

BEYOND THE MANDATE

The Mandate Fallacy: Return to the Office Is a Change Problem, Not a Policy One

What the winter's return-to-office mandates reveal about a profession that knows how to lead change and keeps choosing not to

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"The mandate did not fail because people dislike the office. It failed because it was aimed at the population most able to leave and least willing to be told."

The memo, the mandate, and the missing method

Somewhere this autumn, in a great many organisations, a version of the same email went out. It thanked people for their resilience through an extraordinary period. It praised the results delivered from spare bedrooms and kitchen tables. And then, in its final paragraph, it announced that from January the expectation would be three days a week in the office — sometimes two, sometimes four, but a number, issued as a decision rather than opened as a conversation.

Then Omicron arrived, and a good many of those Januarys slipped quietly to February, or to spring. But the variant only postponed the mandates; it did not alter their character. And their character is the whole point.

For two decades this profession has built its craft on a single hard-won insight: you cannot install a new way of working the way you install a new system. People adopt change when they understand why it serves them, when they have some hand in shaping it, and when the organisation earns the shift instead of declaring it. We have the models for this. We have the vocabulary — engagement, the change curve, resistance treated as information rather than obstacle, the coalition that has to be built before the launch and not after it. And then, facing the largest and most personal change most of our workforces have lived through in a generation, we reached for a count of days and a start date.

That is not a policy. It is a change programme in denial about being one.

What the mandate is really solving for

Set aside, for a moment, the question of whether the office is good. It often is. The case for physical proximity is real and deserves its strongest form, not a caricature: apprenticeship happens over shoulders, not over video; weak-tie relationships and the accidental corridor conversation are genuinely hard to reproduce on a screen; culture is

transmitted in a hundred unscheduled moments that no calendar invite captures; and the people most disadvantaged by a fully remote default are often the juniors with the least to teach them and the most to learn. None of that is wrong.

But notice what the mandate does with that case. It converts a set of outcomes we want — faster learning, stronger relationships, a living culture — into a single crude input: bodies in a building, a fixed number of days, measured at the door. It mistakes the proxy for the goal. And it answers the only question that matters to the person reading the email — why should I? — with the one answer we have spent our careers warning leaders never to rely on: because we have decided.

A mandate optimises for attendance. Change optimises for adoption. The two are not the same thing, and the gap between them is exactly the space where transformation is won or lost.

We know where compliance-without-commitment leads, because we have watched it in every forced rollout of a system nobody was consulted about. People give you the letter of the requirement and withhold its spirit. They come in on the mandated days and hold the same video calls they would have held at home, to colleagues sitting two floors away. The building fills; the outcome does not arrive. Attendance is easy to count, which is precisely why it becomes the target, and precisely why it is the wrong one.

The number that should give us pause

There is a further reason to treat this as change rather than facilities. For the better part of two years, the workforce ran a controlled experiment on the central assumption of office life — that the work needs the room — and, by most organisations' own reporting, delivered. That experience does not simply reset when the memo lands. A blanket mandate now reads, to the person on the receiving end, as a statement that the last two years counted for nothing and that they are trusted rather less than their own results suggest they earned.

In one pattern I have watched repeat this year, an organisation that issued a fixed three-day rule found that within a single quarter its voluntary attrition among five-to-ten-year employees had risen by roughly half — and that the increase was concentrated almost entirely in the roles it could least afford to lose: the mid-career people with the deepest institutional memory and the most options in a labour market that has rarely been tighter. The mandate did not fail because people dislike the office. It failed because it was aimed at the population most able to leave and least willing to be told.

Run the method you already own

The uncomfortable truth is that we are not short of the capability to do this well. We are choosing not to deploy it, because deploying it is slower and more exposed than sending

a memo.

Treating the return as change would look recognisably different:

- Start from the outcome, not the attendance. Name what the office is for — this team, this quarter — and let the pattern of days follow the purpose rather than precede it.
- Engage before deciding. The people who will live with the arrangement almost always know which collaboration genuinely needs a room and which is theatre. Ask them, and the answer stops being a fight.
- Treat resistance as data. When your most capable people push back, that is not obstruction to be overcome; it is the most valuable information you will get about what the policy has failed to account for.
- Differentiate. A single number applied across every role and every life circumstance is administratively tidy and behaviourally illiterate. Change has never been one-size-fits-all, and this change least of all.

None of this is novel. It is the ordinary discipline of the field, applied to the organisation's own workforce instead of to the customers of a programme.

The winter's mandates will mostly hold, for a while, on the strength of a loosening labour market and managers who have simply tired of the argument. But holding is not the same as landing. The organisations that will look wise in a year are not the ones that won the fight over Tuesdays and Thursdays. They are the ones that noticed they were running a change programme, and had the humility to use the methods they already teach everyone else.

We are, it turns out, fluent in leading change right up to the moment it is our own comfort and our own control on the table. That is worth sitting with — because it is the most honest thing this whole episode has to teach us.