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Aug 5, 2021, 07:00am EDT | 61 views

# A Tale Of Two Workforces, And The Board's Urgent Challenge




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The Board Must Lean In To Prevent Delta-Based Employee Tensions. GETTY

Two emerging cultural conflicts exacerbated by the Delta variant combine to present a pressing oversight challenge for corporate boards. The deftness with which the board responds to this challenge may well define its future credibility on workforce culture concerns.

One such conflict is generationally grounded, where in increasing numbers millennial and other younger employees are resisting return-to-work requests from management. According to reporting in [The New York Times](#), these are employees who have, over the last 18 months, become accustomed to working from home and the associated flexibility it provides. Indeed, for the youngest of employees, “WFH” is the only workforce experience they know, and they are not persuaded by descriptions of how productive and stimulating the traditional office environment can be.

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This reluctance is compounded by the particular concern millennial employees have for personal health and safety matters. For these employees, the rising infection rates caused by the Delta variant may only serve to increase their reluctance to return to the office, as some recent surveys suggest.

And this reluctance carries with it the material risk of conflict with older employees, managers and executives who support return-to-office plans as serving a more inclusive and engaged culture and a more efficient and dynamic work environment.

This “generation gap” is demonstrated by a recent survey from the [Conference Board](#), concluding that 55% of millennials are questioning the value of returning to the office, as compared to 45% of “Gen-Xers” (i.e., those born between 1965 and 1996) and only 36% of “Baby Boomers” (i.e., those born between 1946 and 1964). The Conference Board further concludes that support for remote working remains high, and has increased significantly from January, 2021.

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The other conflict is more **class-grounded**, with concerns that some corporate vaccination mandates can disproportionately impact blue collar employees within the broader workforce, and with the increasing potential for tension between vaccinated and unvaccinated employees.

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As to the former concern, at least two issues are in play. First is the matter of health equity. As [The New York Times DealBook](#), as noted, most of the unvaccinated population consists of people at lower income levels, those who are uninsured, or people who live in states where the pandemic has been politicized. Second is the concern that companies that implement vaccination mandates covering only management level employees may unintentionally widen the gap -and the suspicion- between the vaccinated and unvaccinated, given that lower income employees are less likely to be vaccinated.

Indeed, [recent newspaper](#) reports highlight the rising anger of many vaccinated citizens for those who have chosen not to be vaccinated, attributing to them (fairly or unfairly) much of the responsibility for the current infection surge. That anger certainly can find its way into the discourse of the workplace.

All of these issues carry incredible significance to the company, its prospects for business resilience and its ability to attract and retain a committed

workforce. And in that context they underscore the rationale for the new governance best practice regarding board oversight of workforce culture; i.e., that issues of such weight must have the attention and commitment of the board.

As articulated by the [National Association of Corporate Directors \(NACD\)](#), this best practice is grounded in the perspective that a positive organizational culture can be a meaningful corporate asset in a variety of ways (e.g., influencing operational performance, talent development and organizational reputation). As NACD notes, the days have since passed when corporate culture could be treated as a “soft issue” by management and boards.

This perspective is shared by a new report from [the Conference Board](#) which calls upon corporate governance to be more engaged in employee health and welfare as a matter of value preservation, and to encourage management to adopt a more strategic approach to the topic.

From leadership’s perspective, the ongoing pandemic has proven to be an extraordinary incubator of workforce culture concerns; e.g., the adjustment to remote work; the absence of work/home separation; concerns with workforce safety and general return-to-work issues. The new, Delta-prompted potential for intra-organizational clash is the latest and potentially one of the most significant of these concerns.

In such a fluid and challenging environment, informed board collaboration with management on the resolution of these issues can represent some of the highest and best utilization of governance time and energy. The stakes for the organization’s operations, reputation, and talent recruitment and retention are incredibly high for the board to stand on the sidelines, deferring to management’s direction

A true silver lining from the otherwise dark cloud of the pandemic would be the ability of the board and management to work effectively in preventing

conflict in the workforce and to encouraging the sense of community and purpose amongst employees. Such a partnership would help to confirm the board's related (and critical) oversight role. The Delta variant has claimed enough victims; workplace culture need not be one of them.

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