

BEYOND THE MANDATE

Return-to-Office as Change Management Failure

A Practitioner's Perspective on Why Mandates Replaced Engagement in 2021

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The Mandate Reflex

By the final quarter of 2021, a pattern had become unmistakable across sectors: organisations that had spent eighteen months praising the resilience and adaptability of their people were now issuing edicts demanding their return to the office. The language varied — "return to normalcy," "rebuilding culture," "collaboration requires proximity" — but the mechanism was uniform. A mandate. A date. A percentage of days.

What was remarkable was not the desire to bring people back. That was understandable, even defensible in many contexts. What was remarkable was the method. These were organisations that employed change managers, published change frameworks, and spoke fluently about stakeholder engagement, communication planning, and the psychology of transition. And yet, when confronted with what was arguably the most consequential change to working practices in decades, they reached for the bluntest instrument available: the directive.

Change Management in Name Only

The irony deserves stating plainly. The same organisations that would never dream of migrating an ERP system without a twelve-month change programme — complete with impact assessments, readiness surveys, champion networks, and carefully staged communications — decided that fundamentally restructuring where and how people work could be accomplished by email.

The organisations issuing return-to-office mandates in late 2021 were not solving a productivity problem — they were avoiding a leadership one. The evidence on productivity during remote and hybrid work was, at worst, mixed; in many knowledge-work contexts it was positive. But productivity was never really the point. The mandate was a proxy for something leaders found harder to articulate: a loss of visible control, an anxiety about culture they could feel but not measure, and a genuine uncertainty about how to lead teams they could not see.

A mandate is what organisations produce when they have failed to build a case for change that people find compelling.

This is not a peripheral observation. It sits at the centre of everything we know about effective change. People do not resist change because they are irrational or recalcitrant. They resist when the case has not been made, when they have not been involved in shaping the solution, and when the change appears to serve the institution's convenience rather than a shared purpose. Every return-to-office mandate that triggered resentment, quiet non-compliance, or accelerated attrition was a case study in this principle.

What Good Practice Would Have Required

A change-management-literate approach to returning to the office would have looked fundamentally different. It would have started with diagnosis rather than decree — understanding what had actually changed in how teams worked, what had been gained, and what had genuinely been lost. It would have involved the people affected in designing the solution, recognising that a workforce that had successfully reorganised itself to work remotely had demonstrated exactly the kind of agency and capability that should be harnessed, not overridden.

It would have acknowledged loss. The commute, the cost, the rigidity of five-day presence — these were not trivial. People had restructured their lives. Any credible change approach recognises that asking people to give something up requires more than an instruction; it requires an honest exchange about what they gain in return.

And it would have been staged, monitored, and adapted — not announced as a fait accompli with a compliance date.

The Deeper Signal

The return-to-office mandate is a symptom of a broader pattern that persists in organisational life: the gap between what organisations say about change and what they actually do when the change is uncomfortable for leadership itself. Change management, in too many organisations, remains something done to the workforce in service of leadership's agenda. When the change is one that leadership finds difficult — when it requires them to develop new skills, tolerate ambiguity, or relinquish familiar modes of control — the frameworks are quietly set aside.

This is the real lesson of late 2021. Not that organisations wanted people back in the office — that is a legitimate strategic conversation. But that they wanted it badly enough to abandon their own principles to get it. And in doing so, they damaged exactly the trust and engagement they claimed to be rebuilding.

The organisations that navigated this well — and they existed, though they attracted fewer headlines — were the ones that treated the transition as what it was: a complex,

emotionally charged change that required the same rigour, empathy, and participative design they would apply to any other transformation. They moved more slowly, landed more sustainably, and kept more of their people.

The mandate was always the easy path. It was never the effective one.