
The *Five Question* Workplace Strategy Framework



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Asking The Right Questions

Introducing the Five Question Framework

In her latest *Harvard Business Review* article, “Redesigning How we Work (March/April 2023),” London Business School’s Lynda Gratton outlines the difficulty and uncertainty that managers are facing as they strategize their own approaches to hybrid work. As we enter year three of a brave new world of work, it is becoming clear that getting hybrid right will be a long-term evolutionary process.

Leaders are settling into the task of aligning the needs of *their* business with how work gets done. Simply setting a 2/3 or 3/2 hybrid schedule might have worked in the short term, but establishing a sustainable approach to hybrid work will require patience, research, and a combination of experimentation and learning. And that starts with asking the right questions.

To shift an organization through the hybrid transition, it is important to understand what is working well today, what is not, and where there are opportunities for innovation. This, in turn, requires understanding worker experiences across the organization.

“Surfacing the hidden assumptions that block workplace change requires asking the right questions.”

The Five Questions

We approach workplace strategy and the future of work as a cultural opportunity. We use the Open Culture Model outlined in the new book- *The Open Culture Handbook: Five Questions to Drive Engagement and Innovation*- by OpenWork's Drew Jones.

Rather than battering employees with yet another culture survey to determine what 'type' of culture an organization has, we use qualitative research to understand company culture through the eyes of employees by asking them five simple questions:

1. Why- Why does the organization exist? What is the company's vision and purpose from employees' point of view? How does that resonate with people? Do employees feel connected to that?
2. What- What specific projects and activities are employees engaged in on a regular basis? Are they doing algorithmic work or are they experimenting and learning?
3. How- How do individuals and teams work on projects? Are they over-managed in an environment of mistrust, or are they empowered to self-organize and make key decisions?
4. Who- Does leadership win the hearts, minds, and respect of employees? Do they cascade trust and a growth mindset in the organization?
5. Where- Do company workspaces and policies foster community, collaboration and productivity? Do employees have choice and flexibility over when and where they work?

Applied to the challenge of aligning culture with workplace strategy, the Where question is placed at the center of the equation. Each of the four questions are then tethered to where work gets done- office, home, virtual, third place, etc.

- ✓ Purpose/Vision/Strategy (the Why)- How does leadership communicate this to teams? Is this done primarily on campus, or via technology? Does a sense of shared purpose suffer when people are not co-located? What do employees think about this?

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- ✓ Projects/Activities (the What)- When conducting an activity audit, which ones necessarily need to be at the office, and which can be done effectively from anywhere? What do employees think?
 - ✓ Autonomy/Decision Rights/ Accountability (the How)- Do company norms encourage or allow self-organizing teams and independent decision making, and how much of the work absolutely needs to be done within view of managers? What do employees think?
 - ✓ Leadership/Trust/Growth Mindset (the Who)- What percentage of employees' work involves risk taking, experimentation, and growth through learning (from failures and successes)? Is there an established process for after action reviews (AARs), and how are these conducted (in person or via technology)?



Assessment & Alignment

Both the necessity (and frequency) of office attendance as well as the nature of the workspaces available to people when they are on campus can be determined by carefully working through each of the five questions in consultation with employees.

A simple mix of research methods can unearth what employees and managers are experiencing and why, which creates new opportunities for co-creation and innovation:

- ✓ Observational Research
 - Observing work and workspace in context
 - Observing utilization and flow in real time
 - Shadowing
- ✓ Interviews
 - Structured
 - Open-ended
- ✓ Employee Journey Mapping
 - At office
 - At home
 - At third places
- ✓ Focus Groups
 - Employees
 - Managers
 - Mixed groups

In her HBR article, Gratton suggests that each company's *future of work* will be unique. We fully agree with her. The Five Question Framework is a simple and straightforward way to accomplish four things at once:

1. Includes employee experience and employee voice in the change process from the outset.
2. Identifies the types of activities that absolutely should be done on campus, which are best done remotely, and which can be done either way.
3. Sharpens an organization's understanding, through precise observational and interview assessment, which types of physical spaces an organization needs.
4. Enhances the employer brand by creating a place to work that attracts top talent in the industry.

Conclusion: Find Your Own Questions

Each organization is unique, with its own history, leadership approach, culture, practices, norms, etc. Limiting yourself to the five questions that we use is not necessary. What is helpful, though, is to put users—employees and managers—at the heart of the question-and-answer process.

Human agency is a powerful force. When people feel heard and are given voice in the changes that impact them, their energy is released. There is no reason that organizations' future workplace strategies should not be governed by the same principle.

Perhaps start by generating your own list of questions. Organizations can start by talking with employees about their work experiences- at the office, at home, and any other third places where work might happen. Empowering employees to be a part of the research design process is an even further boost to energy and agency in the organization.

About OpenWork Agency

OpenWork is a workplace strategy and culture consultancy that helps bold organizations reimagine how they work. We use qualitative research, strategy development, and design strategy to facilitate innovative hybrid and activity-based working solutions. Over the past decade we have worked with clients in the US, Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. We are based in Austin, Texas.

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