

THE JOURNAL OF BUSINESS AGILITY

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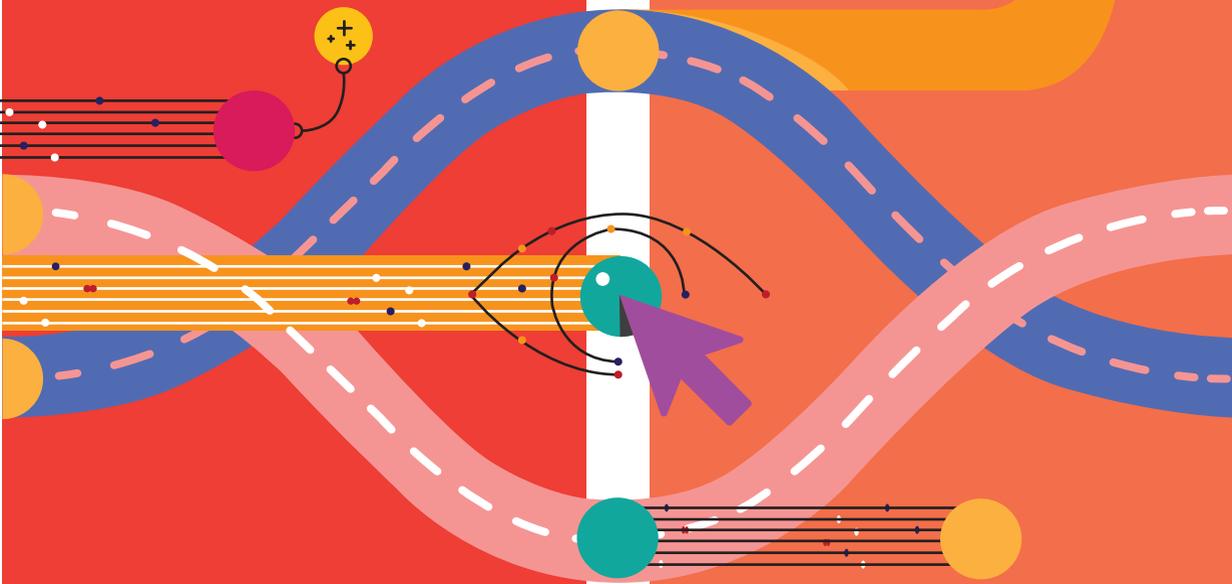
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# Rethinking



**WORK & THE WORKPLACE**

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issue theme

# rethinking work and the workplace

In his book, *The Second Machine Age*, MIT professor Erik Brynjolfsson describes a future in which machines are becoming increasingly capable of performing many tasks that have traditionally been done by human beings. This trend is already well underway, and it is transforming the nature of work and the workplace.

In the past, work was often physical and repetitive, and it could be done by people with little education or training. But as machines have become more sophisticated, they have increasingly replaced humans in performing these tasks. Today, many jobs require higher levels of education and training, and they are often more creative and challenging.

The workplace is also changing. In the past, work was often done in factories or offices, but today it is increasingly being done remotely, through telecommuting and other forms of flexible work arrangements.

These changes have profound implications for individuals, organizations, and society as a whole. They are raising important questions about the future of work and the workplace. What will work be like in the future? What will the workplace of the future look like? How can we best prepare for these changes?

These are just some of the questions that we will be exploring in this issue of *Emergence*. We hope that you will find it to be an interesting and thought-provoking read.

We hope you enjoy this issue of *Emergence*!

Manoj Khanna  
*Managing Editor & Publisher*

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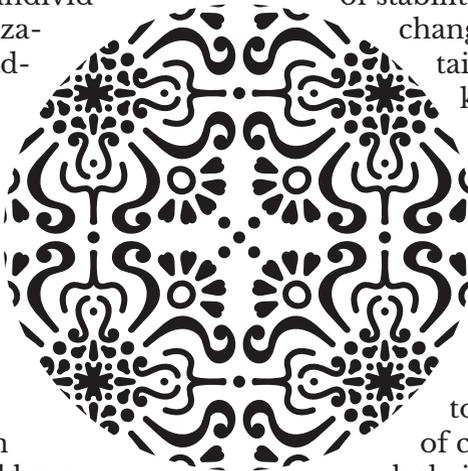
# Emergent Change & the Human Factor

Nicole Brauckmann

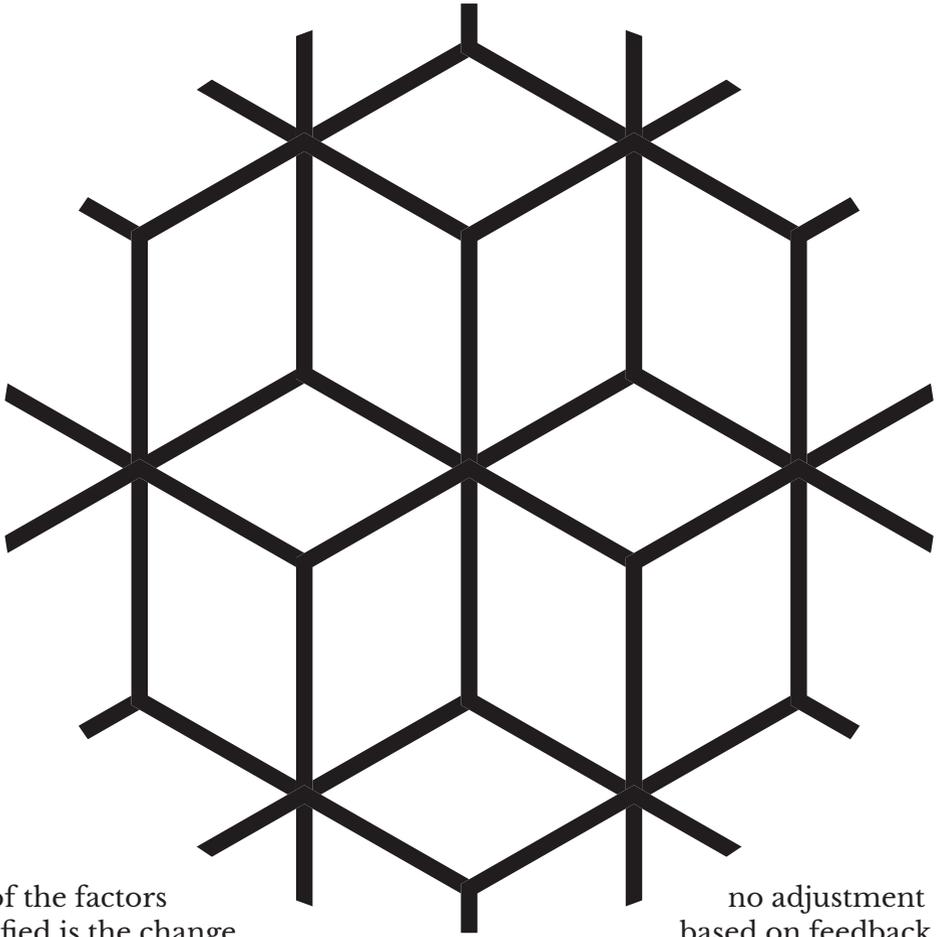
As the first engagements of the Russia-Ukraine war unfolded in early 2022, people around the world were once again confronted by the fragility of their long-held assumptions and beliefs. More than two years of a global pandemic had already forced individuals and organizations alike to radically reshuffle how they went about their businesses, including a far quicker and broader shift to remote and hybrid ways of working than probably would have been possible without this external pressure. Then, instead of a new, post-Covid stability, a violent and destructive war in Europe forced us to recognize that the certainties we hold onto dearly can easily be shaken by sudden dis-

ruptive, unforeseen developments, whether they be existing internally or externally.

Focusing on the business world, these events underline that seeing change as a phase between periods of stability is obsolete and constant change will be required for sustained business success—a key argument used in the conversation around agile organizations. This includes facing growing uncertainty and unpredictability that makes longer term planning futile. What does it take for businesses and leaders to navigate this constant sea of change successfully, particularly if they cannot rely on past experiences to find answers to as-yet unknown questions? Several rounds of empirical research into what it takes to successfully lead large scale, complex change have pointed to the answers.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of the research methodology see Deborah Rowland, *Still Moving – How to Lead Mindful Change*, Wiley 2017. The research team used Behavioral Event Interviews to gather stories of how leaders led change. These stories were coded against a framework based on the Still Moving frameworks whilst a multi-rater panel assessed sustained change success. The data was subsequently used for quantitative analysis, using T-Tests, regression analysis, and model testing. Academic Lead: Malcom J. Higgs, Professor for Organization Behavior and HR, Hull University, UK



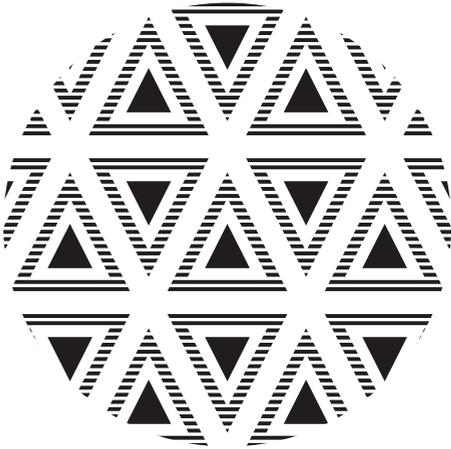
One of the factors identified is the change approach<sup>2</sup>, a conscious and consistent choice of how to go about change that corresponds with underlying assumptions about the nature of change. Conventionally, change often was and is seen as something manageable. The assumptions read: “The top team in any organization undergoing change clearly have the answer (what to change) and also know which steps need to be executed to get there (how to change).” As a consequence, change is often delivered top down, with standard recipes, programmes, and little to

no adjustment based on feedback along the way. In a slight twist to this directive approach, some organizations acknowledge the need for (local) differentiation, allowing dispersed groups of management to implement change so it fits their contexts best. They still pursue a top-down set, pre-defined change outcome (pre-determined what) by generously spreading standardized tool kits and communication packages from the center without any follow up integration and cohesion (no cohesive how). The research clearly demonstrates

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<sup>2</sup> See Deborah Rowland, Malcolm Higgs: *Sustaining Change – Leadership That Works*, Wiley 2008 for a more detailed description of the four different change approaches identified in the research.

that both the directive as well as the self-assembly approach to change have a highly negative correlation to change success. In other words, don't use these when you want your large scale, complex transformation to stand a chance of success!



Whilst there still is occasionally “episodic change”—a clear cut response to a new or changed situation—the big hairy challenges most organizations face are of the sort where the answer isn't obvious from the beginning. In most cases it is evident that “what successfully got us here, won't get us there”. The most promising way to deal with change under these circumstances is an emergent approach<sup>3</sup> which starts from the assumption that most transformations are too complex to be directly controlled, and the context is too volatile to cling to any longer-term planning or pre-defined

actions. Similar to the fundamentals of the agile movement with its encouragement of (cross-functional) collaboration, self organization, and rapid feedback loops, this approach consciously steps into the uncertainty of not-knowing. It trusts an organization's ability to galvanize the needed skills and energy behind a loosely defined direction of the change instead of following detailed plans—which most likely are overtaken by the constantly changing context anyway. It is firmly rooted in the conviction that “I cannot create change, but can only create the conditions for change to happen”.

Leading change in an emergent way starts with setting a loose intention—a north star, clearly visible for all and used to navigate the journey—and very few hard rules that guide behavior. The second step is to make space for self-organization. Emergent change also is characterized by small experiments on ripe issues that have large consequences and a step-by-step approach that, through frequent feedback loops, is open for adjustment along the way wherever needed.<sup>4</sup> Again, this focus on self-organization, working across boundaries and the aspiration to learn quickly, and constantly adapt and learn as you go is at the heart of agile approaches as well.

However, many organizations find

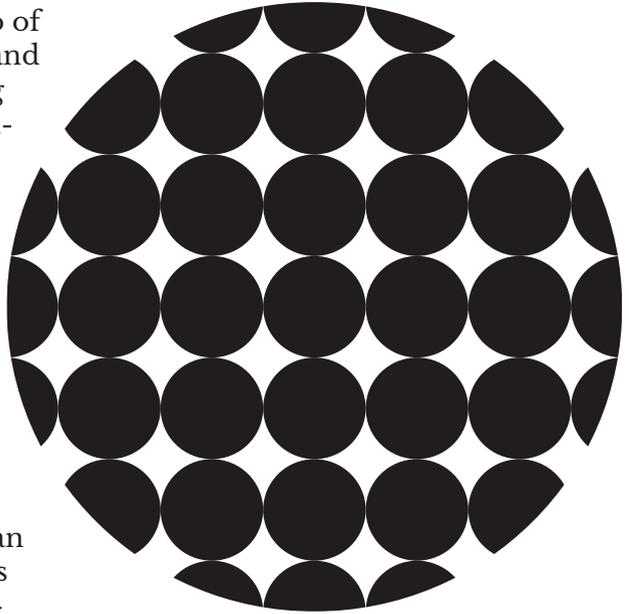
<sup>3</sup> The fourth approach (masterful change) was identified as second most likely to yield the desired outcomes. Different from the emergent change approach, the masterful approach still assumes change is, to some extent, controllable and works from a more clearly defined answer to the “what” of change. See Rowland, Higgs, *Sustaining Change – Leadership That Works*, Wiley 2008. Emergent change however clearly stands out as the number one choice.

<sup>4</sup> Deeper insights into the nature of emergent change can be found in the research into complex adaptive systems—imagine, changing an organization would resemble more the beautiful movement of a school of fish or a flock of birds than the uphill battle it often feels like...

it difficult to work through emergent change. It requires letting go of control, embracing uncertainty, and not-knowing, instead of pursuing detailed plans and minute expected outcomes. This is difficult for both leaders and their teams: We are all hardwired to stick to the known and capitalize on learned and tested routines—after all, we have not only spent years on continuously improving what we do so well, we all strongly feel this very routine is what got us this far.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, there is always the human capability to approach new things with curiosity and embrace questions as opportunities to innovate and pursue new solutions. The conscious decision for emergent change thus can liberate curiosity and creativity to a much higher degree than the dire picture of a burning platform and a very restricted change approach with prescribed, detailed requirements.<sup>6</sup>

What does it take to effectively lead emergent change and remain open to curiosity and newness rather than being seduced back into the safety of routines and known solutions? It turns out when leaders are equipped



and able to address the fundamental human need to belong (both in themselves as well as in their teams and organizations) they have a much higher chance of successful change leadership.

Belonging is one of the ordering forces that govern any human system—a bit like laws of nature which in themselves are invisible, but once you understand (for example) the principle of gravity, you see its impact all around you! The ordering force of belonging refers to the underlying flow of energy created

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<sup>5</sup> Neuroscience has shed a light on the fact that our brain's evolution benefits from known paths over the unknown, particularly in stressful situations: Facing a saber tooth tiger in the old days was best met with a prompt reaction that didn't require deliberation: fight, flight, or freeze. Learned routines were once a question of survival. Today, and more complex contexts, they can be a huge liability getting in the way of change.

<sup>6</sup> Again, Neuroscience helpfully pointed out two fundamentally different modes of our brain: approach and avoid. A 2001 experiment at the University of Maryland demonstrated how these two dichotomies affect creativity. Two groups were each given a picture of a maze to solve. In one, the maze was themed around a mouse trying to exit in order to eat some cheese. In the other, the mouse was escaping an owl. The group who solved the cheese puzzle then tested twice as well on creative tasks afterward. Clearly, the avoid mode is a very healthy impulse (poisonous spider on the wall) but can equally be very disabling (a picture of a poisonous spider on the wall).

through all individuals striving to feel safe, seen, and able to contribute to the collective. Think of playing ball at school and choosing the teams—how the less talented kids silently become worried about being chosen only at the very end, as the least favored contributor.<sup>7</sup> Again, belonging isn't the only ordering force at play, yet it seems to have primacy over other forces. For example, within the order of exchange, many acts of giving and receiving can build or threaten belonging if the measure is unequal. To combat this, inequality must be addressed in some fashion, at the very least by acknowledging it to be unfair—as an example, a business moving away from traditional business models and abandoning those divisions that

were the source of past successes. These imbalances can elicit powerful emotions—grief, a sense of loss, vulnerability, and also an awareness of being indebted.

Acknowledgement helps to deal with them in a constructive manner.<sup>8</sup> Almost like invisible magnetic fields, these ordering forces can promote or inhibit change (imagine a magnet pulling iron filings in one direction or another).

Change inevitably threatens belonging as it upsets the status quo and raises questions—“Will I be able to

contribute in future with my current skills and knowledge?”

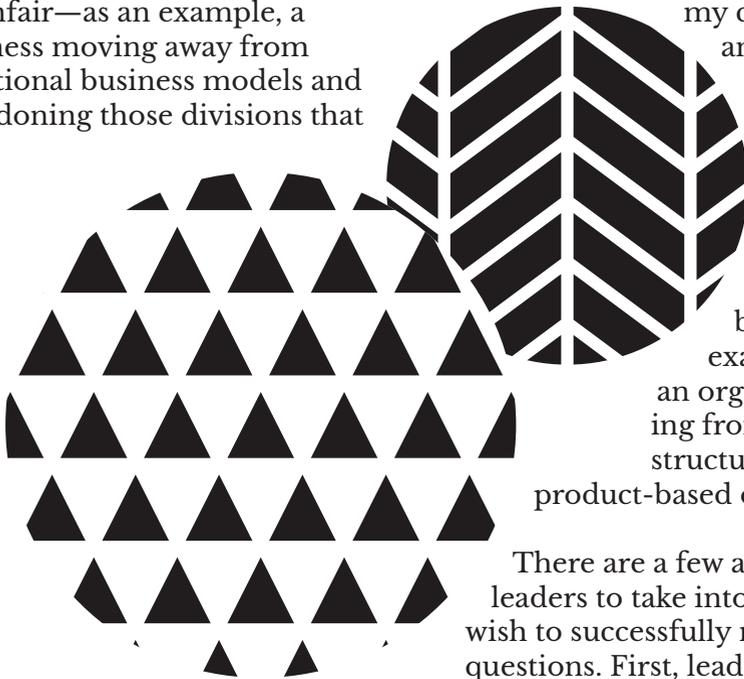
“Can I trust this new team, division, or group?”, etc.—and often requires new

belongings to be created. For example, think of

an organization moving from a regional structure to a

product-based one.

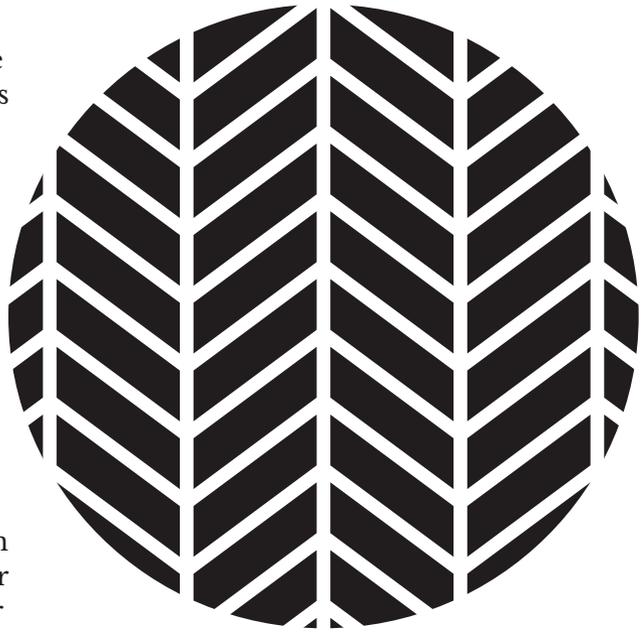
There are a few aspects for leaders to take into account if they wish to successfully navigate these questions. First, leaders need to tune



<sup>7</sup> Our biology comes into play here again—without belonging to a tribe and being looked after, a newborn infant would surely die. Brain scans demonstrated that social stress (fear of exclusion) activates the same brain areas as actual physical pain. Life sciences prove that life expectancy is dependent on the quality and quantity of sound relationships. As such, belonging is a matter of life and death.

<sup>8</sup> The four ordering forces are Belonging, Exchange, Time—a shared collective history with its successes and upheavals—and Place—the intricate web of formal and informal hierarchies that sometimes create conflict, e.g. when length of service or age isn't in symmetry with formal hierarchy.

into themselves. Often, leaders are so preoccupied with leading others through change that they do not spend sufficient time and care on looking after themselves. I remember many conversations with colleagues from my corporate past after a merger with their former main competitor. While all of them acknowledged the economic and strategic sense behind this decision (some of them having in fact been deeply involved in executing this deal) our conversations were more often about losing familiar colleagues, or mourning the changes in behavior and values. They also shared stories about their teams being reluctant to step into the new organization and truly bring it to life. Clearly those who realized their own sense of loss for their belonging to the previous organization—whilst not yet having a strong sense of their new belonging—were more able to authentically talk to their teams, and find the right words to help them close with the past and build belonging and loyalty in the new organization. There is also the story of the leader who held both a global as well as a regional role. The organization moved away from what had been a regional structure into one that was more suited to product and client groups. The caveat here was that this leader felt that while the current structure was enabling him and the regional team to be very effective, moving to a global structure would mean going back to revisiting issues hand-in-hand with global colleagues



that they had successfully dealt with within their own remit already. Only after reflecting upon how loyalty to the global team required a shift in his belonging to the regional team, too, this leader felt able to truly step into the future and ask his regional team to embrace the new structure: “I realized that what I had and what worked beautifully for us was not the case for others in the global round. So, in order for the global organization to move forward, we needed to give up what we had successfully built and find a new way that was better suited for all of us.”<sup>9</sup> But without realizing first the conflict between two sets of belonging, this could not have been articulated as clearly or as authentically.

Secondly, leaders can play an important role in making sure people in their organization feel they belong. Again, this starts with

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<sup>9</sup> This example also beautifully illustrates how Belonging is connected to Exchange—giving up something that is held dear for a greater good.

the awareness that some decisions and requirements may shake people's sense of belonging and that change is often felt as a threat to their belonging. When in a transformation, new teams are formed, and leaders can actively attend to these issues by simply making space for connecting with the team, making sure each voice is heard, and that the past is respectfully acknowledged so it can be consciously left behind.

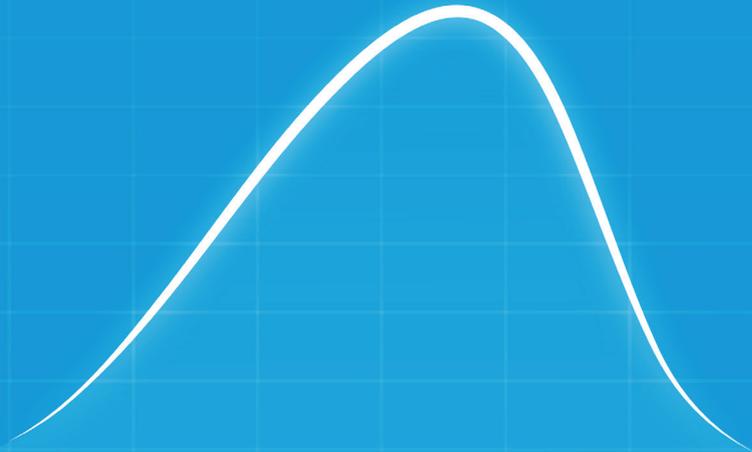
A great catalyst for belonging is a shared purpose. Ensuring the shared purpose is clear helps people to see how it is connected to the work, how they can contribute, and how their work is connected with others. A beautiful example of making people feel seen, safe, and able to contribute was given by a leader who, upon taking the helm of an organization with a newly acquired and integrated business, explicitly stated in his opening speech: "In order for our organization to be successful, I need you, I need your skillset, you are important to me." He then took the rest of the day to walk the floors and have conversations with all new team members, trying to form a personal bond with each and every one.

To briefly summarize: given increased market volatility and unpredictability, a successful approach to change must allow for emergence. This means creating the conditions for change to happen by setting an overall intention and loose direction—a few hard rules that guide local behavior—and then letting self-organization take over,

proceeding in a step-by-step manner, and constantly adjusting where needed. The perceived threat that change entails for people's sense of belonging may be more pronounced in an emergent change approach as the (false) certainty of tightly managed top-down programmes is stripped away. Leaders must attend to their own and to their teams' sense of belonging by ensuring everyone is clear about being a valued member of the community and that they are able to contribute within the newly formed entity (including closing out old loyalties if needed). Through this, not only will the organization be more capable of anticipating, engaging with, and even embracing change, it can also boost the diversity and inclusion agenda in a more authentic and truthful way as a conscious effort is made to include every individual beyond a programmatic statement.

With teams returning from remote working, having had little personal contact with colleagues for months, and the new reality of hybrid forms of work creating fresh challenges regarding balancing time and belonging between different groups (your team at work, your family, colleagues, etc.), this might be the time to ask yourself—where do I feel I belong? And what is the sense of belonging in my team? What is the current reality of my team and how—particular in remote or hybrid settings—can I strengthen the sense of belonging? Leading change is never without effort but attending to these fundamental questions can make it more effortless. ©

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