


# Cultivating Culture in a Crisis

Through the Covid-19 pandemic, our world of work has changed almost overnight. In the past few weeks, we've spoken with senior leaders at organizations with whom we have been working to strengthen their ethical culture. These leaders understand that their culture is an essential resource to navigate through the current crisis, and are finding new ways to cultivate ethical culture under these radically-changed circumstances. Drawing on our conversations with leaders across business and civil society, here are a few reflections on ways to guide your own culture during this period.

## Be deliberate about your remote-based culture.

It is important that we understand how the shift to remote work environments impacts our organizational culture, no matter how temporary we hope it will be. Being intentional about what we put in place can enable benefits and mitigate risks. Transitioning to remote work without building a corresponding culture creates multiple risks, including loss of employee engagement and inclusion, impact to productivity, lack of connectedness between individual and overall organization goals, increased fragmentation

and risks of misconduct related to changing accountabilities. Yet many organizations with fully-remote work environments have long championed the potential benefits that come from proactively cultivating a virtual culture. We heard one story about an organization that set up randomly-selected 'crews' of nine people to offer a space for reflection and support to each other outside of usual work activities. These crews are encouraged to connect weekly, and the HR department has



committed to responding to all requests for support for fellow crew members within 24 hours. This has created a powerful space for connection and a culture of solidarity and compassion.

There is no shortage of articles and blogs about virtual workplaces, each with useful tips on setting rules of engagement, using a range of technologies for

different purposes, and fostering new forms of virtual collaboration. Many providers are offering free or low-cost support to ensure smooth transitions to remote-based environments. Take the steps you need to sustain and build your culture through this period. Regularly monitor how it's going, learn from mistakes and adapt.

### **Communicate often (enough), clearly, and compassionately.**


One CEO we spoke with last week said, "It doesn't matter how much I communicate right now – it's never enough! There's a deep need to hear directly from me what's going on and what we're doing about it, even when I don't have anything new to say!". We spoke about how we are all inundated with information from all directions, and it's a vicious

quench it, she let her staff know how often and what she would be communicating. This rhythm has been reassuring, but most critical has been the honest and compassionate tone she is focusing on, which has been powerful in shaping a culture of openness and care. Messages that resonate are honest about challenges, clear about steps

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cycle – the more we read, the more we want to know, the more overwhelmed we feel. To be clear up front about how to meet this thirst but keep a balance in how to

being taken, offer opportunities to contribute, and include reminders about purpose and values through stories and personal reflections.



## Be honest about potential scenarios, including uncomfortable ones.

Every organization we are working with is actively engaged in scenario-planning exercises. Think how your values and key principles can guide the way you develop, consider, evaluate and communicate those scenarios across the organization – particularly values such as integrity and transparency. One

on people. That is so short-sighted – and almost unprincipled.” The tendency to equate nice and safe with being principled often surfaces at moments of stress. Many organizations are having to make difficult decisions about resources, staffing, suppliers, partners, and programming, which

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senior strategy director we spoke with said, “I am so frustrated. I took a framework for our scenario planning to discuss with the rest of the leadership team. They all suggested removing any reference to potential staffing cuts, thinking it would damage morale and sound like we are more focused on our budget than

can at times feel contradictory to values. But the extent to which these decisions are aligned to your organization’s values and principles, and how transparent you are about how these decisions are made, can impact your organization’s culture for years to come.



## Practice agility and adaptability.

In mid-March, one former client who leads her organization's ethics and conduct team told us, "We are really just keeping our heads down, and focusing on how to stay on track with our priorities – we don't want to lose the important groundwork we have

her two weeks later, she was using a new set of criteria to prioritize which activities to focus on, including relevance and need in responding to possible scenarios that unfold over the coming months. While it is important to keep an eye on

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laid, so we are positioning and will be ready to re-launch when this is all over." We reflected with her on ways of maintaining momentum towards the changes she wanted to see but taking very different paths than she had originally charted. When we checked in with

longer-term strategic goals and priorities, we should not lose sight of the shorter-term initiatives we are aiming to achieve, the changes we may need to make, and the need to be agile and adaptable.

## Identify opportunities to contribute, including with your own stakeholders.

One of the biggest challenges with this crisis is how people are left feeling helpless. Many NGOs that we work with are involved in preparation and response efforts. This aligned purpose can be

motivating and fulfilling for their teams. Making your purpose relevant in the current situation can be more challenging for other sectors, but there are opportunities to do so. All



organizations will need to find ways of engaging their staff in opportunities to contribute in philanthropic efforts and share stories of how they are helping. The range of stakeholders impacted are unprecedented. Consider the impacts to your broader stakeholder groups – suppliers, contractors, partners,

customers – and the steps you are taking to be flexible with policies, to adjust ways of working to minimize the negative impacts, and to be supportive and responsive. Your responsibility to your stakeholders is directly connected to your mission and values.

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We are all making tough decisions about our organization, our people and our ability to deliver services, programs, and products. Being intentional about the health of our organizational culture is more

has passed in one way or another, I want to be able to say that, at the hardest of times, I did my best to do the right thing and act in a principled way.” The way we act, and the decisions we make today,

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important now than ever. One senior leader shared with us, “Who knows what the world or our organization will look like on the other side of this – but when it

will tell the story long after the pandemic about the type of leaders we are, the types of organizations we build, and the ethical cultures we cultivate.



## Authors

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**Principia Advisory** is the leading advisory firm on organizational ethics. We work with our clients to translate values and principles into consistent, ethical decision-making and action. Our proven methodologies draw on behavioural science, organizational psychology, and moral philosophy to enhance organizations' ability to consistently do the right thing.