Create a Successful Culture of Hybrid Remote Work in Times of Crisis

Published 14 May 2020 - ID G00725555 - 19 min read

By Analysts Daniel Sanchez Reina, Fabrizio Magnani

Initiatives: CIO Leadership, Culture and People **and 1 more**

COVID-19 has changed the way we work. Employees are trying to adapt to remote or hybrid remote/on-site work, while also facing concerns about employment due to the economic downturn. These things hinder their engagement, motivation and productivity, meaning CIOs must build a culture of resilience.

Overview

Key Findings

- Organizations are embracing remote work at different scales, which employees are not used to. This causes employees to struggle to be self-organized, to adjust to the lack of socialization and to stay productive.

- The technological side of remote work is the least of your problems. People's resilience is at stake, not only because of remote work, but also due to the shock and uncertainty of COVID-19 and economic stress that is shaking the foundations of company cultures.

- Performance of people (remote or physical) declines in times of crisis. The challenge of most enterprises is to not just survive, but to thrive.

- Leaders are struggling to generate the levels of engagement and motivation required to get the most of people in this remote work environment. There is a cohort of office workers who feel disconnected from their remote colleagues, and a cohort of remote workers who feel disconnected with the rest of their team too.

Recommendations

As a CIO seeking to create a resilient IT organization culture in times of remote work and crisis, you must:

- Create an environment of **Open Vulnerability**, where people are willing to put their vulnerabilities, problems and fears out in the open — giving you the opportunity to tackle them — by exhibiting transparency, caring about their concerns and running premortems. Just creating an open and transparent atmosphere is not enough.

- Ensure people know the impact they make with their work, by aligning employees' meaningful work as closely as possible with the company goals (**Impact Orientation**). Just being oriented to outcomes is not enough.

- Feed each employee's main basic recognition need by identifying which of the three basic motivational needs of human beings prevail in them (**Intrinsic Rewarding**). Just having a rewards and recognition system is not enough.

- Foster an environment where a **Sense of Tribe** prevails beyond the IT organization by establishing, in a deliberate fashion, permanent links with other parts of the company. Just developing a sense of belonging is not enough.

Analysis

COVID-19 has plunged us into a type of social and economic crisis that has very specific characteristics due to its nature (pandemic) and the organizational turmoil it has caused (remote work at a high scale). Classical ways of achieving engagement and motivation are not enough because they were applied to a workplace that was very different during and post-COVID-19. Most workplaces have transformed into a hybrid of remote and physical work. And, to cap it all, this is all under a scenario of economic downturn that poses concerns over job stability and security.

As a result of this, there are four cultural behaviors that CIOs should incorporate in their IT organizational culture to make it more resilient. Depending on the enterprise, it should be carried out either directly by the CIO, or via the CIO encouraging their IT leaders to do it, or both.

This document does not intend to replace your current company culture with a different one. The goal is to add these four additional behaviors to increase the resilience of your team members in these turbulent times (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Culture of Resilience — Framework

Culture of Resilience — Framework
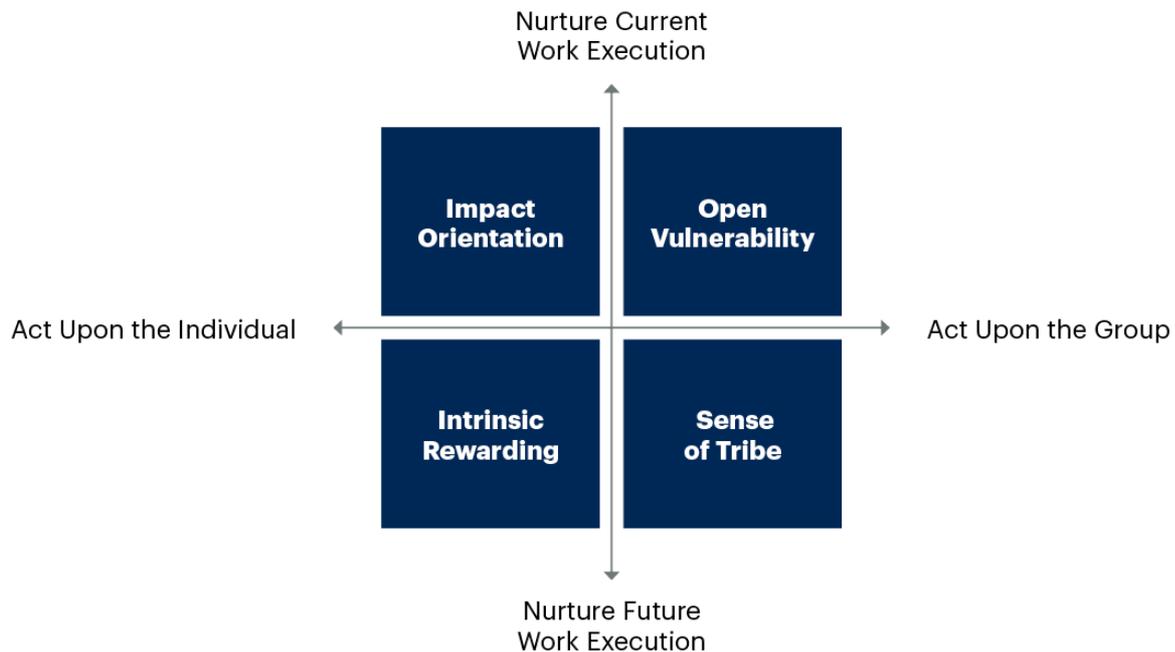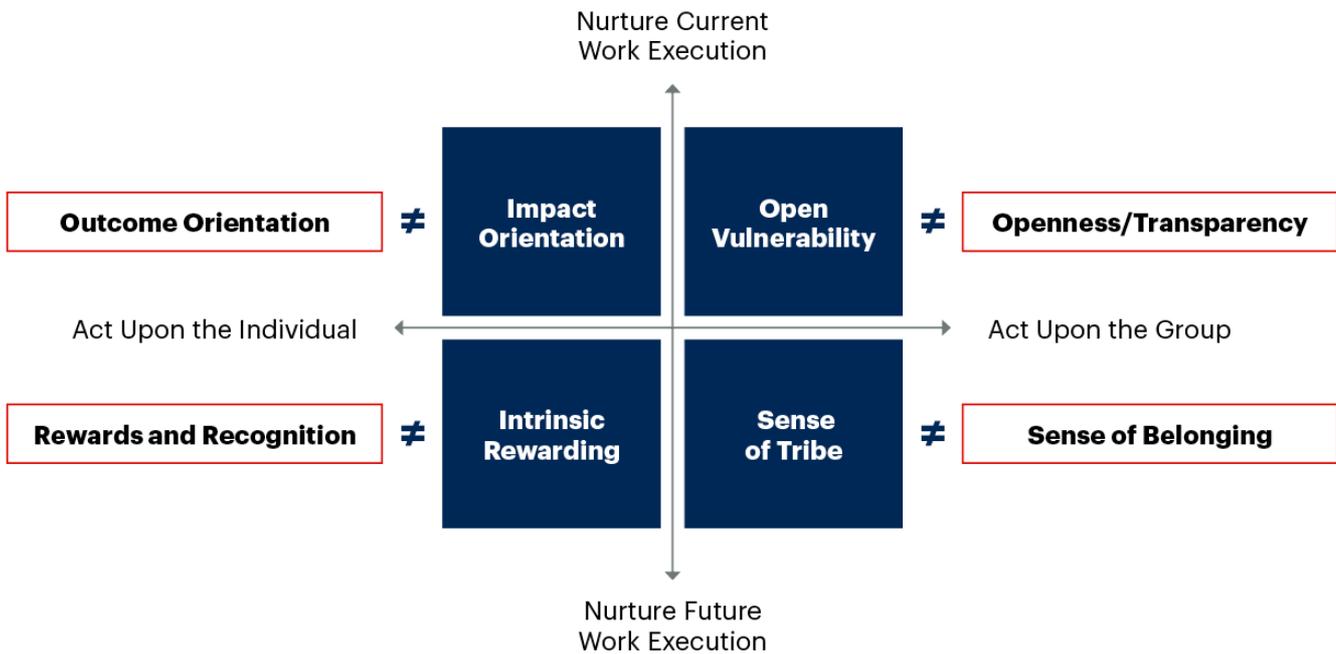

Source: Gartner

725555_C

Ideally, CIOs should apply the four components at the same time. However, they can start with those they feel more comfortable with (for example, focusing on the left-hand side of the framework if they are better at individual, rather than group, interactions), and enter in the other ones more gradually.

It is important to highlight the differences between these elements and others that are seemingly similar, but not the same (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Outstanding Differences With Traditional Concepts

Outstanding Differences With Traditional Concepts

Source: Gartner

725555_C

Open Vulnerability

Why?

Uncertainty and lack of information increase in times of crisis, which force our brains to "fill the gaps" with interpretations, often incorrectly, based on personal experience and perceptions. This is intensified when we work remotely because we don't have the common physical spaces, like the coffee machine, to meet other people and exchange information and resolve doubts

On top of that, organizations with high levels of trust increase their average employee engagement by 76% over organizations with low levels of trust. [1] The core element of trust is transparency at a high scale; that is, between leaders and team members and among team members, with 71% of employees saying their employers should increase their transparency. [2]

The combination of our brains' need to fill the gaps and the aim for transparency indicates that we must create an environment in which people feel comfortable exposing their fears and vulnerabilities, both personal and professional.

Difference between Open Vulnerability behavior and openness/transparency: Being in an open environment where transparency prevails does not necessarily mean that people are willing to put their vulnerabilities out in the open. Only when leaders achieve that open vulnerability will they be able to manage those vulnerabilities, problems and fears, and therefore, increase the psychological well-being of their teams.

How?

Achieving vulnerability is a journey of transparency by building understanding and care by framing expectations that lead us to the reassurance of our team members to express their vulnerabilities and fears out in the open (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Journey to Achieve Open Vulnerability

Journey To Achieve Open Vulnerability

Transparency	+	Care	=	Reassurance
Build Understanding		Frame Expectations		Handle Vulnerabilities
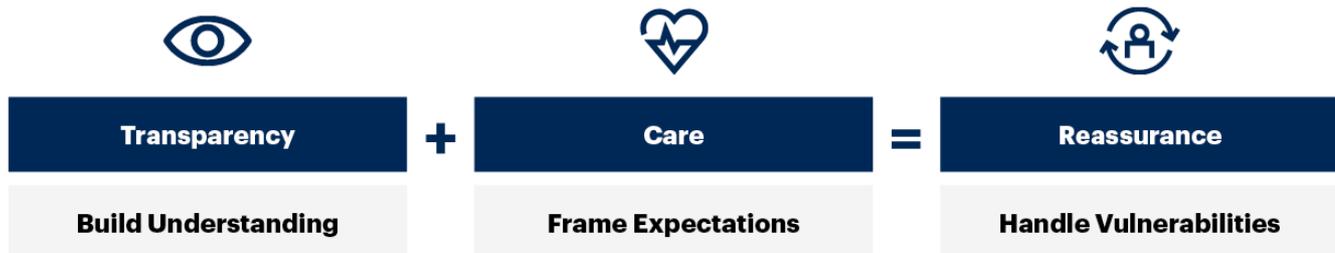
Source: Gartner
725555_C

Build Understanding to Aim for Transparency

These are the three simple things you must do:

- Regularly share what you know about the company's present and future situation, but not only impacting your department. People are not stupid; they hear, they feel and they sense. Uncertainty is worse than transparency. If you are opaque, they will tend to fill the gaps with imagination, which usually is not for the best.

- Be more accessible than ever, and give honest and clear answers to team concerns and doubts. If you are not authorized because some sensitive topics are being discussed yet, be honest, making sure that you build understanding.

- Keep your senses wide open to identify concerns — personal or professional — that the team may not be sharing with you.

Notice the difference between "communicating" and "building understanding." There is a substantial difference. When you build understanding, you are ensuring that the message has been understood by asking precise questions, anticipating the concerns and providing answers to those concerns even though they have not been verbalized. Encourage your IT leaders to do the same with their teams.

If we ask our team members to explore artificial intelligence (AI) for fraud detection, there will be a few who are enthusiastic about the proposal. They may say, "Yes, I will start right now, and I use it as a pilot to extend AI to all the areas of the company." You can extend your explanations if you wish, but they are not asking for it; they don't need it to start the movement. But most people are

not like that. Most will need to know which guide rails to use to develop that solution, which portion of their time they are supposed to spend on their own learning and which portion in the search for the solution. They will also need to know how it fits in with their overall priorities, and what will happen if that exploration ends in nothing. Without such a proactive exercise of building understanding, they will not move because they lack information. And, even worse, most likely they will not ask you for clarification. You are not building understanding, they will feel insecure, and thus, you are not creating transparency. This is an example of the difference between communicating and building understanding.

Frame Expectations to Show That You Care

When you frame expectations, taking into account people's needs, you show care.

These are the three simple things you must do:

- Do not be "binary." Walk away from mandates like, "I need everyone to start working at 9 a.m." or "Everyone has to work eight hours a day." That does not convey psychological well-being because each person has different needs: Some are more productive in the morning, others in the evening; some of them have complicated logistics with children at precise times of the day and more. Tailor their work schedules to what's best for them.

- Define a window of no more than two hours so that everyone is available every day to participate in team meetings or make decisions. If you need additional time to arrange meetings, be very selective with which ones are really necessary and which are expendable. The rest of the time, let them arrange their agendas to best suit them. Encourage your IT leaders to do the same with their teams. Remember that the principle and merit behind remote work is not to replace the office, but to allow people to organize their time as best suits them in order to achieve higher levels of engagement.

- Set shorter milestones, preferably weekly, which will be the guide rails for your team members to organize their time and for you to refrain from micromanaging. Limit your weekly interaction with your team members to just one meeting per week. If you micromanage them because of your anxiety for control, they will feel that you don't trust them and that you don't respect their autonomy. You will be spoiling the construction of trust you have to aim for. Watch out for signs that you, your IT leaders and other leaders underneath you are micromanaging.

Given the fact that in times of crisis priorities change often, reprioritize as needed, week by week. Workload has to be oriented to the relevant topics.

Handle Vulnerabilities as They Are Put Out in the Open

Now you are ready to have your team members share their vulnerabilities, fears or problems. Remember — that's the only way for you to be able to manage them.

These are the two simple things you must do:

- Foster conversations where fears and vulnerabilities are put out in the open. You have to explicitly guarantee maximum confidentiality. Break the ice yourself to generate more confidence. Some examples include statements like, "I feel I am not being able to identify the reason why the cloud migration project is not working well," and "I am afraid of not having enough skills to carry out such an initiative." They may also include more personal fears like, "I am afraid that my partner will fall ill, and have to dedicate myself fully to my children and I will not be able to give my best at work."

- Then, as a team or privately, depending on the theme, build the "vulnerabilities premortem" by asking:

  - "What is the worst thing that could happen if the vulnerability/fear occurs?"

  - "How can we prevent it from happening?"

  - "And if it happens, how can we solve it?"

Example 1: Mary recognizes that she is afraid of not meeting the important deadline of project X. Along with her, build the vulnerabilities premortem and act accordingly. Mary, and you, will feel reassured and will put the countermeasures in place.

Example 2: John recognizes that he is not skilled enough to manage an important aspect of project Y. Along with him, build the vulnerabilities premortem and act accordingly.

Example 3: Patrick will not be able to dedicate the necessary time and effort to project Z because his adolescent son has behavior problems at school. Because of this, he wants to dedicate a significant part of his time over the next two weeks to manage the situation (such as spending more time with his son and attending group therapy with him). The vulnerability premortem will allow you, along with Patrick, to put the countermeasures in place.

Impact Orientation

Why?

The management of emotions in our brains, fear in particular, is directly connected to the hippocampus: the center of memory. According to neuroscience, the high emotional sensitivity typical with contexts of crisis have the ability to leave a long-lasting memory in our brain. In other words, you will be remembered for a long time if you don't manage this situation properly — and also if you do well — much more than in normal times.

In times of crisis, feeling that our work contributes to company goals reduces anxiety about job security. [3] Therefore, whatever you do to increase or reduce that anxiety will contribute to the psychological well-being of that person. As a side effect, productivity will also increase. There is

work to do. Employees report that 22% of their time is spent doing low-value and repetitive tasks, which represents more than one day per week. [4]

On top of that, if those goals make sense to us, it will generate the motivation that will make our brains segregate the dopamine that activates the neurotransmitters of neuroplasticity. In other words, the adaptation to change and to the new environment will be faster and more easily accepted.

Last but not least, the risk aversion inherent in times of crisis is a disengagement factor for high-potential employees (HiPos). HiPos tend to have a preference for less routine activities. [5]

Difference between Impact Orientation behavior and outcome orientation: An employee can focus on meeting the results, but that doesn't mean that with those results they will have impacted on their stakeholders (whether they are clients, other departments or colleagues), or that those outcomes make sense to them.

How?

The key is to identify what meaningful work is for each team member. Follow the sequence in Figure 4 to connect people's sense of meaningful work with company goals.

Figure 4. Impact Orientation

Impact Orientation

Explore Meaningful Work (MW) ▶ Connect MW With Impact ▶ Set an Impact goal

Source: Gartner

725555_C

This is what you must do for each step of that sequence:

- **Explore meaningful work**: If you don't know what meaningful work (MW) is for them, open a candid one-on-one conversation and ask them, "What makes/would make you get out of bed every day to come to work?" Listen very actively; watch for what excites them, what makes them smile and what makes their eyes bright. Of course, it has to be feasible within your department. And set clear expectations — you are simply exploring it to connect it with the company goals as much as possible.

- **Connect MW with an "impact" goal**: Have a conversation around that, such as: "How could your sense of MW have a positive impact on company goals?" Make sure the person knows what the company goals are.

- **Set an impact goal**: Finally, set a goal or two where MW meets company goals.

Example: A person in the development area, who is very conscious about the necessary quality of applications, says that being an internal beta tester is their MW. Find, together with that team member, a set of applications where they can beta-test them and set specific goals for it.

Reminder: Do not micromanage. Focus on the outcome, not on the process, the time slots the person will work on it, the effort they will put in or the way they will do it.

Intrinsic Rewarding

Why?

In times of crisis we need approximately 30% more recognition than in normal times. [6] We previously mentioned the neuroscience finding on long-lasting memory and reduction of anxiety when our work contributes to company goals. It is also important to remember the loss of visual signs of recognition if we work remotely, and the lower importance of superficial recognition in times of crisis — working remotely or not. This is because we have more important things to look after (such as our health, our family and our finances). This indicates that in turbulent times we need to feel not only more recognized, but also recognized in the deepest components of our motivational needs to create a long-lasting positive memory and nurture our work positively moving forward.

Difference between Intrinsic Rewarding behavior and rewards and recognition: Although having a culture of reward and recognition is very positive, in times of distress we must appeal to the most intimate needs for recognition of human beings, as we have seen. Moreover, rewards and recognition are "backward looking," based on performance accrued. Intrinsic rewards are "forward looking," setting the foundations of engagement and motivation to nurture the future well-being of each team member and their productivity.

How?

Humans are governed by three major types of needs, regardless of age, gender, geography, race or culture (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Intrinsic Rewarding

Intrinsic Rewarding

Need for achievement
Need for sense of accomplishment (attainment of goals)

Need for status
Need for prestige and influence (increase in personal status)

Need for affiliation
Need for friendly relationships (creation of harmony)

The Three Motivational Needs

Source: Adapted From David McClelland's Human Motivation Theory

725555_C

We all have a fraction of each of those three needs, but one is predominant. Find the predominant one for each team member. You will have found the most intimate recognition lever of each one.

Identifying the main motivational need is quite obvious in most cases:

- Individuals who exhibit a preference for taking part in challenging projects will likely be driven by achievement. They are also individuals who ask for frequent feedback.

- Individuals who display a preference for leading others, or for having visible signs of status (such as a car, office or bombastic business title), will likely be driven by power.

- Individuals who show a preference for working collaboratively, or whose productivity is higher when they work in groups or teams, will likely be driven by affiliation.

Take into account their main need when it comes to recognizing them:

- If the need for achievement prevails, recognize their good work by engaging them in challenging projects.

- If the need for status prevails, involve the person in a prestigious project, let them lead a working group or engage them in a project sponsored by the CEO. The closer to the power, the more their status needs will be fulfilled.

- If the need for affiliation prevails, involve them in a project or product that is not working well because of the tensions between team members —because they will strive to achieve a harmonious environment. Or engage them in a project that will produce a social benefit.

CIOs must be careful not to overload people with this additional work. Remember it is a reward, so it should be part of their normal agendas, not part of their after-hours agenda.

Sense of Tribe

Why?

As the social animals that we are, physical eye contact and proximity releases serotonin, an essential hormone to keep the balance between positive and negative feelings. In the particular case of remote work, we don't have such physical proximity. Furthermore, interactions with others are also essential to activate mirror neurons, those responsible for developing empathy. Again, in the particular case of remote work, we are lacking that.

That, along with the need to fill the gaps in times of crisis (described previously), informs us that CIOs have to strive to create a "sense of tribe," which goes beyond their department. The more positive interactions we have with the members of the tribe (even in remote contexts), the more we will compensate for the lack of physical proximity (see Figure 6).

Difference between Sense of Tribe behavior and sense of belonging: Employees develop a sense of belonging — which can still exist in difficult circumstances and remote work — through the relationships with their team, or through the reputation of the company or its values. The sense of tribe goes much further than that; it is the next level. It has to do with the bonds created with the whole enterprise. Employees must feel that they can rely on anyone they may need in the organization at any time, and get from them anything they require to do their job.

How?

Examples of a proper sense of tribe:

- If a team member has an issue that the financial department must resolve, for example, a cost charge that they do not understand, do they know to whom they should address it? Is that person accessible enough? Do they feel cared for by that person? Do they strive to give that person the best solution in the shortest amount of time?

- If a team member needs human resources to manage an online course on cybersecurity, do they feel that there is someone on the other side of the line taking action about their request?

Figure 6. Sense of Tribe

Sense of Tribe

Source: Gartner

725555_C

A sense of tribe can be achieved by:

- **Creating "rituals" that involve yours and other departments:**

  - **Example 1**: Make a proposal to organize a biweekly ritual, face-to-face or virtual, with the entire company, in which, besides providing information about the current situation of the company, new projects and initiatives, all leaders will recognize individual or collective successes. If you know the other members of the tribe (who they are and what they do) and they know you, you all will increase the probability that the interactions of the tribe are more fluid and frequent.

  - **Example 2**: Set the ritual of establishing a virtual cafeteria where those who wish can meet every day for 20 minutes.

- **Setting one or two cross-departmental objectives**: What company goals can be better achieved by collaborating with another department? Or is there a company goal where collaborating with another department will increase team members' global knowledge of the enterprise?

- **Asking for an "altruistic" objective from each team member where they will help others (within the department or outside) to achieve their goals**: For example, this can include mentoring on a skill or competence to a colleague, helping another person to overcome a personal or professional concern, or similar.

- **Enabling social network channels where people from several departments can share ideas and socialize**: This could include something like a forum to overcome the personal or professional difficulties of remote work. Limit it to no more than two or three departments to avoid too many extroverts monopolizing the conversations.

Gartner, Inc. | 725555

Final Reflection

After reading all of this research, you will ask yourself, "What can I do if I am not excellent in some of those four elements?" The horizontal and vertical axes of Figures 1 and 2 will help you.

For example, if you manage yourself better in individual than in group interactions, lean more on the two quadrants of the individual, on the left-hand side. If you are better at nurturing future conditions than at focusing on present work, focus on the two quadrants at the bottom.

But don't give up on addressing the other quadrants too. Give them a chance, and enter in those uncharted territories. You have nothing to lose; you can only make things better to foster a culture of resilience.

Evidence

Gartner's CIO Must-Read Research Collection for Successful Culture Change

[1] "The Neuroscience of Trust," Harvard Business Review.

[2] 2019 Gartner Future of Work Employee Panel Survey

[3] 2009 Gartner Manager Quality Survey; Gartner Analysis

[4] 2020 Gartner Digital Friction Survey

[5] 2019 Gartner CLC Human Resources, Employment Value Proposition Survey

[6] We previously published such correlation during the subprime crisis (at that time it was 15%), based on survey data from over 50,000 employees and hundreds of interviews. Based on more current data, it has gone up to approximately 30%.

Recommended by the Authors

Combat Digital Transformation Fatigue by Applying a Neuroscience Finding

Lead Your Employees Through the Emotional Side of COVID-19

React to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak via Raising Business Model Resilience

COVID-19: What the Board of Directors Needs to Know

Recommended For You

The Culture PRISM: 5 Dimensions That Shape Your Culture

Overcome the Fears, Embrace the Benefits and Launch a Remote Work Pilot Program

Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Managing the Remote Worker

Shape, Shift and Share the Organization's Culture for ContinuousNext

Myths and Realities of Changing Culture

Supporting Initiatives

CIO Leadership, Culture and People

⊕ **Track**

Coronavirus (COVID-19) Resource Center

⊕ **Track**