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Tackling the Virtual Culture Dilemma:

Help Your People Work Better Together While Officing Apart

While most of us thought 2020 was going to be "our year," everything got derailed when the pandemic struck, sending people to all corners of their homes in search of a comfortable, functional workspace. Displaced and distracted, some employees checked out, while others lashed out. We've named this evolution **The Virtual Culture Dilemma**—and it's shifting the way we relate, communicate, and collaborate.

Even before the remote workforce evolution, office culture was inherently fragile. After all, it's made up of imperfect humans interacting with other imperfect humans. And while perfection isn't the goal, we all secretly wish for a workplace where people find ways to bring out the best in each other. Unfortunately, that's not always an intuitive skill. It takes guidance, practice, and then more guidance and practice… but with the right leadership, it's definitely achievable.

This eBook reveals three critical components to addressing The Virtual Culture Dilemma along with actionable strategies to shape an engaged, collaborative, and adaptive culture— one that drives results while simultaneously fostering those daily human connections that embrace everyone's unique strengths and one-of-a-kind contributions.
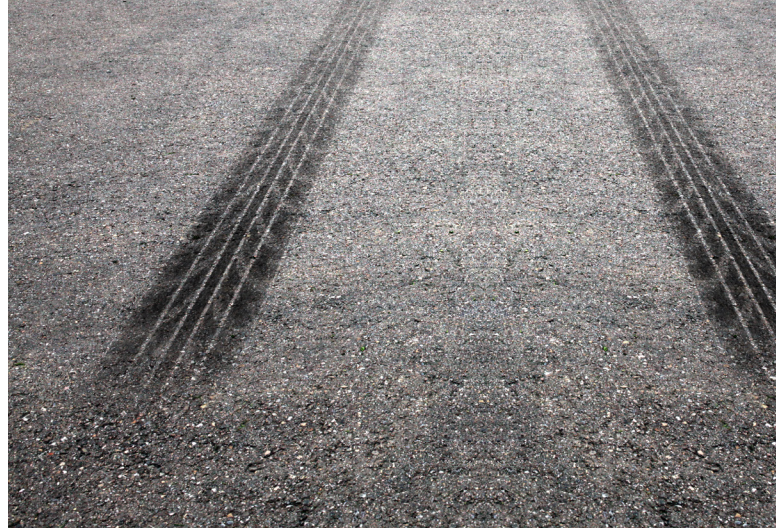
Part 1:

The Virtual Culture Dilemma.

Your office culture was humming along nicely. Then *[brakes screech]* 2020 hit.

2020's nationwide pandemic precautions left an overwhelming majority of workers scrambling to set up a "temporary" home office. While many of us anticipated technology being the biggest hurdle of working from home, it turns out that it was the people part that left us wishing we could hit the ESC button.

Why does a team video call feel so different from a face-to-face regroup? Why does even a one-on-one meeting feel different when it's the remote version? We think that, at least in part, it's because there are fewer opportunities to spontaneously connect. Those "drive-by" chats we used to have about weekend plans, sports, movies, or even something as mundane as the weather are all chances to connect on some level—and now those opportunities for casual conversation and relationship building are no longer there. Managers can't see when someone's having a rough day and suggest a heart-to-heart over coffee or lunch. And you can't duck into a conference room to hash out a disagreement or share an idea with a peer.

In September 2020, Wiley surveyed 2,500 business professionals to better understand the impact of the pandemic on organizations and culture. We found that working from home is new to many of us. In fact, only 22% of respondents worked from home at least part time before the pandemic, creating a steep learning curve for the majority who transitioned to working remotely almost overnight. At-home distractions add an additional layer of complexity, from noisy kids and unpredictable pets, to grocery deliveries, the handyman, or the louder-than-you-remember lawncare crew arriving at the worst possible moment. And it appears this virtual setup isn't going away anytime soon. **As Forbes recently reported**, 74% of CFOs intend to accommodate at least some employees working remotely for the foreseeable future.

This poses a new, very real challenge to leaders. If the path we're on is an all-virtual or more flexible work environment, how do we promote those authentic human connections that are so critical to an engaged, collaborative, and adaptive culture? How do we make sure out of sight isn't out of mind?

The 2020 Shift to Remote Work

51%
of people are working from home at least part-time

compared to only

22%
of people that worked from home at least part-time before the pandemic

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The Virtual Culture Dilemma, defined.

We're seeing a new concept take shape, and we're calling it **The Virtual Culture Dilemma**, which states that organizational culture will emerge from the haze of the pandemic in a different place than where it started. In fact, it's already happening. Work relationships, communication, and employee expectations are transforming.
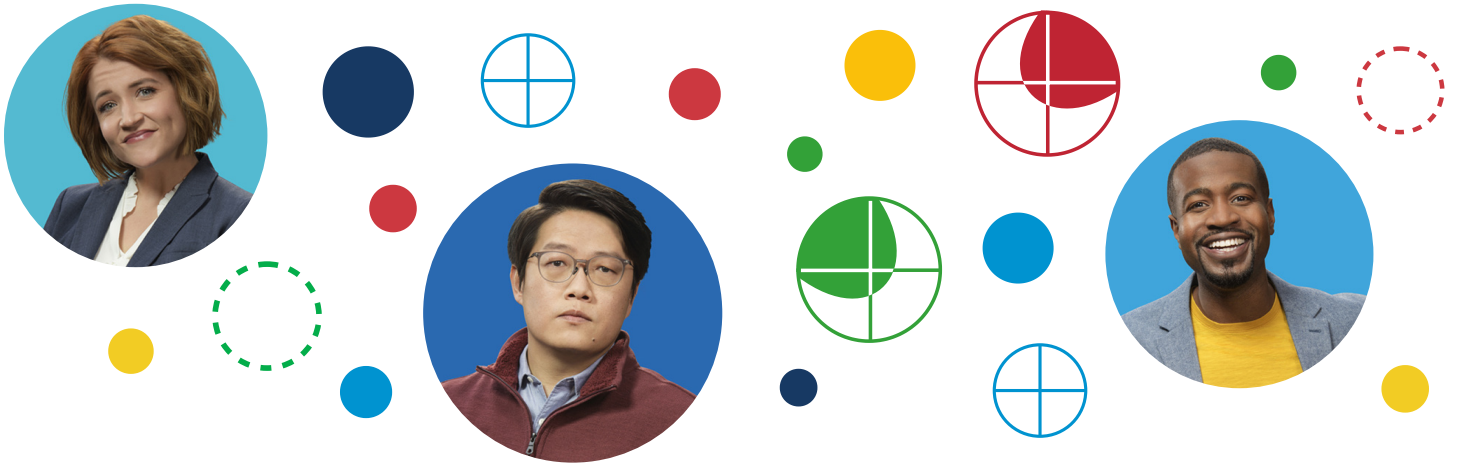
It's critical that leaders are not only aware of these shifts in culture, but proactively addressing them in a way that drives their business forward. "Waiting it out" is no longer an option. The time for action is now.

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Part 2:

The Value of Culture.

When it comes to culture shaping,
a hands-on approach is critical.

The Virtual Culture Dilemma can highlight a few less than ideal behaviors: snarky commenters, disengaged "listeners", back-to-back meeting bookers, etc. Every virtual workplace has them, and too many of these instances can come together to create a dysfunctional culture that drags down morale and performance. Leaders have two ways to respond to this: hands-off, where you let it go and hope for the best, or hands-on, where you intervene with an action plan that shapes a more peaceful and productive workplace.

You may wonder, with everything on your more-than-overflowing plate, is it worth the investment of time and resources? According to business professionals like you, it most certainly is. An overwhelming 98% of those surveyed agreed an organization's culture greatly impacts its success. We appreciate their optimism, and fully endorse that sentiment.

Perceived Impact of Culture on Organizational Performance
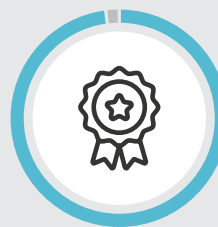
98%
agree that organizational culture greatly impacts its success

99%
agree that organizational culture can be improved

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So, you're on board with changing culture.
You're just not sure how.

As an ecosystem, office culture is inherently fragile. It's made up of imperfect humans interacting with other imperfect humans, which makes the situation, well, less than perfect. And while perfection isn't the goal, we all secretly wish for a workplace where people find ways to bring out the best in each other. Unfortunately, that's not always an intuitive skill. It takes guidance. And practice. And then more guidance and practice. (Did we say guidance and practice?)

So where do you go for this guidance? And how do you put it into practice? Often, well-meaning leaders go about culture change by crafting a new mission statement written to inspire, adding more team touchpoints to foster collaboration, or rewarding high performers to keep people motivated. Those things do matter, and value statements, systems, and processes serve a purpose, but they're not enough. **If leaders want to shape an engaged, collaborative, and adaptive virtual culture, they need people who are engaged, collaborative, and adaptive—from the entry level admin to the CEO.**

Biggest Influences on Culture

Employees/People ranked as the biggest influence on culture, followed closely by leadership.

#1 Employees/People

#2 Leadership

#3 Mission, Vision, Values

#4 Policies

How do you cultivate an engaged, collaborative, and adaptive culture when everyone's working separately from their own virtual bubble?

To make the biggest difference in culture, leaders need to invest in their people and help them develop the soft skills critical to a high performing culture. If we go back to the Wiley survey, we see that a majority of respondents ranked social and emotional skills second only to biggies like critical thinking and problem solving. Furthermore, 41% said social and emotional skills are even more important now than before the pandemic.

Here's the kicker: While 98% of leaders surveyed agree it's worth their team's time to develop their social and emotional skills, only 9% strongly agreed that they know how to make that happen. Even the few who feel confident they can foster those skills with their team in the office likely feel less sure when everyone's on mute with their cameras off.

Skills Ranked by Importance for Virtual Work

#1 Critical Thinking/Problem Solving

#2 Social and Emotional Skills

#3 Basic Cognitive Skills

#4 Technical Skills

#5 Physical Skills

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Part 3:

Human Problems Require Human Solutions.

Soft skills, defined.

Before we go on, let's define soft skills—also known as social and emotional skills. We all show up at work with a lifetime of experiences with other people—some great, some less than great (some terrible, actually). At any moment, our ability to listen, trust, take input, take action, push back, and cut slack depends on our social and emotional know-how. The question becomes, do we have the ability to leverage learnings from our positive experiences with others while overcoming the ones we'd rather forget? In other words, are we able to recognize our natural tendencies and adapt when those tendencies no longer serve us?

For example, **The Go-Getter** who was praised as a child for independent behavior may not understand why it's so important to **The Harmonizer** to have everyone on board before moving forward with a decision.

The Go-Getter

&

The Harmonizer

Or **The I-Dotter/T-Crosser**, whose previous boss valued perfection over speed, may express frustration with **The Ad-Libber** manager who quickly sends unfinished presentations over to clients so she can get an early read on whether the team is headed in the right direction.

The I-Dotter/T-Crosser

&

The Ad-Libber

Soft skills are hard work. Like, unlearn-some-of-your-core-behaviors-and-unearth-your-deepest-insecurities hard.

Improving your social and emotional skill set is different from other kinds of skill development because it's not a strictly cognitive process. It's not like learning videography or supply chain software or project management. It's fundamentally different, engaging not only the prefrontal cortex, but also the primitive brain, the heart, even the soul. **In fact, how social and emotional skills are learned may be more important than the learning content itself.** If it's not experienced in a holistic manner, it probably won't stick. Too often, companies take on a development plan for soft skills that utilizes the same approach as learning and developing hard skills. While employees acquire the information, they're unable to internalize it, so there's no new behavior, and all that time and energy was wasted.

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What should you look for in soft skill development plans to **ensure the learning sticks?**

1. Everyone is different, so soft skill development must be personalized.

No two human beings are alike. We are all delightfully and uniquely our own person, so a one-size-fits-all approach is doomed to fail. Whatever the topic—management, communication, leadership, conflict, emotional intelligence—the specific lessons learned will be different from person to person. This can be true for cognitive skill building, of course, but you can usually account for that by offering different levels of training, like beginner, intermediate, and advanced. For soft skills, the need to tailor learning to each person is exponentially greater. It's not that some people are beginners and others are advanced. It's that we come from vastly different, completely individual, one-of-a-kind backgrounds. Each of us has our own distinctive set of lessons to learn. Let's look at how different personality types might respond to the same situation.

Situation:

Boss moves a deadline up by 5 days.

Response:

The I-Dotter/T-Crosser quietly clocks an 80-hour week, endlessly proofing and revising. Submits it in the nick of time.

The Go-Getter replies, "Bring it on. I got this." (Likely bragging later about knocking it out of the park. Again.)

The Challenger pushes back, demanding rationale for the change.

The Ad-Libber waits until the last minute, then scrambles to pull it off.

The Harmonizer buys the team dinner as a thank you for staying late to get it done.

Why So Different?

It could be their experience growing up at home, the influence of a teacher or coach, or even a previous manager's style. But we all react differently, which triggers a different response from the person we're interacting with. That's why it's so critical to understand all that factors into our daily conversations at work.

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## 2. The learning must take place in a social context.

We are relational beings, and we learn social and emotional skills from other people. Yes, e-learning can provide insight into those skills, but it can't compete with the conversations and aha moments sparked by the give-and-take of discussion with peers.

To address old behavior patterns, each of us needs to unlearn the bad habits and mistaken beliefs deeply lodged in our psyche and fused into our understanding of how the world works. Since those bad habits and mistaken beliefs were shaped by years of social and emotional experiences, effective social and emotional skill development requires that same social context.

People must challenge their habits and beliefs in a social setting that allows for vulnerability and gradually opens their eyes to new ways of relating to others. That's how the seeds are planted, and once those roots are established, you'll start to see real growth.

We're guessing the thought bubble over your head right now says something along the lines of, "Social setting? But we're all working remotely." Indeed, it's more challenging when people can't sit next to each other and share insights in pairs or small groups. But there's a population of passionate professionals who have made the transition to virtual facilitation, and have found ways to transfer the richness and depth of in-person discussion to a virtual setting. Their approach is geared toward engaging smaller groups with digital tools like breakout rooms and whiteboards, which help solve some of the "loudest-voice-wins" issues with video calls.

Committed leaders in organizations everywhere have transitioned to virtual facilitation, successfully transferring the richness and depth of in-person discussion to a remote work setting. Skeptical about the effectiveness of these virtual sessions vs. in-person? We suggest you give them a try. You may be surprised (dare we say delighted?) at the impact when there's a skilled guide to help each group implement the learning.

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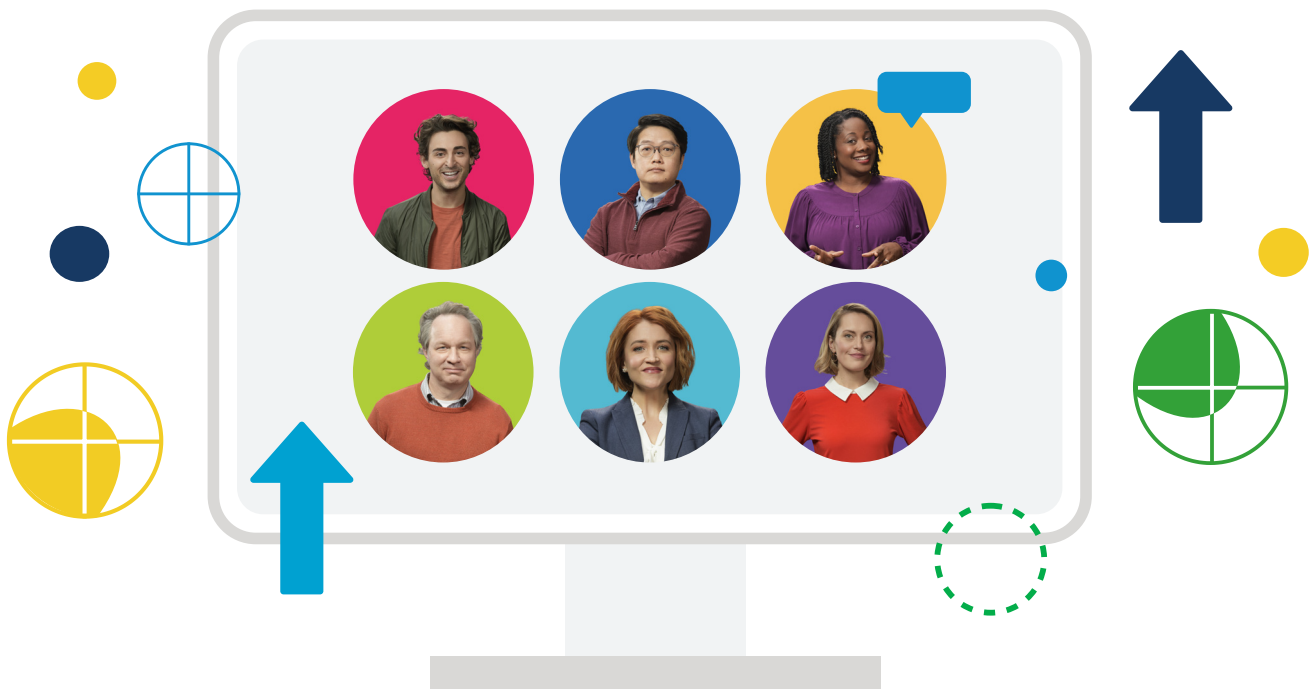
3. The learning must include reinforcement.

Working on social and emotional skills can take time. They're acquired through repetition, affirmation, and lots and lots of practice. The technical term is "continuous learning"—defined as learning that is repeatedly practiced and reinforced. And thanks to all of that practicing and reinforcing, the result is more likely to be applied in real-time situations, ultimately leading to behavior change. Yet continuous learning and behavior change in a professional setting can be challenging for a few reasons.

First, our workdays are often full of stress and uncertainty, causing us to revert to our go-to behaviors.

We fall back on the natural behavioral preferences that have guided (and misguided) us our whole lives. So those cues that remind us to change our behavior (Alert! Alert!) must be easily accessible so they can be applied the moment they're needed.

Everyone needs a safe space to mess up, try a new approach, and repeat.

We all need the chance for a do-over. Without that sense of safety, we don't feel comfortable taking the risk, and change just won't happen. As leaders, it's our responsibility to create that safe zone, giving our teams the peace of mind necessary to practice their new skills (with the freedom to get it wrong) so they can self-correct the next time around.

Lastly, accountability is critical.

This can be uncomfortable for some (talking to you, people pleasers and introverts). It requires us to reflect on our own behavior and challenge each other when we feel there is an opportunity for growth. We've found that if you clearly communicate the goals, and implement a common language, people feel more comfortable holding each other to a higher standard.
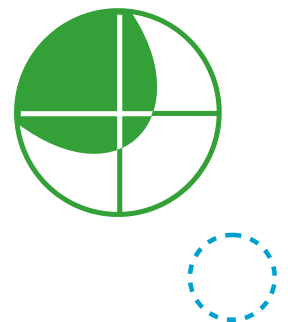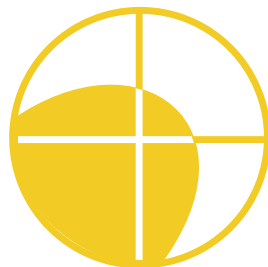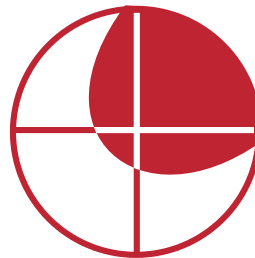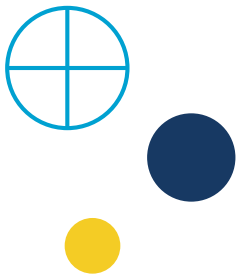
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The bottom line? Invest in your people.

Culture impacts everything about your organization, from morale to productivity. So it's worth the investment to create the kind of place people want to be a part of—the kind of place that inspires people to do what they do even better. The good news? You can reverse The Virtual Culture Dilemma by investing in the social and emotional skills that are critical for creating lasting change through positive and productive day-to-day interactions.

Keep in mind, for those new skills to stick, they need to be personalized, flexible, reinforced, and deeply human. The learning needs to take place in a real-world context alongside others who approach life and work differently. Once your team is on board and commits to daily repetition and practice of these skills, you'll start to see a culture where people learn to bring out the best in each other. It's a proven process that enables us to work better together, even while officing apart.

Initiating culture change is daunting to be sure, but the only way to get started is to actually get started—to stop putting it off and make it happen. Move it to the top of your list and start creating your own Office of Unicorns.

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Make the magic happen with Everything DiSC® on Catalyst™.

Everything DiSC® on Catalyst™ is a personal development learning experience that equips people with the social and emotional know-how for more effective interactions at work—no matter who or where they are. This solution combines DiSC® with instructor-led training and a powerful learning platform to help participants:

- ⊘ **Better understand themselves**
- ⊘ **Appreciate and value difference in perspective and approach**
- ⊘ **Readily and consistently adapt to the unique needs of each person or situation they encounter**

For learners, Everything DiSC on Catalyst makes the hard work of lasting behavior change possible—even fun. For organizations, Everything DiSC on Catalyst helps foster an engaged, collaborative, and adaptive culture that drives results regardless of your workforce's location.

To get a demo of the Everything DiSC on Catalyst learning experience, connect with your Everything DiSC Authorized Partner today.

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