ACROSS THE COUNTRY, SCHOOL ADMINISTRAtors are wrestling with how to create a full-day curriculum for remote learners, to mirror the average school day. But is that really necessary? Is school fundamentally a way to keep children occupied and collect grades? Or is its purpose to cultivate curiosity and teach our future generations to be ready to adjust and succeed for the future – one that doesn't look anything like today?

LEADERSHIP in the Time of Covid

Employees aren't the problem. They're the solution, says REBEKAH METTS-CHILDERS

The same questions apply to working from home. Until the pandemic struck, the average office practiced an informal keeping-of-tabs even in the absence of time clocks. "Joe isn't in today" translated loosely to "Joe's taking the day off." To be seen at one's desk mattered, even if one occupied oneself there with online explorations of potential vacation spots.

Now, office workers in America and across the world are working from home, and generally speaking the results are surprising. The technology really does work. More surprising still, employees really do work, perhaps harder than ever. In fact, much of the data points to productivity increasing, happiness increasing and hiring managers feeling that remote working has gone better than expected.

Even so, mindsets are slow to change. Many reopening plans are working to establish how remote working can mirror the average workday. And to measure and track against it. You don't have to search far to find articles about promising new surveillance technology that can record key strokes, mouse movements, employee workflow, monitor online activity, even keep a video log of the seat in front of the laptop. Too bad for the professional who does her best thinking while pacing.

Tracking movements and ensuring boxes are checked rewards people for working to demonstrate their competence for others. This is the workforce equivalent of striving only to achieve good grades. That sounds great, right? Well, not necessarily, because it drives the individual to seek self-serving goals—a promotion or higher pay or a better offer from a competitor—rather than pursuing the goals of the company. Surveillance doesn't nurture trustworthiness. It drives check-a-box behavior, if not furtive behavior.

What employers should want is an engaged, trustworthy and committed workforce. Research shows that those qualities enhance productivity and longevity. So how does an employer nurture the workforce behaviors s/he wants amid physical absence? Short of brainwashing, can employees really be motivated to place the best interests of the company above their own?

Yes. But it begins with a shift in leadership mindset and a deliberate culture focused on long-term versus short-term goals.

If a workplace encourages and incentivizes employees to think beyond the tasks assigned to them, to bring critical thinking to their roles and to develop new skills, employees should find that their own advancement is a side effect. Employees that naturally show these tendencies are the ones who have stood out when suddenly Zoom meetings replaced in-person encounters, when their company's 2020 plans became irrelevant overnight or their product plans, distribution strategies and operations shifted. They are the individuals who already view success as more than getting good grades.

Certainly, some people are more naturally

inclined to work like this. Perhaps even because of their early education. But it isn't only a matter of hiring those types of employees. It is considering how to provide the right leadership, environment, culture, training and rewards to develop them.

In education, there is a theory around developing curricula around four C's - collaboration, communication, critical thinking and creativity. The idea is that while the jobs and ways of working for which we are educating our children may look completely different when they enter the workforce, they can bring those traits forward to be successful. Pre-COVID, we were already working in a world that changed constantly and rapidly. With the increased speed, unknowns and setbacks of today, being able to learn, develop and respond quickly is invaluable. The four C's play into this. Employees that are highly skilled in all four are simply more successful during change.

What does that look like for a corporate environment? It goes beyond a need to train employees on how to conduct a Zoom call. It is training employees on how to collaborate and communicate to create new leaders across the organization. It is about asking employees to consider how leading virtually can achieve a higher goal. It is understanding the theory of math as opposed to passing a math test.

Brunswick Insight research shows that a quarter of U.S. employees intend to seek a new role in the next 12 months, and the main reason is that their current roles offer too little opportunity for growth. Instead of regarding this revelation as a threat, companies should embrace it, and put resources behind it. A pandemic is not the greatest environment in which to hire. What better news than that your existing workforce is teeming with desire for new opportunities?

All kinds of research shows that employers can train and incentivize workers to develop new ways to collaborate, communicate and increase creative and critical thinking. But it also shows that employers often put the onus on employees to find ways to grow, learn and develop their skills. Now is the time to turn resources away from surveillance platforms and toward development platforms. Adding surveillance metrics based on hours in front of a computer, emails sent or pushing reports to ensure work is seen, can lead to less than ideal employee attributes. Increased use of surveillance technologies may cause unintended culture shifts – therefore decreasing productivity, accountability and commitment of our employees.

Instead, employees need help and opportunities for training. And they need to know about those opportunities through every internal channel you

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have—email, intranet, newsletters, meetings, leaders and influencer groups. But communication about trainings can't be the end.

Employees must be incentivized in the right ways to understand why their learning and development matters to their own success, and the success of the company. Certainly there is a personal responsibility in that, but it also means that organizations need to structure environments that encourage intellectual risks rather than only celebrating boxes being checked. It also means that social comparison and competition needs to be reduced to allow and foster new thinking, or innovation.

Leaders must also act, and lead, in ways that go beyond achieving a task or getting the A. This needs to start at the top, and it needs reinforcement from the middle. Today, managers hire for roles versus hiring incredible people and finding the best work for them within the operating structure. With a remote workforce, in a constantly changing environment, leaders need to do the hard work of getting to know their team members better. Understanding what they are great at and how they work best. And then bringing the right employees to the tasks at hand. This is an evolving process and certainly puts more work on leaders themselves to work with better communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity.

It can be scary to allow more autonomy, rather than giving orders or micromanaging, in a time when you can't see if Joe is working hard or hardly working. But by spending more time understanding the true outcomes and objectives for company success and releasing the "normal" way we've always worked, we can lead independent thinkers who are engaged, trustworthy and committed. ◆