

# INTRODUCTION

The Future is now.

Source: George Allen, Legendary Football Coach.

**R**ecently, my daughter, a newly minted college graduate, kicked off a search for her very first job. She posted her resume on LinkedIn, networked via Facebook, and then submitted scores of applications to online job boards and other internet-based career sites.

After that, those websites scrubbed her application—and those of thousands of applicants just like her—for “key words” to match her with potential employers through an algorithm not unlike Tinder’s “match, chat, date” approach to pairing prospective love interests in our disconnected yet wired world.

My daughter and I shared any number of late night conversations about weighty topics related to work. We talked about the arc of a career and the many changes taking place today in the world of work.

And it got me thinking about the quantum leaps I’ve observed and experienced in my own lifetime immersion in work as I interacted with my bosses and colleagues, conducted business, managed employees, and advised others about how to be good employers.

I’ve done it all . . . from selling newspapers on the beach to washing pots and pans at restaurants. I’ve waited tables, saved lives as a summer

lifeguard, made change at a pinball arcade, and worked at a water circus. (No, not as an aqua clown.)

I flipped burgers at a Philly cheesesteak joint (practically a rite of passage for Philly kids), served up cocktails with late night advice at a bar, and during my college years, I “candled” eggs during the graveyard shift at an egg processing company to ensure they were safe for shipping to consumers. I pumped gas and worked retail, hawking menswear.

Later, I built my own law firm and served as deputy general counsel to a governor. I managed 200 attorneys in the legal office of a government agency and helped set labor policy for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. I shaped human resources policy for a large multinational corporation. And I taught business ethics to community college students (including convicted prisoners at the state penitentiary).

I’ve even worked as an AM talk radio host while also continuing to practice law for 30 years now, mostly working for employers.

In short, I understand—through considerable personal and professional experience—what it means to be both an employee and an employer. What it means to be a manager of people and be managed by others. I’ve represented unions and employees as well as small family businesses and huge corporate employers. So I know a bit about the world of work.

As you’ve no doubt observed through your own work experiences, there are clearly poor places to work and great places to work. There are poor leaders and exceptional leaders. There are truly outstanding employees and, unfortunately, there are also employees who cannot be redeemed.

I’ve had the privilege over my career to enjoy a close-up view of how each of these dynamics work separately and together in the world of work and what they mean for employees, leaders, and organizations who want to excel in the years to come.

These observations—and the current unprecedented pace of change—have fundamentally shifted the way I view the world of work. And that shift has required me to adapt in ways I never could have imagined when I began my own career.

The reality is that it's foolish and risky for leaders to make assumptions based on what has worked in the past. In forward-thinking organizations, the old “control-manage” model of work has given way to creative collaboration and communication.

We can “rage at the dying of the light,” like Welsh poet Dylan Thomas suggests of those who believe they are too old or unwilling to change (or like people concerned about an uncertain fate might do). Or, we can learn to check outdated assumptions when making decisions so we are effective in our efforts to lead profitable, healthy companies into a future that is rapidly reinventing itself. We can learn to *flex*.

This skill set is particularly critical to master in order to respond effectively during pivotal moments inside of an organization. Such moments come in many forms.

For example, the tragic events of 9/11, and then, more recently, COVID-19, created an immediate and profound seismic shift in America's focus on safety and security. Leaders at companies who appreciated the enormity of this shift responded quickly with new policies and targeted training to ensure the workplace remained respectful, healthy, and violence-free.

Downsizings are another moment that occurs frequently inside many companies. The ability to flex is key here also. Managers who can communicate these events organization-wide with sensitivity and transparency fare far better than those who cannot.

Leaders who are skilled at demonstrating compassion and active listening skills are often successful at maintaining the morale of remaining employees while assisting departing employees in letting

go of disappointment so they can move forward with a focus on the future.

Competitive threats and societal movements, such as #MeToo, offer make-or-break moments for organizations. Although it's easy to reach out to a lawyer to navigate those moments, I've learned that lawyers tend to zero in on risks from legal issues while often missing the far more important context of the challenge.

The best way to win a lawsuit is to avoid it altogether by cultivating a willingness to take an unflinching look at uncomfortable organizational culture issues, address outdated human resources policies, actively engage all stakeholders, and end the kinds of injustices—financial and otherwise—that give rise to these difficulties. Organizations that embrace those truisms save money, avoid the challenges of unionization, and spend less time in court.

We can spend our energy and resources working to shut out change that is uncomfortable, inconvenient, and, frankly, inevitable. But it's a useless endeavor in my experience. That path leads to irrelevancy. There are plenty of others happy to take our jobs and customers.

Instead, let's be nimble as we lean into change to proactively shape responsive organizations that value creativity and innovation to foster success. Today, more than ever, we need to care about relationships and be prepared for the disruptions that will inevitably come.

As someone who's been fortunate to have a front-row seat during the onslaught of mega and micro influences reshaping work in America today, I invite you to consider the ways in which successful companies not only navigate unimaginable disruption but also embrace it as an opportunity to learn and grow.