

How semiotics drive workplace culture change during the pandemic



A vicious cycle has been taking over many businesses amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

First, many homebound workers have been dealing with stress, fear, and social isolation. One global survey, organised by the University of Minnesota, [found](#) "a great deal of uncertainty across multiple life domains, causing increased psychological challenges. Respondents generally felt more stressed, depressed, anxious, nervous and more overwhelmed." In the United States, nearly 7 in 10 employees told mental health provider Ginger that the pandemic "is the most stressful time of their entire professional career," the American Journal of Managed Care [reported](#).

At the same time, businesses need workers to be productive. Layoffs have left fewer people handling more tasks. There are widespread reports of people putting in [longer hours](#) and losing whatever semblance of [work-life balance](#) they may have achieved previously. All of this makes stress even worse.

Businesses have long known that workplace cultures can do a lot to [exacerbate or alleviate](#) extreme stress. Cultures in which people are more comfortable and less overwhelmed see all sorts of benefits, [including](#), often, greater focus, strategic thinking and creativity.

As I work with organisations around the world to [design](#) their cultures, stress reduction is one of the central goals. This year, I've been hearing from executives who are facing a new challenge. They're asking: How do we instil a positive workplace culture when our teams are not coming together at a physical workplace?

It can be done. Many of the tools used in physical workplaces can, in fact, be translated online into virtual workplace environments. One of the most important tools is semiotics.

Semiotic management systems

Semiotics is, as Encyclopædia Britannica [puts it](#), "the study of signs and sign-using behaviour." Signs and symbols become imbued with meaning, which can have powerful effects in the human psyche.

This, of course, is often used in [marketing](#). Think of the Nike "swoosh," which carries the meaning "just do it" without the need for any explication. But signs and symbols can also be used internally in organisations to establish cultural values and norms.

For years we have been studying the ways semiotics can impact organisational outcomes by informing mindsets, beliefs, and behaviours — all key components of workplace culture. We've [found](#) that when used right, signs and symbols can serve as management tools that not only instil cultural norms, but also *re-instil* them on a daily basis. They lead to behaviour change.

One thing we do is create [culture walls](#) inside offices. Organisations select tiles filled with messages that visually articulate the norms that leaders are seeking to have adopted. These are set up in high-traffic areas. They can contain a wide variety of themes. These culture walls leverage [picture superiority](#) and other quirks of human cognition to spread and embed desired beliefs, mindsets and behaviours.

For example, our work with parts of the U.S. military has [focused](#) on building a culture of innovation and ending old, established, outdated practices that prevent new ideas from flourishing. So the culture wall at an Air Force Base includes symbols and images aimed at drilling in this idea. One [shows](#) two stone tablets with the message, "If it's not a law, it's a recommendation" — providing a reminder that personnel don't have to do things the way they've always been done.

Organisational psychologist Benjamin P. Hardy (with whom I have collaborated) [says](#) signs and symbols like these serve as "transformational triggers" because they are "tied deeply to a set of emotions, memories and goals."

Semiotics can appear in an organisation in numerous ways. In a series of fascinating experiments, Prof. Sreedhari Desai, of the University of North Carolina, and Maryam Kouchaki, of Northwestern University, [found](#) that employees changed their supervisors' behaviour by displaying "moral symbols" in the workplace. These symbols can include, for example, "posters of moral prototypes" such as Mahatma Gandhi "who have come to be recognised in the collective conscious of a given society for their ethical practices. Alternately, they could be explicit quotations exhorting people to be virtuous." When these symbols were shown, supervisors became less likely to ask subordinates to engage in unethical behaviour.

Virtual semiotics

These tools don't stop working when people are working remotely. Through providing staff with virtual backgrounds, for example, organisations can present signs and symbols that reflect the culture they're working to provide each day. Recently, we've had requests for a background that includes this quote from the late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg: "Real change, enduring change, happens one step at a time." It invokes a sense that employees shouldn't expect themselves to get everything done immediately.

I also recommend businesses send their employees physical objects or signs for their at-home workspaces. Even something as seemingly trivial as a paperweight or small framed image to put on a desk can have these same kinds of effects.

Of course, the messages conveyed through semiotics cannot exist in a vacuum. They only serve to instil values if the company itself lives out those values through daily behaviours. But as long as employees see their organisation "walk the walk," they'll start to experience the intended workplace culture as second nature — and the business will nurture the lower-stress culture employees need at this tumultuous time.



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