to create new ones, given the new world, in addition to adaptations or upgrades required.

## Agility in four cultural pillars

History also shows us how tribes evolve—so too does company culture. Due to broader business changes, a result of strategic disruption, the ongoing hybrid scenario or continued bouts working from home, there's evolution required in four notable pillars.

A culture of compliance means administrative processes, the rules of play, may require critical updates. EAs and PAs are well placed to collaborate with key stakeholders, including HR business partners, C-suite and senior leaders, to offer input into the best path these changes may take. This is an opportunity to showcase your business acumen, business case or strategic thinking muscles. Help decision makers land on best solutions, clear directions and even shortlist selections for best-suited technology where needed. Your expertise in organisation and clarity in the detail and documentation—something already very familiar in your roles—may play a key part in the success of process updates.

A culture of performance requires all people leaders to be hands on. This means knowing, coaching and continually developing their people as well their own numbers. Some people leaders are great when their team is in front of them, but some are not so great or armed with the same level of attention and care when faced with a separated team. You may help people leaders find systems to strengthen capabilities around calendar organisation, scheduling or even continued connectedness so their people don't slip through the cracks. Some leaders, a little like keynote speakers, may be fantastic live in office yet become a little lost or require support and development when translating the same energy or wisdom remotely.

Putting COVID-19 aside, a culture of continual learning is one mechanism to ensure businesses remain relevant and at a competitive advantage in a world of constant fast-paced change. A culture where learning and knowledge transference is something to be valued, not put off when things get busy or difficult, is not to be underestimated amidst current challenges. Perhaps one of the best things to do here is lead by example. Define your own individual learning pathway, maintain time on your own calendar for upskilling, ask for it, stick to it, be a shining example of continued growth for all around.

A unique culture is often perceived as the Holy Grail. When asked to nominate cultures that

stand out from the crowd it's the usual suspects that spring to mind. Often due to the innovation they bring to market or the creative, inclusive soft touches that make their environments fun like casual dress, freebies, or paid work time to support social causes. Given everyone is navigating this new hybrid world collectively it's a great time to get on the front foot with initiatives that internally add a little spark and externally make for inspirational, yet grounded, PR.

## Compassion in communication

In my last feature with Chief of Staff I planted seeds about returning to work and focussing on skills to help navigate change.

After having listened to the views of my inner circle, one trait repeatedly reared its head from all. Ann Dimas, of Marcellin College, articulated it beautifully, clearly and succinctly in saying this is a time to approach all our jobs and interactions with compassion and kindness.

We're seeing a massive shift and investment towards employee mental health. There's a plethora of opinions and studies from respected sources: McKinsey, highlight the pervasive nature of mental health in usual times, let alone the cited increases (about 45% of the population in their American study) as a direct result of COVID-19.

No doubt we can all relate, regardless of our personal circumstances this past year. Stresses have been exacerbated due to periods of furlough (where perhaps our purpose feels lost); instability and uncertainty (due to volatile market impacts or government decisions and reactions); or even those long bouts of working from home. For those living alone, the solitary nature may have felt a little like Tom Hanks in 'Cast Away'. I know I felt a little loopy at times and I'm pretty sure I sorted out the same set of cupboards about 17 times: albeit with a cool 80s playlist thrown in and a cuddly Sully toy in place of a Wilson football. For others, with families and partners, it may have conversely felt like overload: working remotely while managing homeschooling and perhaps getting more under our loved ones' feet than we'd care to share.

The fact is we've all had our own unique experience. As psychologist Dr Justin Coulson mentioned in a conversation I had with him, "We may well all be in the same storm but we're in different boats." It's important we pause a little longer than usual or make fewer assumptions. We may well be speaking the same common language and using the same internal jargon as we were pre-COVID. But unless we approach conversations and communications with compassion then we might as well be speaking a completely different language—perhaps even canine! 🐾

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