BOMA International

DEEP DIVE

TENANT CULTURE AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE RETURN

The strong business case for tenant peace of mind

By John Salustri

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THE OVERVIEW

Property management is not limited to the operations and advancement of the built environment. Among the softer considerations is the need to support corporate occupiers' cultural expectations. But culture, like fingerprints or snowflakes, is unique, varied and multifaceted. It also comes in a variety of shades, ranging from fully realized to non-existent. What it is *not* is a one-size-fits-all topic, which presents major challenges for the property manager trying to keep their distinct customers satisfied.

The word satisfaction there is actually code for issues far beyond the happiness of tenants and their employees. It speaks to hiring and retention, which, in turn, can impact productivity and—in the extreme—even profitability. By extension, it also speaks to tenant retention, which drops the issue and all its nuances squarely at the doorstep of the property team.

And it begs two vital questions: First, as the entire office industry prepares for the "Great Return" to places of business after more than a year of pandemic-induced exile, does anyone have the time or bandwidth to refit for happiness? Second, can a property manager grasp the cultural demands— and wellness needs—of their tenant base if the firm or building they work for is itself culturally starved?

Of course, it behooves all decision-makers to take these questions seriously, now more so than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that work from home (WFH) policies can maintain productivity, but at the cost of the collegial sense of belonging and collaboration that comes from being with your peers. Stress levels, feelings of isolation and depression all skyrocketed in 2020. Tamping it back down is a chore that falls to all of us in 2021 and beyond.

This second Deep Dive will tackle the cultural question from the following angles:

- Defining Our Terms: What Is Corporate Culture?
- COVID-19, Stress and the Psychology of Employee Engagement
- Property Management, Culture and the Bottom Line
- Beyond Amenities: Fitting Spaces to the Corporate Culture
- The Cultural Divide (or the Generation Gap Revisited)

"You can choose not to focus on culture. You can say people should just be happy to have a job, but there's a real cost to that."

– Stephanie Biernbaum, Hines

DEFINING OUR TERMS:
WHAT IS CORPORATE CULTURE?

The office industry can add another item to the increasingly long list of trends not started but accelerated by COVID-19: Densification and worries about space utilization are giving over to experience, in the sense that employees coming to work will become an event not to be replicated anywhere else, certainly not at home. The office is the residing place of what we referenced in our first Deep Dive, *Charting a Path to the Future of the Office*, as the three Cs: coaching, collaboration and connection.

"Experience" is a concept borrowed from the hospitality industry, although the brick-and-mortar retail sector has also jumped on the experience band-wagon in the face of rising internet sales. It carries with it the need to make employees feel comfortable and welcome. Many Class A office buildings even offer concierge services to help workers with the more mundane chores of their lives.

It reflects a major shift in what corporate decision-makers—*successful* cor-porate decision-makers, that is—must emphasize in their physical spaces. As Gensler co-CEO Diane Hoskins wrote recently, "it is becoming clear the pre-pandemic real estate industry may have gone too far in how it valued real estate that was not fully conceived around people."

Indeed. One property professional we spoke with recalls the corporate atti-tude that is now fading away with a story from his time in the office bullpen. It was a day when the office had a particularly large number of empty chairs, whether due to sickness, vacation or business travel. His boss walked the floor yelling, "Where is everybody? Look at all this real estate I'm paying for!"

➡

But it should be noted here that workspaces are still places of business, and productivity isn't going out the window in favor of fun and foosball. As one practitioner shares, "Everything tells us that the most desirable spaces will be those that invest in quality rather than just efficiency." Efficiency isn't going away, he says. It is only being reimagined.

That reimagining implies a major cultural departure from the draconian rules of engagement that once dominated corporate policy: Workers must be here to be productive. Status is defined by the height of cubicle partitions and their placement in proximity to the C-suite. The clock defines the workday.

But what is culture? And is it controllable? "For me, at a simplistic level, it's how managers and employees interact," says one expert. "It's tricky because in the best context, it tends to happen organically."

The quality of corporate culture—which in and of itself is not always a healthy thing—is defined in large part by the difference between management and leadership. A manager will give an order. A leader will provide context to increase everyone's understanding of how a decision fits within the larger mission. A manager will distribute employee satisfaction surveys. A leader will act on the results, even if "they're painful," says one advisor who has worked for companies both large and small. "All of them had culture statements, all had mission statements that were well-crafted and communicated, but they weren't lived."

"Over the past year, corporate cultures have diminished somewhat. The culture is still there, but it has changed due to our isolation."

– Susan Hammer, JLL

No one contributes to the corporate bottom line more than an engaged and self-efficient workforce.

The culture must come down off the wall and be activated. Tellingly, he adds, "There are very few leaders I would follow without asking any questions."

The alignment of mission throughout the organization is a keystone of an evolved corporate culture, one that demands an understanding of worker expectation, want and need. It has turned the traditional manager/employee relationship on its ear. Where once people were hired for their ability to do a specific job, hires are made today based largely on the candidate's acceptance of the mission and their cultural fit. (And, yes, their ability to do their job still plays a role.)

Again, this is not a consideration new to the post-pandemic world. According to a 2019 Glassdoor survey, "over 77 percent of adults across four countries (the United States, [the United Kingdom], France and Germany) would consider a company's culture before applying for a job there, and 79 percent would consider a company's mission and purpose before applying. Furthermore, over half of the 5,000 respondents said that company culture is more important than salary when it comes to job satisfaction."

Translation: Rather than the expectation that employees align themselves with company culture, decision-makers should start aligning themselves with candidate expectations. But is that a rational ask at a time in this still early stage in the pandemic recovery, when those same corporate decision-makers are struggling to right their financial ship after the economic disaster of 2020? Do they need to tend to employee well-being right now?

Short answer: "They'd better," says one contributor bluntly. "We're entering into a new landscape of work post-pandemic, where new opportunities for getting work done have opened up." He adds that no one contributes to the corporate bottom line more than an engaged and self-efficient workforce.

If before the pandemic, the much-touted war for talent was heating up, COVID-19 has rendered it nuclear. "When the economy is challenging, having the best of the best in talent will make the difference, and most big companies understand that." Which means they are also interested in creating better work environments.

That revelation comes at a critical time, because people are burdened with what has been labeled by mental health professionals as Post-COVID Stress Disorder, coupled with what is known as "re-entry anxiety."

COVID-19, STRESS AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

The severity of pandemic-related stress is not to be taken lightly. According to a recent survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (APA), more than 80 percent of Americans report never having expected the pandemic to last for so long. Living through it, say 67 percent of respondents, has been "a roller coaster of emotions."

The fundamental nature of stress hasn't changed, observes one contributor. "The degree to which we experience it has changed a lot."

We entered 2020 with stress enough. Piling on top of our common concerns—debt, job pressures and aging parents—came new fears: layoffs (24 percent); a young child learning remotely (16 percent); and isolation (67 percent). However, another 67 percent developed online social interactions, and 84 percent of them said that this virtual engagement helped them cope. (See *"The Shifting Dynamic Between Engagement and Well-Being"* on page 15.)

Nearly half of U.S. adults (47 percent) said the level of stress in their life has increased since the pandemic began.

Nevertheless, "When asked how the level of stress in their life has changed compared with before the pandemic," says the APA, "nearly half of U.S. adults (47 percent) said the level of stress in their life has increased." And despite vaccinations now rolling out with growing frequency, many have reported a lingering unease about in-person contact, complicating the plans of many companies eager to see more employees return to the office as part of a gradual reopening of in-person workplaces.

Worse still, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports increased cases of suicidal ideation, which peaked during the early stages of the pandemic, specifically around late June. And, while the report states that the tendencies were more frequent in males than females, they were "most commonly reported by persons aged 18–24 years."

No wonder. On top of everything else, if we were constantly connected to our devices before 2020, we hit what another expert calls a slippery slope last year due to WFH, robbing most of us of any separation between work and personal life. More than ever, work "is bleeding into personal quality time with our families," she says.

The feelings of isolation are not limited to lost interactions with coworkers and absent friends. It also extends to the small encounters now absent in

daily life with the barista who prepared your morning coffee, the people you used to meet in the breakroom in the office or fellow commuters with whom you exchanged hellos on the train.

Neither are the mental health issues tagged to WFH employees alone. Property professionals developed coping mechanisms for being in virtually empty buildings during their time as essential personnel early in the pandemic, explains one consultant. Now they are faced with a returning occupancy. "It's a bit scary," she says, adding that some people she has talked with seem to have forgotten even "the norms surrounding small talk."
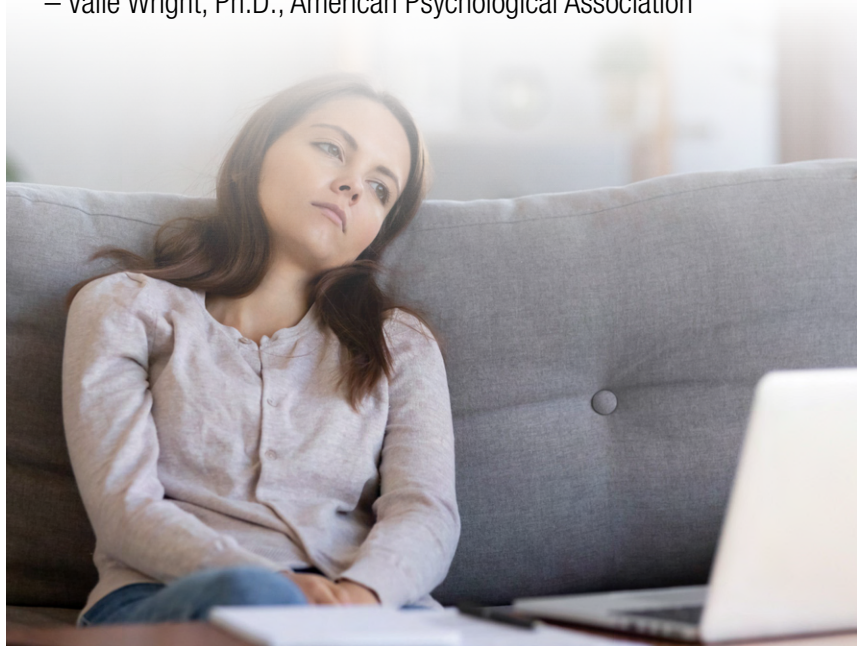
That fear exists on the other side of the equation, too. While the vast majority of office workers look forward to a workday with fewer Zoom meetings and more face-to-masked-face conversations, many also view the uncertainty surrounding a return to the office with some apprehension. Employees who have largely worked remotely over the past year may be feeling vulnerable about leaving the "safe havens" of their home offices or worry about how their workplaces are addressing items previously taken for granted, such as sanitation and ventilation.

Herein lies an opportunity for property professionals, who know every detail about the safety protocols in place in their buildings, to shine. Sharing those details, which often remained behind the scenes in pre-pandemic times, with tenants experiencing "re-entry anxiety" can quell those fears and make them more confident in a safe return to the building.

"There is a generational difference when it comes to stress. We know younger adults routinely, year after year, report higher levels of stress than adults."

– Vaile Wright, Ph.D., American Psychological Association

If there was any good coming from this mental health crisis, it was that the multiple and severe burdens of the pandemic on our psyches laid bare for decision-makers the importance of protecting the emotional well-being of their workforce. In addition to the clear health implications, an emotionally healthy team also is more likely to be committed to the organization, one consultant explains. "They're more likely to be fully present when they're working" and the company is less subjected to the dreaded, time- and capital-draining employee turnover. "Your company is more likely to be successful and profitable."

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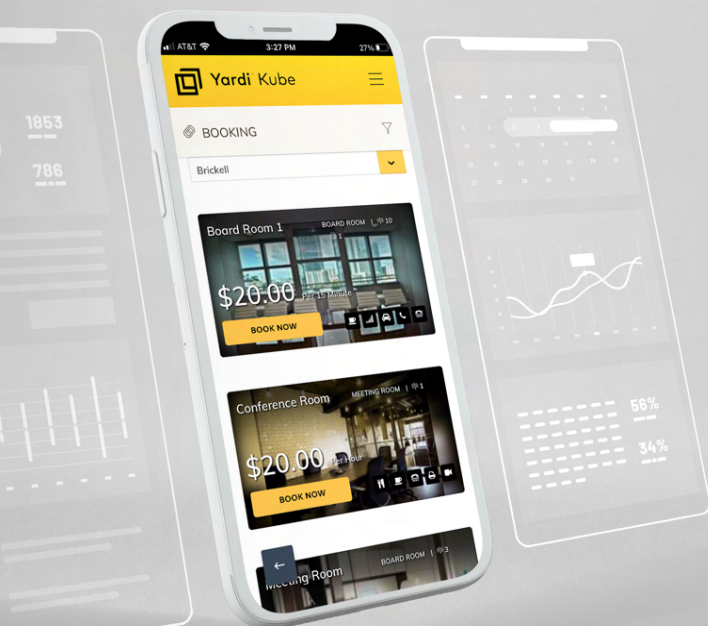
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The engagement dynamic can be viewed from quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Quantitatively, "there's a robust body of research showing that, over the long term, organizations with healthy cultures outperform those with less healthy cultures," she continues.

Qualitatively, decision-makers who want their firms to evolve can do so only with the backbone of a healthy culture. It is a particular challenge for those firms now considering increasing their number of offices, especially on an international plane. Without that cultural backbone, they run the risk of satellite facilities operating under different norms and, in the extreme, "of running afoul of governance challenges. Without an overarching mission and purpose, things can fall apart."

One property professional says that in all satellite offices, the company cultivates "subcultures." No matter the address, it falls to top brass and regional managers alike to "give the support and training that provide a positive culture."

Such attention to the details of culture, engagement and all of their subparts simply eases the coming mass return of the teams to their places of business. It is a good thing, too. In a recent Gensler survey on the WFH dynamic, only 12 percent of U.S. office workers reported a desire to stay at home. This is in keeping with their historical research, which reveals that, among workers with a choice, the office won out for 72 percent of the workweek.

What's more, when respondents were asked to rank their most important reasons for coming to the office, the top four revolved around colleague interaction, whether formal or impromptu. Heads-down work ranked a mere number six. But the question remains: How does the workplace support those three Cs we discussed at the top?

"Strong cultures happen when the senior leadership articulates their vision and everybody in the company is rowing in the same direction toward that vision."

– Katie Sprague, CallisonRKTL

PROPERTY MANAGEMENT, CULTURE
AND THE BOTTOM LINE

It may not be evident at first glance, owing to the internal and unique nature of corporate cultural enhancement, but property managers figure heavily in that tenant initiative. This is true for a number of reasons, well beyond the Wellness 101 considerations of ensuring maximized indoor air quality and sanitized worksurfaces, important as they are. As more than one contributor emphasized, engagement is a holistic affair, one that starts at the front door. "You want people to feel comfortable as soon as they walk in," for a total work experience. (See *"Property Manager: Heal Thyself"* on page 18.)

And, of course, the building team—owners and managers alike—have redevelopment control over common areas for the creation of new, post-COVID amenities. "New" in that most of the boxes that made up the pre-COVID list of must-have amenities have already been checked—the fitness centers and the coffee shops. "Everybody is looking for a holistic package, and the property management community has been really creative in responding to that," says one expert.

As just one example, building managers have responded by activating spaces that were untouchable a few years ago, such as lobbies and outdoor gathering areas. Lobbies were once a conveyance area, meant only for check-in and pass-through, and open only to tenants and visitors. Today, they are often dressed with couches and chairs for impromptu meetings and comfort, many also standing ready to welcome members of the public once pandemic restrictions are fully lifted. Some even boast indoor gardens and mini-art galleries for the enjoyment of the community. Despite their need to serve primarily as pandemic checkpoints over the past year, lobbies increasingly are being positioned as both communal spaces and, more importantly in the short-term, vehicles for delivering a welcoming new first impression for safety-focused returning tenants. ➤

"Every building, every tenant has a personality. If you can tell me how much you spent on keys and locks last week, but you can't describe that personality, you're not a complete property manager."
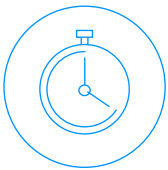
– Joe Markling, USAA Real Estate

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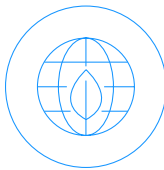
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Outdoor gathering areas may have once been nice to look at, but hardly used, observes one contributor. Today, "people want space they can actually use, that's comfortable and protects them from the elements," he says, a shift that has been accelerated by our newfound appreciation for outdoor spaces as a result of the pandemic. They might be fitted out with food and beverage service and, again, accessible by the public in an effort to tie the building in with the local community. "We're seeing this renaissance of good stuff coming from building managers as a perk to attract really great clients."

There are opportunities as well for managers to create community events, such as outside exercise classes. The goal here is to "put together programs that connect the people and place," she says. (People and place are just two of the three "Ps" essential to an enhanced culture. We will visit these shortly.)

Of course, it is still early in the recovery period for such plans and programs to be fully realized. But, even now, one consultant attests that more developers are asking about health and wellness "and well-being in general." There is much talk in her circles about tenants "wanting it all," within a relatively tight walking radius, a nod to the so-called 15-minute city, where everything you need is located within a 15-minute trip. "The idea is to have a nice quality of life with things like a local farmer's market and art classes in your community."

But we cannot dismiss Wellness 101 entirely in the higher goals of tenant engagement. "So much of this is about perception," says one property manager. "As tenants return, they want to see physical signs that something has changed."

"Do we need the office anymore? Absolutely we do. People need to be with other people, and bringing them together is what the office does best. So how do you dial in the workplace to take advantage of that?"

– Ian Zapata, Gensler

In that spirit, neither should we underestimate the power of signage to inform the community that work in their best interest is being accomplished, or the message that is conveyed when tenants see maintenance people cleaning and sanitizing surfaces. Third-party validation of IAQ and water systems—and the communication to tenants that outside experts are on the case—goes far in achieving the confidence and comfort all occupants need in order to enter a building and get to work.

There is one other aspect of the manager/tenant relationship that is subtle enough to float under everyone's radar. "Property managers frequently know more about a company than the decision-makers themselves know," notes an advisor. They are in the rarified position of talking to the team, often hearing their complaints. The decision-makers might cut the leasing deals, but it is the rank-and-file who have to live with their decisions.

The Shifting Dynamic Between Engagement and Well-Being

COVID-19 is breaking up a longstanding relationship. Well-being and engagement have always been closely connected. That is, until 2020. That was when the two went their separate ways, as Gallup research reveals. Counterintuitively, the firm reports that engagement actually rose through the depths of the pandemic, closing the year one point higher in the firm's benchmarking than in 2019. They attribute this to "the efforts, enthusiasm and commitment of many employees [holding] steadfast through COVID-19, despite experiencing a new kind of stress and worry each day."

Meanwhile, its former partner, well-being, suffered. Stress, worry and isolation began contributing to a decline in a sense of well-being early in the year. Gallup estimates that 40 to 60 percent of the workforce was remote last year. That's a lot of stress to deal with, and it forces employers to deal with the dual issues of their workers' current stress levels while pondering the future of the workplace going forward.

To help clear up that conundrum. Gallup promotes five steps to enhanced well-being. All of them, you will note, also contribute to a strong corporate culture:

■ "**Start measuring employee well-being**, in addition to engagement." If your practice is to distribute employee engagement surveys, "well-being needs to be added to the conversation." (And, as one building manager noted, act on the survey results. Do not file and forget.)

■ "**Train managers to have conversations about well-being**, above and beyond engagement." Managers have to get a little personal here, within the bounds of propriety. "Managers must be able to have appropriate but caring conversations," including conversations about stress and mental health concerns, if they are going to manage employees effectively. And do not forget to take some time with your whole team as well.

■ "**Capitalize on the benefits of well-managed remote work.**" As discussed in BOMA International's first Deep Dive, the key here is flexibility and an embracing of hybrid work models as appropriate to the job.

■ "**Consider the disparate impact the pandemic is having on certain employees.**" Everyone has different circumstances, and everyone handles stress differently. In the face of the increased potential for burnout, Gallup suggests developing perks to attract groups such as parents. The firm calls those perks "table stakes for talent attraction and retention."

■ "**Actively scan for signs of potential burnout.**" Encouragement is one thing. Overload and pushing employees are quite another. Managers are "ultimately responsible for ensuring employees have realistic expectations, support and manageable workloads."

The property manager has their finger on the pulse of the tenant company, its people. If an owner or tenant executive—or, for that matter, building ownership—doesn't tap into the underlying needs broadcast by those conversations, "you're missing a massive amount of intel."

The building team might also be weakening their competitive market stance, especially in the face of newer buildings and management teams that are tapping into that intel. "To stay ahead of the competition, you always have to look for the next big thing," says one property professional, noting that fitness centers and cool restaurants once answered that expectation. "Now, health and wellness are the next big thing."

And therein lies the hardcore financial aspect of the nebulous consideration of enhanced corporate culture, a solid business case that has to be made. Put simply, engaged employees are productive employees, contributing to the corporate bottom line. They also stay put longer, decreasing the cost of employee churn. (We will have more on churn in a moment.) Likewise, corporate tenants are more likely to renew if they are happy with the business environment of their building.

On the surface, that might sound simplistic. Yes, "engagement, productivity, collaboration, innovation are words that get used a lot, but they are really the lifeblood of success," says one expert. The built environment and how it is managed have a huge impact on tenant satisfaction, and whether or not employees want to show up for work. Or stay at the company, for that matter.

The built environment isn't the be-all and end-all of tenant engagement or it's close relation, corporate culture. But most corporate tenants understand that, he says. "Real estate is the place to support a business plan and strategies for growth."

"The way a space is designed is part of the company culture, and it's changing. Companies are trying hard now to define what works best for them."

– Clayton Ulrich, Hines

BEYOND AMENITIES: FITTING SPACE TO THE CORPORATE CULTURE

So, assuming a great or enhanced recognition by senior leadership of the importance of engagement and culture to the bottom line, how can they and the building teams that serve them create an environment reflective of that? Remember, as virtually all of the experts stated: The goal is to create space that offers more than an employee can get at home.

Cushman & Wakefield makes it easy for us, laying out five dynamics that will drive culture and workplace environments:

1. Determine where people are able to deliver their best output.
2. Bring people together in the right environment to support new ideas and breakthrough thinking.
3. Support and sustain work culture through the physical workplace and the way people interact with it.
4. Embrace flexibility and engender trust to drive employee retention.
5. Understand that cities remain important, that supporting hubs offer flexibility and that building location, as well as layout and purpose, are critical—the 15-minute city previously mentioned.

It might be easy now to envision the optimized workspace as an open design encouraging the free flow of workers for collaboration and interaction. That assumes there is no longer room for partitions and private offices—and that assumption would be wrong.

Culture is an individual thing, like fingerprints, and there is nothing wrong, our experts tell us, with walls and doors and private offices, if those work for all involved. "Hierarchy in and of itself is not a bad cultural thing," says one advisor. "The question is whether or not it is a deliberate choice, and if it works for everyone."

That consideration underscores that message that the real estate is only part of an overall cultural overhaul, a result, not a cause. Think, says one expert, of the "three Ps:" people, place and pathways—three interlocking, and equally important, design elements. How do the people feel and how do they interact? Does the place encourage the culture you have collectively embraced? What of the communication pathways? "A lot of companies miss the boat on this one," she says. But how does leadership connect the people and the place? Is there true engagement and a sense of community or is it all about the bottom line?

The goal is to create space that offers more than an employee can get at home.

Is there a correct office design? Yes. It is the design that works for your employees, your mission and your future growth.

Increasingly, that growth is being nurtured by younger generations. As Pew Research Center indicated back in 2018, millennials dominate the work-force, with Gen Xers and Boomers following, in that order. But we all re-member the headlines and research that were so prevalent in the years prior to COVID, the reports that millennials were notorious for their job-hopping ways, and as we all know, employee churn pokes major holes in corporate culture.

Yet, could it be that those reports were unfairly characterizing an entire gen-eration?

Property Manager: Heal Thyself

Can a property manager truly understand the cultural needs of their tenants if they themselves work for a firm with a broken culture?

"No, they can't," says one property professional flatly, recalling former jobs where decision-makers essentially confined their property management teams to their desks. As a result, "They weren't immersed in the culture of their tenants. They didn't know the people in their buildings." The only antidote was to get them out of their chairs and into the buildings they managed.

It takes a naturally optimistic mindset to overcome the dearth of support and encouragement from corporate leadership to help enhance their tenants' culture, "but it's harder," adds another property professional. But with those support systems in place and a focus on the well-being of the whole property management team, "the outcomes for your tenants can be even better."

And separation from the corporate headquarters can actually be a boon to the professional outlook, too. It might give property management teams the opportunity to create their own mini-cultures, untethered from any corporate negativity. "A case can be made that they want to provide for their tenants what they themselves do not have."

THE CULTURAL DIVIDE
(OR THE GENERATION GAP REVISITED)

"For my team, the company is me."

If that statement were coming from a CEO, it might be followed by a mass employee exodus, or at least a note from Human Resources. Rather, it came from an expert we spoke with, a decades-long veteran of his firm. And rather than a statement of uniqueness, he was speaking as one among his fellow employees, a leader through whom the company culture is transmitted. It starts, therefore, with him, and then each person on the team, individually and collectively reflecting and living the culture of their company, which boasts a healthy retention rate. "Culture is created by each employee as much as it is by leadership," he says.

Employee churn represents an expensive deviation from a strong corporate culture and erodes a reason for others to stay. Prior to 2020, there was much research that explored the working habits of millennials, essentially indicting an entire generation for their job-hopping tendencies.

Not true, says Gallup. In a report issued just prior to the pandemic, the research firm revealed that millennials are no more likely to switch jobs than their elders—as long as they have a reason to stay. "We all live with certain circumstances that influence us," says one expert. "Still, a lot of the differences between generations might be more related to age and experience rather than to a particular cohort." These differences also explain why different generations have had varying degrees of success with the grand work-from-home experiment—and why offices tend to be viewed as a "great equalizer," since not all home work setups are created equal.

Gallup puts the millennial engagement factor at a pitiful 29 percent. But the national engagement factor is not much better: 34 percent. So, we must ask ourselves, is that the fault of the worker or their leadership?

If an employee is going to stay at a job, no matter the generation, they "want a workplace that contributes to their health and safety," says one contributor. Increasingly, there is also a social responsibility factor to the places that they want to work for. They want workplaces that let them know they are doing good in the world. She says that she has personally seen people turn down jobs based on the company's commitment to corporate responsibility.

> Regardless of generation, employees want a workplace that contributes to their health and safety, emphasizes social responsibility and lets them know they are doing good in the world.

So, while we cannot pin much on the millennial—or, now, Gen Z—factor, life experiences that are unique to certain age groups, like having school-age children at home or caring for elderly parents, still influence a workable workplace. With all the talk about a post-pandemic return to collaboration, it falls to leadership as well as their teams to figure out how "multi-generational cohorts" can come back together in person effectively again and work together in peace and harmony.

It was common through the depths of the pandemic to say we are all in this together. The same can be said of corporate culture, from the worker and their leadership to the building management team and ownership.

And that may be the best definition of an enhanced corporate culture anyone can provide. ∎

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS