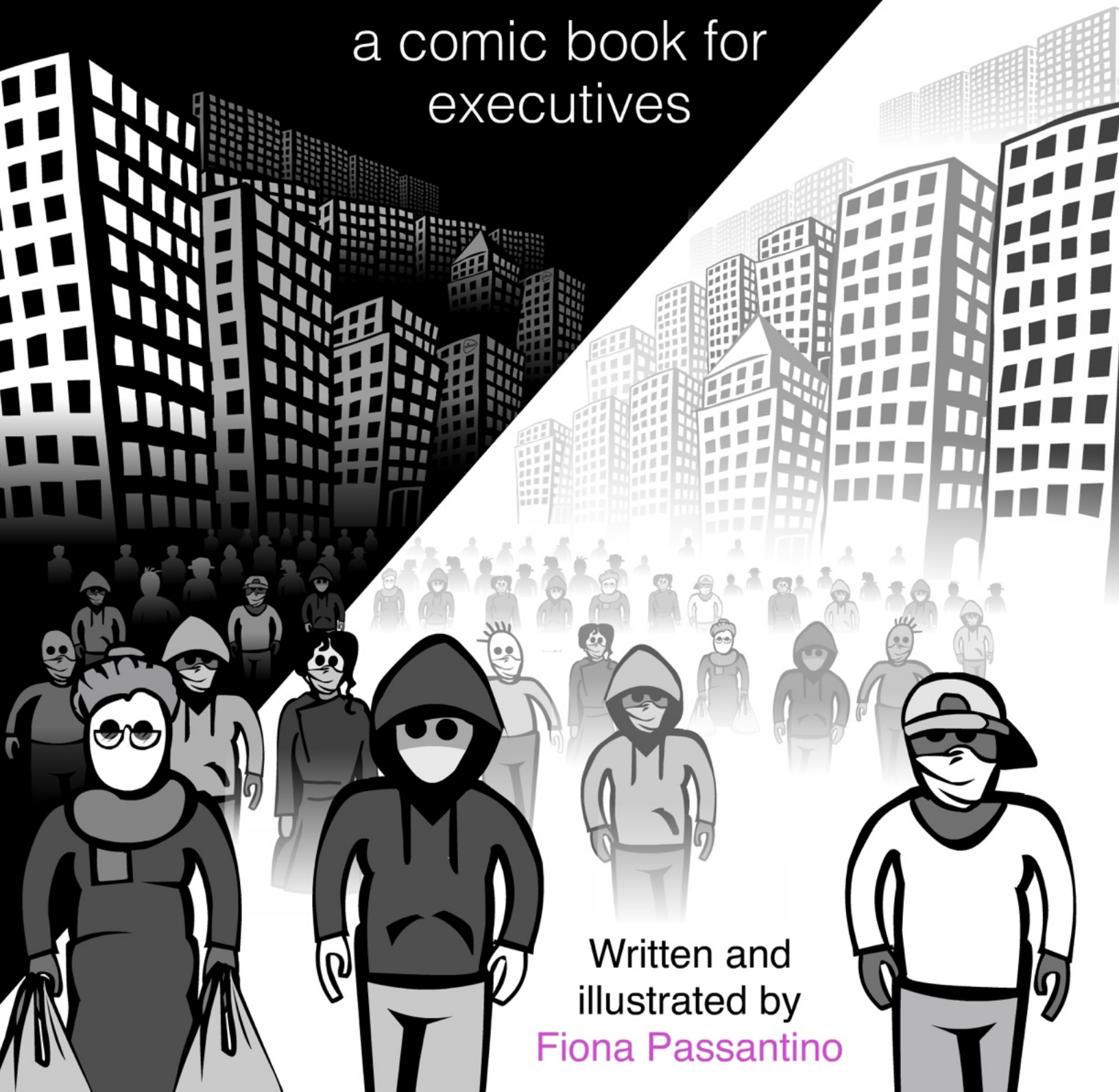


Handbook for Post-Covid Engagement

a comic book for
executives



Written and
illustrated by

Fiona Passantino

This book is for anyone who wants to **inform**, **connect** and **inspire** their teams.



the Scrum Master



the coach



the Employee Engagement Manager



the Internal Communications Manager



the HR Business Partner



the team lead



the mentor



the stay-at-home Dad



the Agile Squad Lead



the band leader



the fire chief



the influencer



the teacher



What does it mean to be “engaged” in the post-Covid workplace?

As the Covid pandemic starts to fade in our memories, we return to “normal” knowing that there is no going back to the workplaces we knew before lockdown.

Amidst the Great Resignation and plenty of crises to rock any business, the goal is inspiring, informing and igniting the imaginations of the community. Creating a policy of irreplaceability, trust and listening to keep people onboard, rowing together. Lowering attrition, improving the customer experience.

Engagement is about bringing our best selves to the office, being heard, supported, feeling irreplaceable and free.

This book is a road map for leaders and followers alike, in any organization. Telling the story of Covid and the small shifts we can make every day to keep us energized and connected.

**Continue the
conversation.**





PART I: lockdown



Summer 2020.

We'd been dealing with Covid for well over a year.

Going from full lockdowns where we could only get groceries, pet food and other essentials...



to periods of re-emergence...



followed by more shutdowns.

Working from home.

Sorry about my cat...



Learning from home.

Headphones!



Trying to stay busy.

Didn't I see you in here earlier today?



Yes. Just need another dozen!

Trying to stay connected.

What's for dinner, dear? Looks yummy!



On Tuesdays we would sometimes hear about new measures.



***Sometimes loosening.
Sometimes tightening.
Case numbers went up,
down, wave after wave.***



It never seemed to end.

It was all we talked about.

**6.590 cases today.
And it's a Monday!**

**Usually Thursdays
are the highest.**

**Still counting...
it's only 5pm.**



*The vaccines arrived
at last.*



*One age group at a
time got called up.*



**Hey, guess
what?
I got my
invitation!**

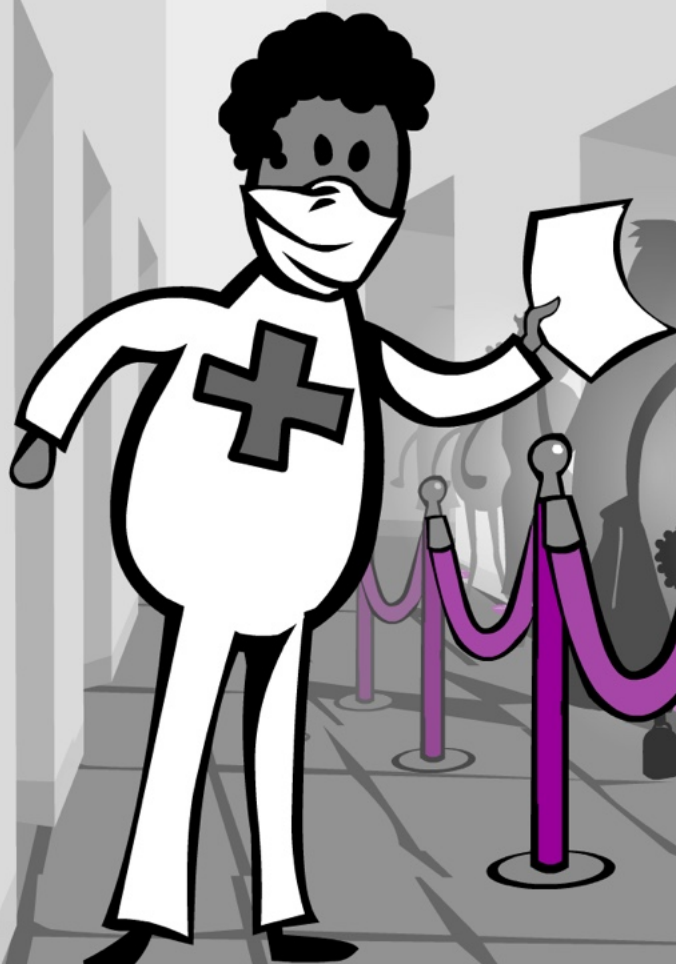
**No fair!
I'm older
than you.**

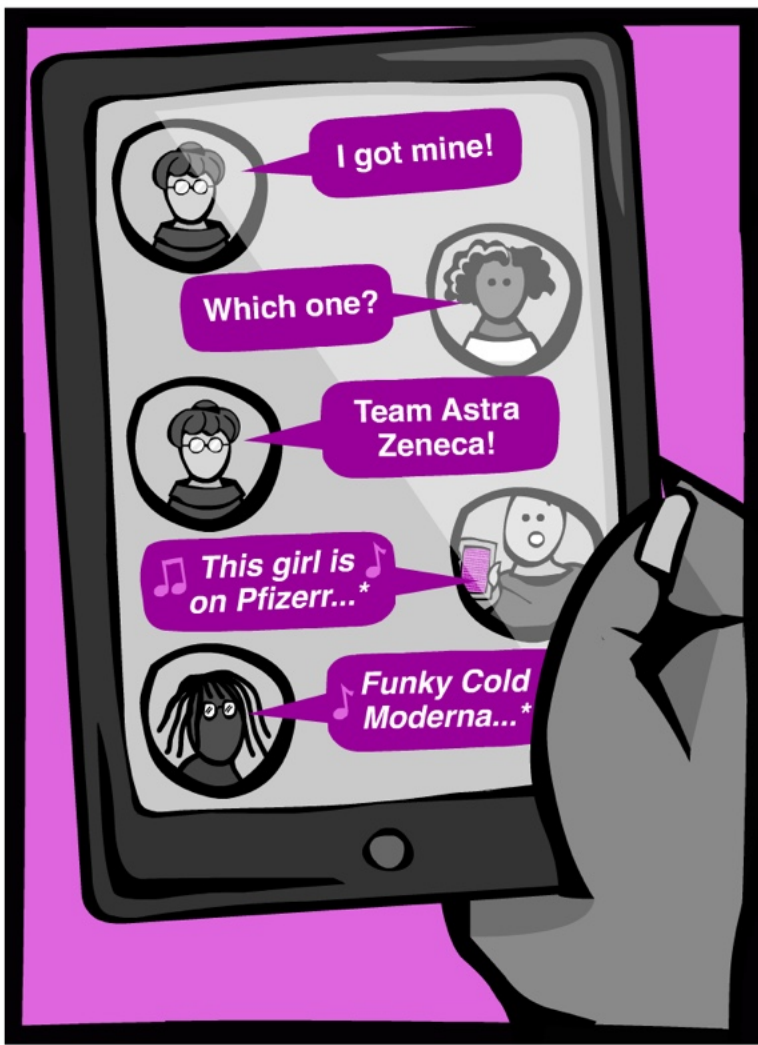
**By two
months!**

*The vaccination centers were huge and well-organized.
Kind of like a military operation.*

**This way please.
Fill out form D.
Black ink only.
Then proceed
to Desk 1.**

**ID, invitation, masks,
forms, yellow books...
what am I forgetting?**





Many of us were relieved and happy.

Part of the solution, in a small way.

We were allowed to go to the office once in a while.

If we registered in advance by app.

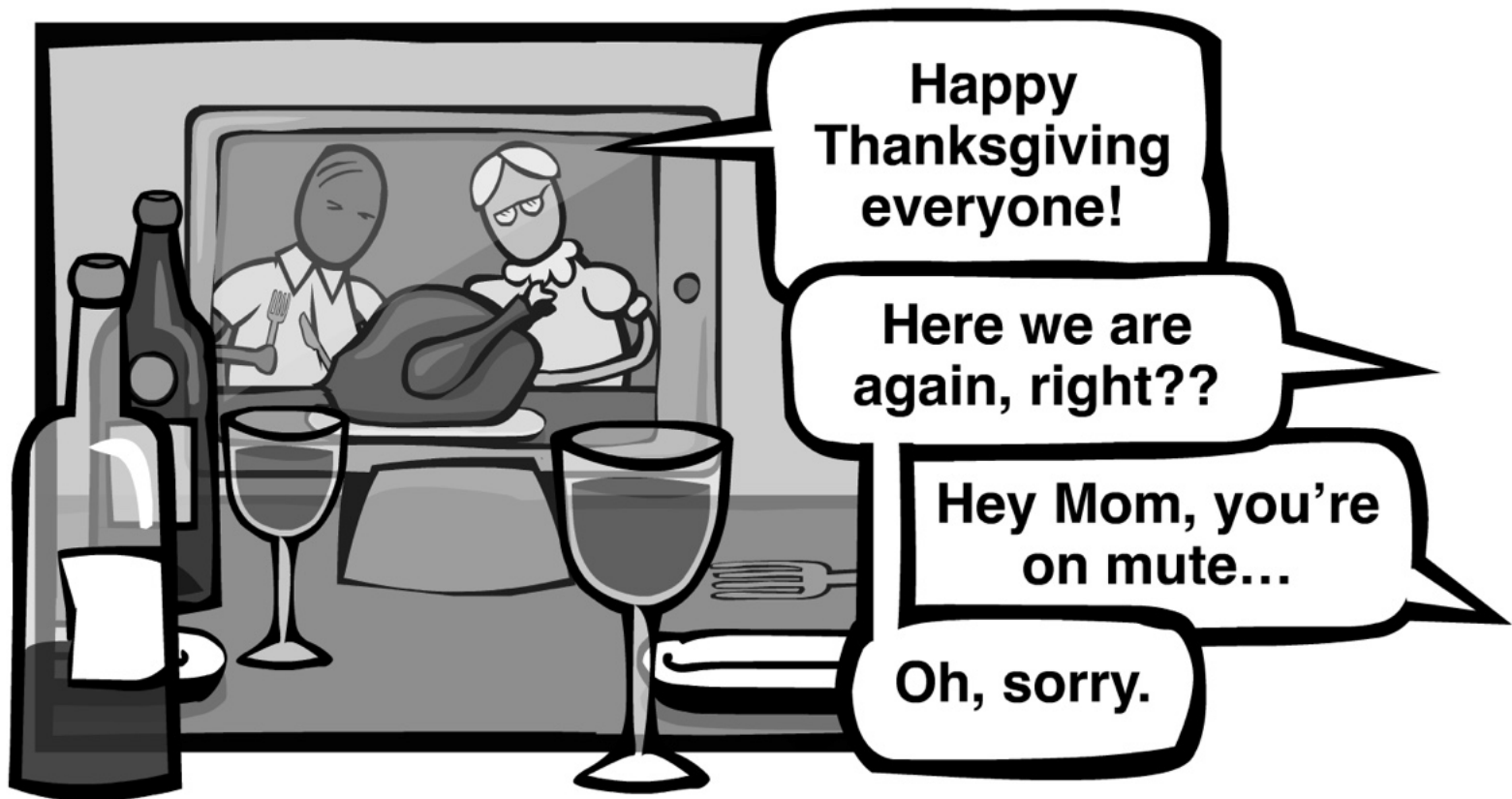
When we did go to the office, it was mostly empty.



Like the streets.



A year went by.



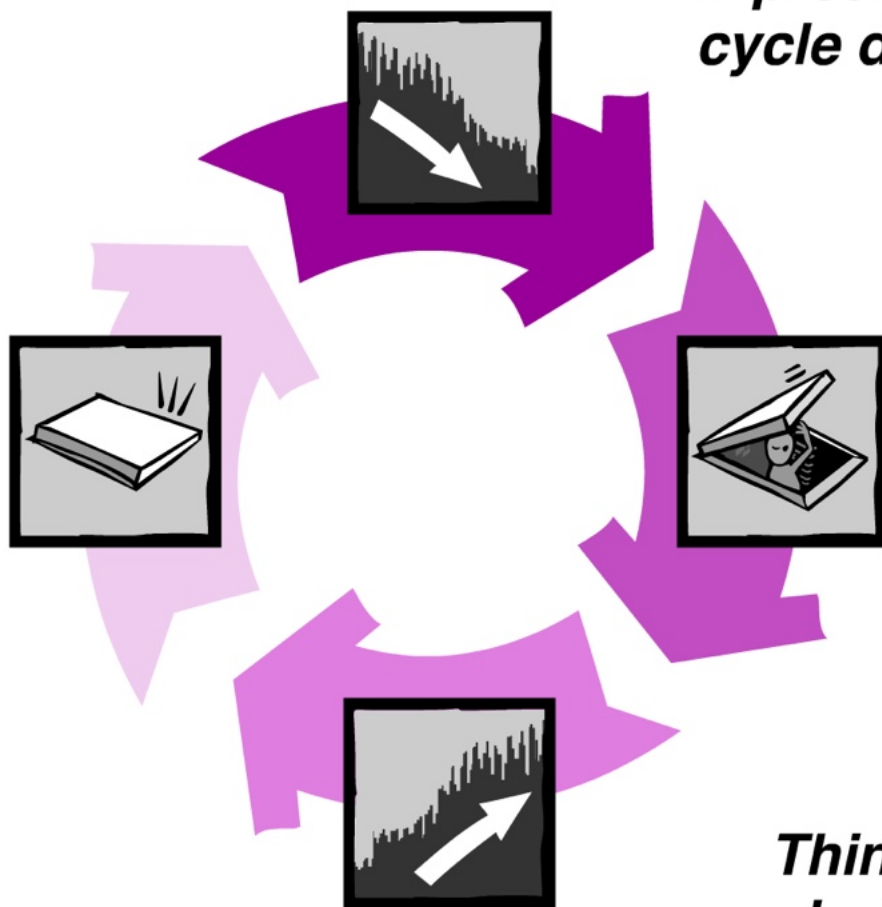
A predictable cycle developed.

Numbers would go down a bit.

We would emerge from lockdown.

Numbers would shoot up.

Things would shut down.



Two doses of the vaccine offered enough protection to keep from getting seriously ill.

Vaccinated people could download an app with a QR code. This was scanned to get into restaurants, bars, museums and many shops.

Can I scan your code please?

Aw heck, my phone just died...



People who didn't get vaccinated had to show negative PCR tests.



This is really starting to get old...

Vaccination was strongly encouraged but still optional.



Huge campaigns rolled out to spread awareness and convince people to do their part.

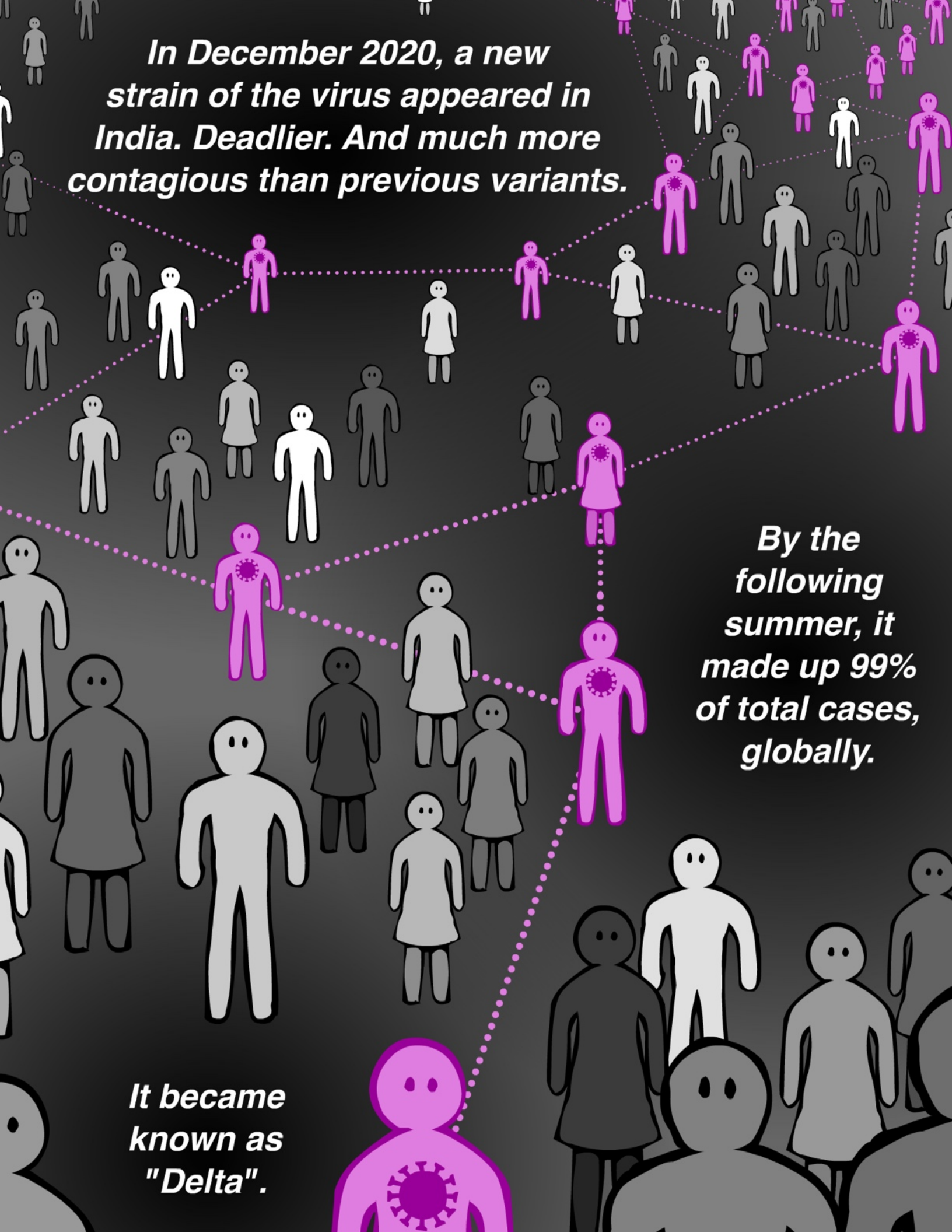
An 85% vaccination rate, would lead to the goal of “herd immunity”.

***Then we could finally go back to living our lives again.
That was the idea, anyway.***

In December 2020, a new strain of the virus appeared in India. Deadlier. And much more contagious than previous variants.

By the following summer, it made up 99% of total cases, globally.

It became known as "Delta".



*By the fall of 2021,
case numbers began
to shoot up again.*

All thanks to Delta.



*New lockdown
measures.*

More mandates.

*Shops, restaurants,
bars, cafes, movie
theaters all shut
down at 5pm,
making dinners out
impossible.*

Another holiday season of canceled parties, postponed events and travel to see loved ones. Another month of family dinners on screen...



Happy Hanukkah everyone!

We're just so grateful everyone's healthy this year.

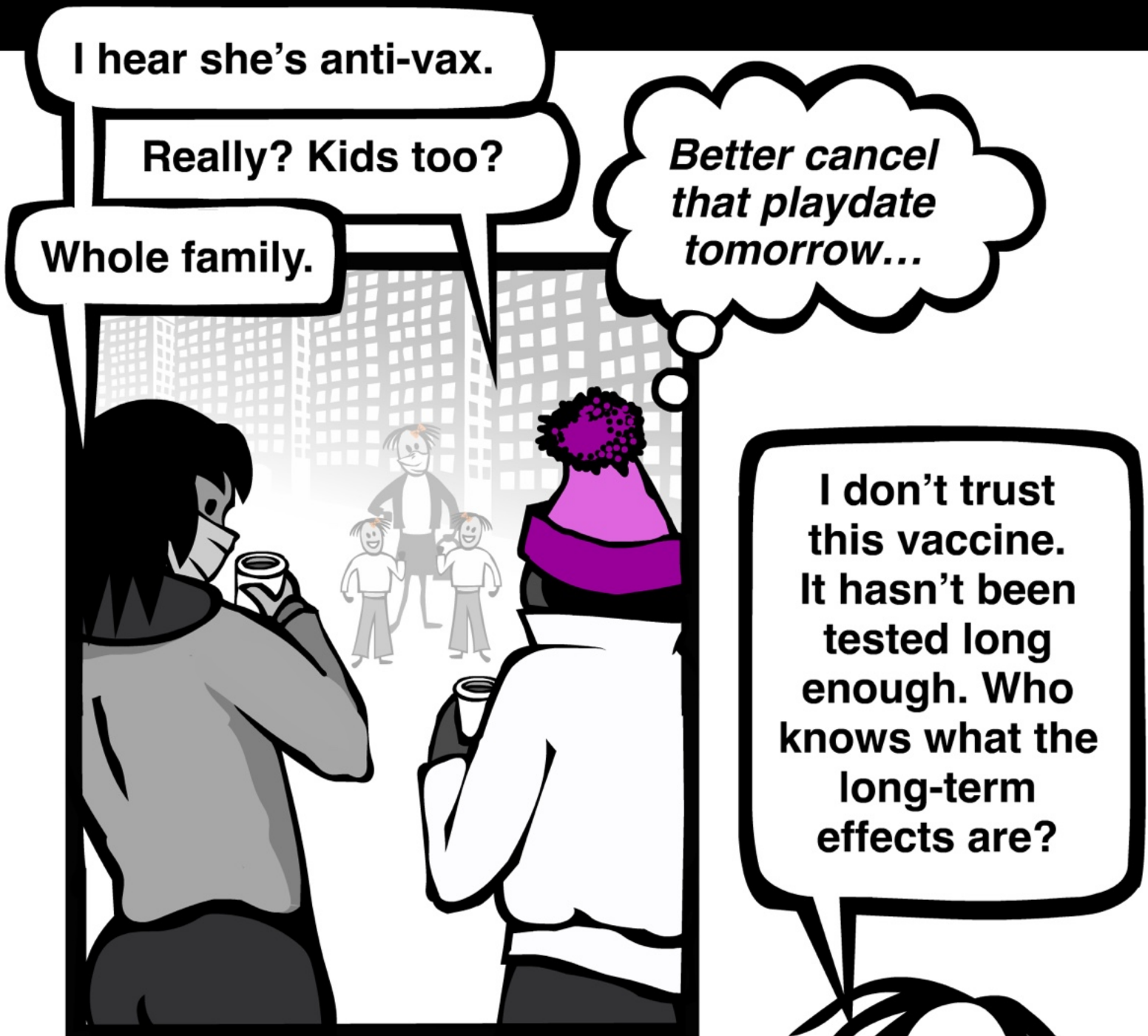
and racking up flight vouchers.

We can take a trip around the world in 2022 with all these flight vouchers!

We were all exhausted.



Cracks began to form between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated population. It divided communities and put a strain on relationships.



The unvaccinated felt isolated and misunderstood.

The vaccinated became resentful.



*Resentment between
the two sides grew.*

We'll never
be done with Covid
unless everyone is
vaccinated.

Don't tell
me what
to do.

This is a war;
why can't they
understand that?

Why can't
they just leave
us alone?

*It was like we
were living on two
different planets.*



Hospitals were at capacity, sometimes shipping patients into other countries for treatment.



70% of Covid patients in ICU were unvaccinated. Many of them regretted their decision. Surprisingly, many of them did not.



As the holidays approached, another new variant surfaced in South Africa. This one was much more contagious than Delta.

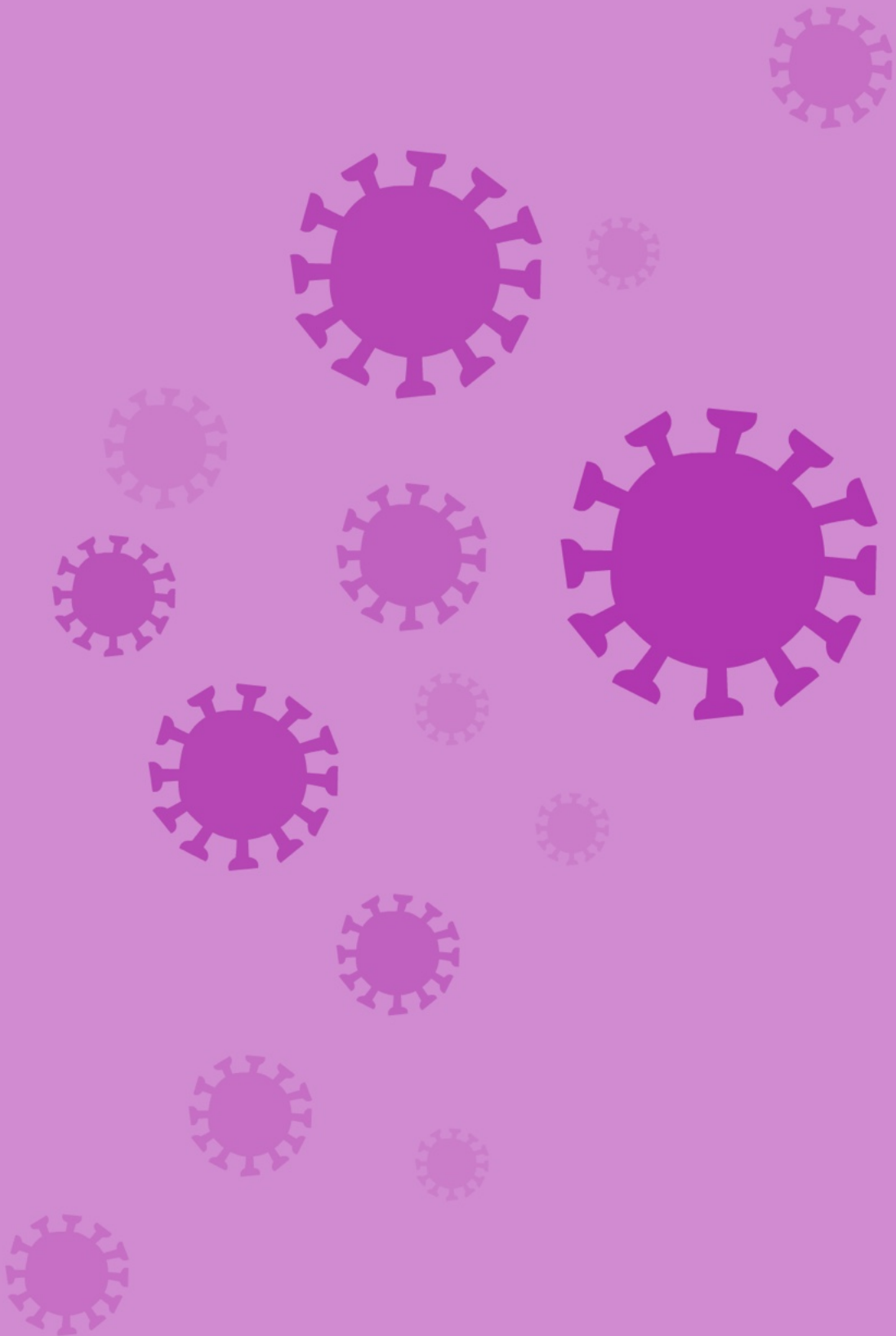


Within days it had reached Europe.

One month later it was found throughout Asia and the Americas.

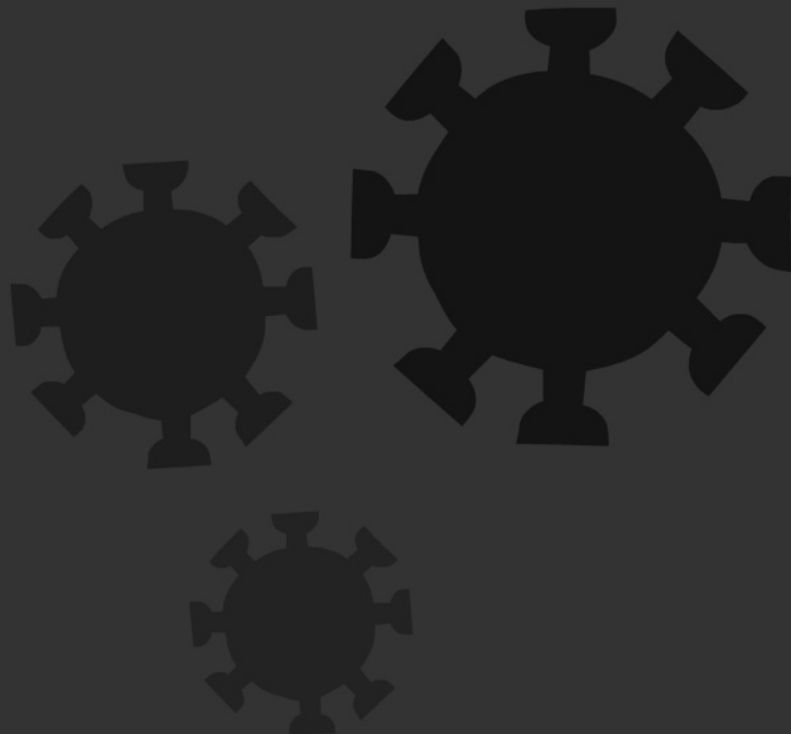
The World Health Organization called it "Omicron".







PART II:
we are here



Year 2022 AD (or, the year 0003 PC*).

We live in a strange moment in our species' history. Year 003 **PC**, the time of wearing masks, keeping our distance fading in our memories. Omicron to Deltachron, perhaps more to come this winter. Time will tell.

We're exhausted: 42% of women and 35% of men^[i]. We are stressed and on-edge: 40% of us, making 2020 the most stressful year in recent history^[ii]. We're angry: 24% experienced aggression, and riots and unrest increased globally by 10% in 2020^[iii]. We watched tension and rage flare up among families, friends and co-workers along the vac/ antivax lines. We're depressed: 27% of us experienced sadness on a daily basis^[iv].

The 2021 holiday season came and went with another year of canceled dinners, postponed parties, weddings and conferences. The things that help us Humans, the Social Animal, feel inspired and connected. Closed restaurants, staying indoors, eating at home.

Re-opening them again cautiously. Spring of 2022 saw a cautious opening up, only to be slammed back into lockdown with a resurgence of a new variant.

The time before Covid seems to belong to some other, far away lifetime, our memories of carefree events visible through panes of fogged glass. We wonder whether the future will bring another virus, or something else. We are no longer invulnerable as we start to test the limits of our planet's ability to sustain us.

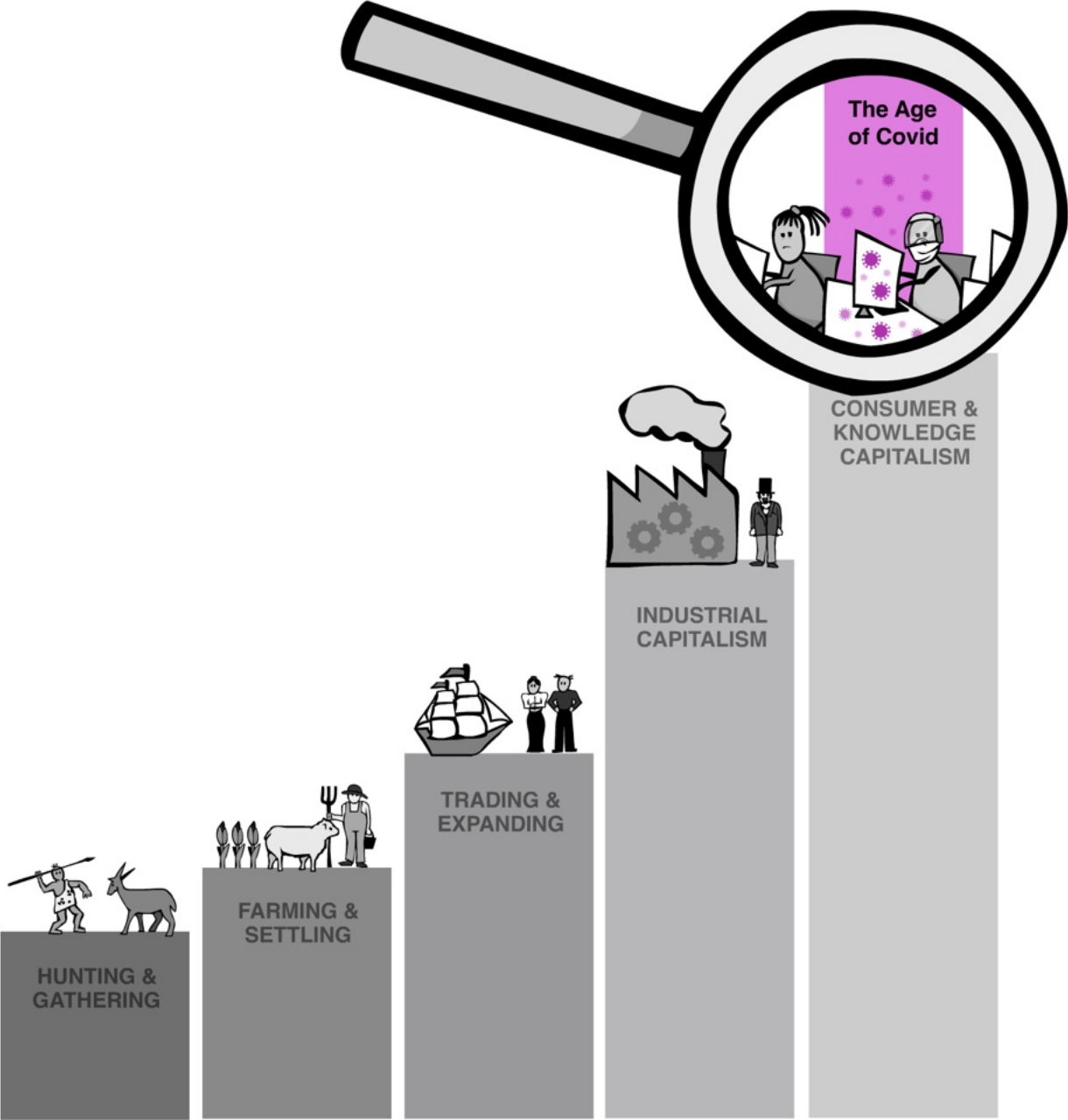
[i] McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.Org. (2021). "Women in the Workplace 2021". McKinsey & Company 2021, accessed on December 7, 2021. https://wiw-report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women_in_the_Workplace_2021.pdf

[ii] Kelly (2021). "Global Emotions Survey Shows Record High Levels Of People 'Feeling Stressed, Sad, Angry And Worried'", Forbes Magazine, accessed on December 7, 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackkelly/2021/07/31/global-emotions-survey-shows-record-high-levels-of-people-feeling-stressed-sad-angry-and-worried/?sh=3cfde23f6963>

[iii] Global Peace Index (2021). "World less peaceful as civil unrest and political instability increases due to COVID-19". Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP), accessed on December 7, 2021. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/world-less-peaceful-as-civil-unrest-and-political-instability-increases-due-to-covid-19-pandemic/>

[iv] Gallup (2021). "Global Emotions Report", Gallup, accessed on December 7, 2021. <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/349280/gallup-global-emotions-report.aspx>

We are **here.**



Let's look back.

The Covid Pandemic is our first in the age of smartphones and global social sharing, and the first to be widely communicated across all digital channels. All cultures by now instantly recognize the enemy's iconic protein spike image, it's the first with its own logo, apps, QR codes and an uncounted number of hashtags and callouts.

Given all this, it's easy to believe that no one else has ever been through any of this before. But in fact, the Covid pandemic closely mirrors what we went through in 1918, and to better understand where we're going, it might be helpful to also see where we've been.

In 1918, the Spanish Flu ravaged our cities and trade routes over three brutal years, claiming more lives than World War I, military and civilian combined^[i]. A full third of the world's population was infected, resulting in 50 million deaths over three distinct waves, peaking in the fall of 1918^[ii].

During these years, the Spanish Flu was the only thing anyone was talking about. And then it went away, like magic. No vaccines, no QR codes, no Green Passes and no hand sanitizer. How did that chapter end?

The truth is, it didn't: a weakened version of the Spanish Flu is still with us now. It kept mutating and hopping from human to farm animal and back again, growing more transmissible but less deadly with every generation until it finally settled into today's seasonal flu^[iii]. That fever that kept you in bed last week was likely a descendant of the 1918 H1N1 virus.

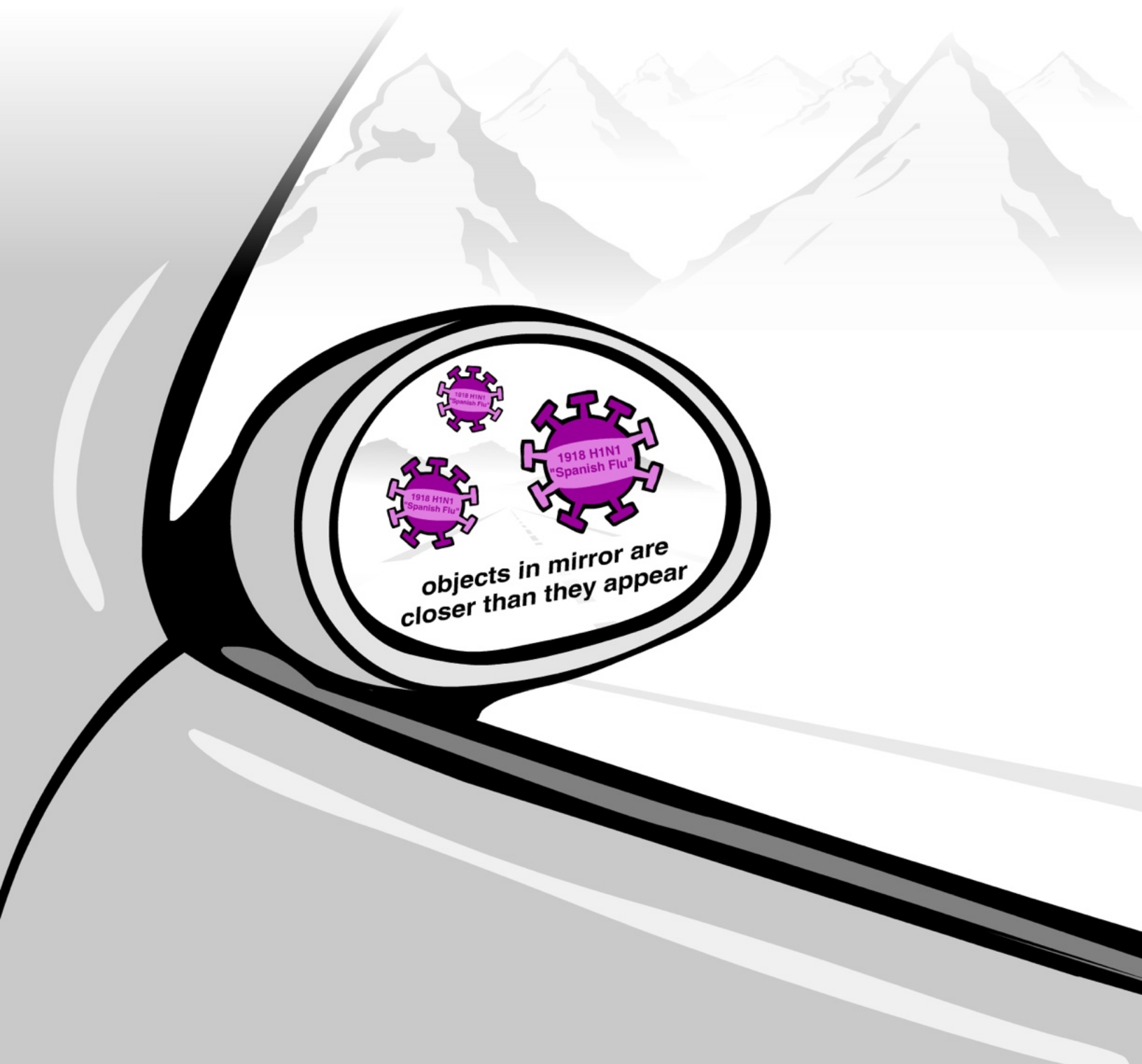
Many experts believe that Covid will fade into the background, lose its sting, kept under control with annual vaccines, never really going away. Until the next one appears.

^[i] NCIRD (2018). "1918 Pandemic Influenza: Three Waves". Content source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, accessed on December 7, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-commemoration/three-waves.htm>

^[ii] Roos (2020). "Why the 1918 Flu Pandemic Never Really Ended After infecting millions of people worldwide, the 1918 flu strain shifted—and then stuck around." History.com, accessed on December 7, 2021. <https://www.history.com/news/1918-flu-pandemic-never-ended>

^[iii] Amenabar (2020). "'The 1918 flu is still with us': The deadliest pandemic ever is still causing problems today." The Washington Post, accessed on December 7, 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/09/01/1918-flu-pandemic-end/>

Let's look **back**.



objects in mirror are
closer than they appear

The Great Resignation

Back to today. After the first shocking year, 2019, adrenalin and shared common purpose carried us through the first waves of lockdown and isolation. We went underground, quickly got used to working with our cats and our kids in the same room. At first our Zoom calls were carried out in closets to hang on to the PC image or professionalism, but by 2020, we were all taking calls with our cats, in our pajamas without thinking twice.

Once the dust settled and we found our lockdown rhythms, we acquired the taste for takeout and realized that without our daily commutes or the busy-ness of our normal lives, we finally had the two things we said we always wanted.

Silence and time.

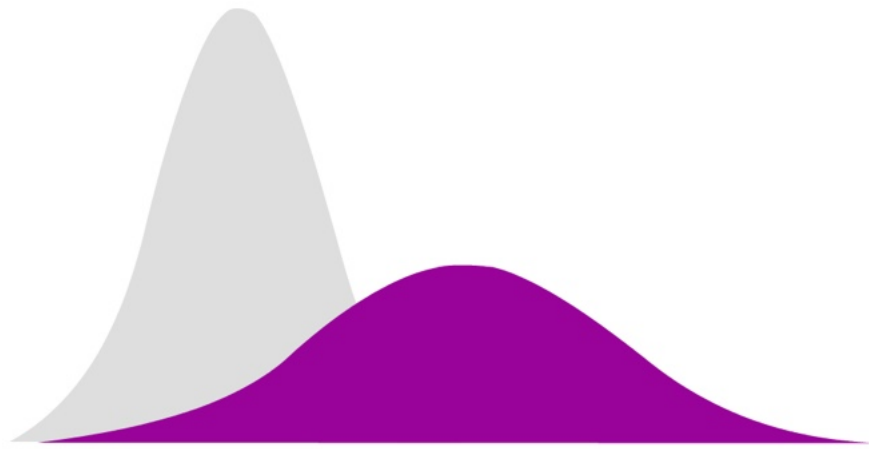
Perhaps it was the space to think. Or maybe we just got to see what we missed when we came home late from work in the **pre-Covid (or BC, Before Covid)** days: a toddler's first steps, your dog doing cute things during the day. Without our commutes, we could play a round of Scrabble with the kids before dinner, take a walk through the park with a friend or call family members.

We had a bit of time alone with our thoughts when we might otherwise be fighting traffic or rushing to catch the train. We were too busy to wonder why we were rushing around, too busy to think.

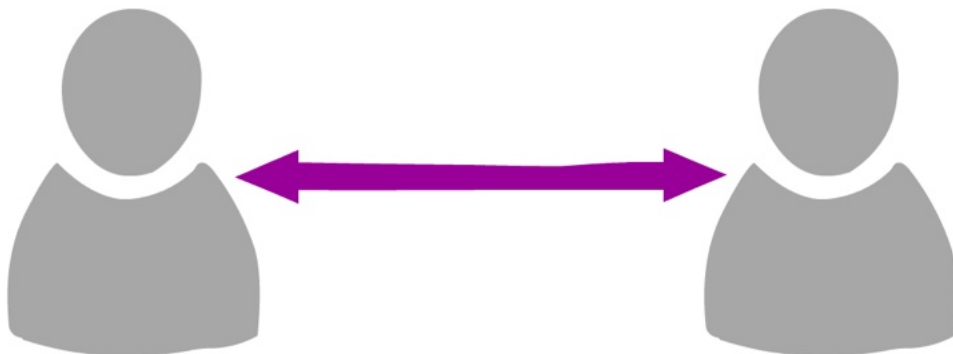
Suddenly there was time to learn how to make perfect pizza dough by watching Neapolitan chefs on YouTube. There was time to learn to sew, meditate, time to ponder the fragility of our lives, and which relationships really mattered.

Maybe we realized that we were all in this together. Or that sooner or later, something will catch up with us. If not Covid, perhaps a flood. Locusts. Extreme heat. Something else. Are we spending our precious hours on this planet doing what we're meant to do, what we love? Are the jobs we have worthy of the precious time we have on this planet?

Flattening the curve.



1,5m distance.



And we found a few answers. We discovered that we are often disrespected, ignored, undervalued and overworked. Kept unnaturally busy with unnecessary extra tasks, extra back-and-forth to satisfy the egos of the powerful. Unhappy but unable to slow down long enough to understand where the pain was coming from.

Once we realized it was our jobs that was causing us the most pain, we quit in massive numbers. Nearly a quarter of us left or changed or slowed down. Practically overnight, the power balance shifted from leadership to employee, and the hunt for talent heated up.

We call it the **Great Resignation**, and it's still a fact. Some 44 million Americans left their jobs in September 2020 alone, nearly a third of them without a new job to go to^[i]. Reasons varied from feeling unappreciated to a lack of flexibility, stress, overwork and lack of work-life balance. Not all the walkouts were by choice; faced with a sudden lack of childcare, women quit their jobs at twice the rate of men in 2020; not by choice, but by necessity^[ii].

That's the easy-to-explain Story of Covid. But the truth is more complicated. Long before the first virus appeared we were at slow-boil disengaged, kept distracted by overwork and our buzzing social lives and overfull social feeds. But for decades, hairline fissures were forming between worker and leadership. Covid came along and accelerated everything it touched.

As we start to enter the **post-Covid** era - masks disappearing, concerts and parties cranking up, traffic back at pre-pandemic levels - we plan our weddings and overseas trips, blinking in the daylight, wondering whether it's "really gone" or something else will happen this winter.

^[i] Gallup (2021). "Global Emotions Report", Gallup, accessed on December 7, 2021. <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/349280/gallup-global-emotions-report.aspx>

Cox (2021). "Millions of people quit their jobs in the 'Great Resignation.' Here is why it may not last long", CNBC.com, accessed on December 7, 2021. <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/11/18/why-the-great-resignation-may-not-last-very-long.html>

^[ii] Donegan (2020) "Part of the 'great resignation' is actually just mothers forced to leave their jobs", the Guardian. Accessed on March 27, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/nov/19/great-resignation-mothers-forced-to-leave-jobs>

What's
"engagement",
anyway??



This book is about the new, balanced lives we hope to grow into once we get used to our new normal. It is a road map for leaders and followers of every level of an organization, showing small shifts we can make every day to help keep us switched on, plugged in and inspired at work. Large shifts in mindset.

This is a book about engagement at work, written for this time in our history.

What's "Engagement"?

In 2020, Gallup revealed that only 31% of the US working population describe themselves as "engaged" with leaders and mid-level managers most impacted^[i]. In 2021, things did not look much better; one-third of employees (34%) were engaged, and as much as 16% actively disengaged in their work and their workplace^[ii].

But what is "*engagement*"?

When you become engaged to a person, you commit to them; the rest of the world outside loses a bit of its sparkle, because find what you are looking for with just one. And you marry them and live (sometimes) happily ever after. You are fully present, supporting and building a life with the person you have chosen with your full focus.

^[i] Harter (2020). "Historic Drop in Employee Engagement Follows Record Rise". Accessed November 29, 2021. Gallup Workplace. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/313313/historic-drop-employee-engagement-follows-record-rise.aspx#:~:text=Line%20graph%20showing%20the%20U.S.,and%2015%25%20were%20actively%20disengaged.&text=Taking%20into%20consideration%20three%20Gallup,workers%20during%202020%20is%2036%25>.

^[ii] Harter (2022) "U.S. Employee Engagement Drops for First Year in a Decade". Gallup. Accessed August 14, 2022. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/388481/employee-engagement-drops-first-year-decade.aspx>

^[iii] Ryba (2021). "What is Employee Engagement? What, Why, and How to Improve It". Accessed November 29, 2021. Quantum Workplace. <https://www.quantumworkplace.com/future-of-work/what-is-employee-engagement-definition>

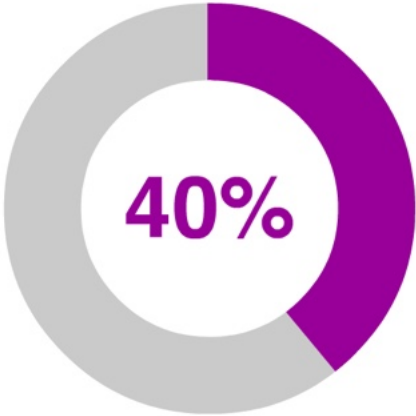
^[iv] Swank (2021). What is Employee Engagement? The Ultimate Effectory Guide to Engagement. Accessed on November 29, 2021. <https://www.effectory.com/knowledge/what-is-employee-engagement/#>

^[v] Ryba (2021). "What is Employee Engagement? What, Why, and How to Improve It". Accessed November 29, 2021. Quantum Workplace. <https://www.quantumworkplace.com/future-of-work/what-is-employee-engagement-definition>

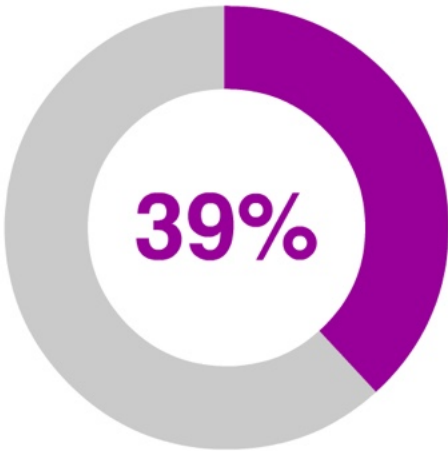
^[vi] Swank (2021). "What is Employee Engagement? The Ultimate Effectory Guide to Engagement". Accessed on November 29, 2021. <https://www.effectory.com/knowledge/what-is-employee-engagement/#>

^[vii] Ryba (2021). "What is Employee Engagement? What, Why, and How to Improve It". Accessed November 29, 2021. Quantum Workplace. <https://www.quantumworkplace.com/future-of-work/what-is-employee-engagement-definition>

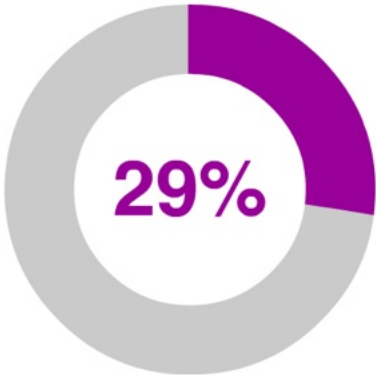
Stress in 2020.



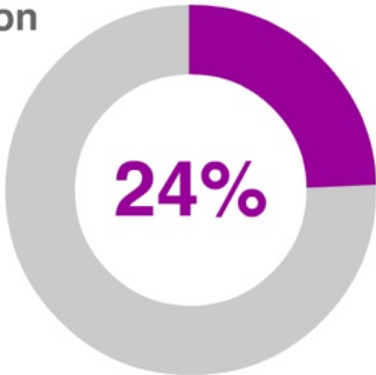
experienced stress



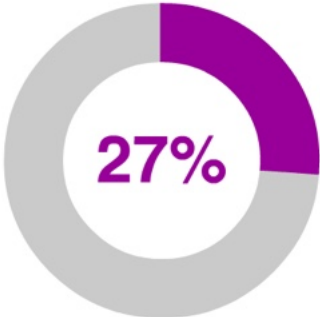
experienced exhaustion



experienced physical pain



experienced anger



experienced sadness

“Engagement” is the connection employees feel toward their jobs: to a team, an organization, to its mission and purpose, measured by the degree to which employees line up behind its basic vision^[i]. Humans want the work they do to have meaning and impact and deliver value to the world. On a granular level, humans want to enjoy a level of autonomy, respect, have a degree of impact, feel indispensable, and connected to a positive work culture^[iii].

“Engagement” is not the same as “job satisfaction”. A satisfied worker may feel content in but are not dedicated, motivated or committed. They might not work late on a Wednesday before a big company event or bend down to pick that candy wrapper up off the showroom floor when no one is looking.

Engaged employees are 17% more productive than their satisfied peers^[iii]. They are team players, staying longer with a company with lower levels of burnout. Absenteeism rates are 41% lower among the engaged^[iv]. Radiating outwards, engaged employees provide better customer service and become brand ambassadors according to 72% of executives^[v].

We have known all this for years. But despite that, we were doing a lot to actively disengage our working population since we’ve had offices to go to. Decisions were made by the Few and the Powerful behind closed doors, with working people often overworked, under-attended and invisible. We were being ground down, re-arranged and re-assigned, disrespected, laid off in great numbers and paid according to results utterly beyond our control^[vi].

^[i] Ryba (2021). “What is Employee Engagement? What, Why, and How to Improve It”. Accessed November 29, 2021. Quantum Workplace. <https://www.quantumworkplace.com/future-of-work/what-is-employee-engagement-definition>

^[ii] Swank (2021). What is Employee Engagement? The Ultimate Effectory Guide to Engagement. Accessed on November 29, 2021. <https://www.effectory.com/knowledge/what-is-employee-engagement/#>

^[iii] Ryba (2021). “What is Employee Engagement? What, Why, and How to Improve It”. Accessed November 29, 2021. Quantum Workplace. <https://www.quantumworkplace.com/future-of-work/what-is-employee-engagement-definition>

^[iv] Swank (2021). “What is Employee Engagement? The Ultimate Effectory Guide to Engagement”. Accessed on November 29, 2021. <https://www.effectory.com/knowledge/what-is-employee-engagement/#>

^[v] Ryba (2021). “What is Employee Engagement? What, Why, and How to Improve It”. Accessed November 29, 2021. Quantum Workplace. <https://www.quantumworkplace.com/future-of-work/what-is-employee-engagement-definition>

^[vi] Swank (2021). What is Employee Engagement? The Ultimate Effectory Guide to Engagement. Accessed on November 29, 2021. <https://www.effectory.com/knowledge/what-is-employee-engagement/#>

How did we get here?

In early May, 2022, one of Europe's largest airports became consumed by chaos. At Schiphol, Amsterdam, KLM cancelled more than 70 flights while other airlines - Transavia, Tui and Corendon - rerouted theirs^[i]. People reported waiting 3-4 hours to pass through check-in, missing flights, unable in some cases to even find the right lines to start their wait. Every aspect of the journey was impacted, from baggage handling to checking in and even getting a morning coffee.

The disruptions were largely due to staff shortages.

It's easy to blame the stress and burnout on the pandemic, but by looking at a few random examples of pre-Covid corporate behavior, it's easy to see how we got here. The Great Resignation has been commonly blamed on Covid, but it's been a steadily building trend since 2009. That was the year when the average monthly quit rate increased by 0.10 percentage points and continued its annual growth trend ever since^[ii].

We don't resign because of poor pay or insufficient gym memberships. We leave because we are switched off, undervalued and lacking trust in our leaders. We leave to reconnect with who we are, to pursue our passions, vision, purpose elsewhere.

The Great Resignation is, in reality, better described as the **Great Disengagement**.

We noticed this steady drop in engagement about 5-6 years ago and started hiring our first "Engagement Managers". This person was an HR newcomer, put in place to stem the hemorrhaging of workers, since the cost to fill a vacancy can be three to four times that person's annual salary^[iii].

^[i] Elton (2022). "Updated: Schiphol airport in for hellish weekend with more queues and cancellations". Euronews.travel. Accessed May 8, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/travel/2022/05/04/long-queues-remain-at-schiphol-airport-after-hellish-weekend-for-travellers>

^[ii] Fuller, Kerr (2022) "The Great Resignation Didn't Start with the Pandemic" Harvard Business Review. Accessed May 8, 2022. <https://hbr.org/2022/03/the-great-resignation-didnt-start-with-the-pandemic>

^[iii] Navarra (2022), "The Real Costs of Recruitment" SHRM. Accessed October 9, 2022. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/talent-acquisition/pages/the-real-costs-of-recruitment.aspx>

The Great Resignation.



The Engagement Manager was responsible for internal communication, employee wellbeing and mental health, social channels, organizing events and taking the pulse of the workforce. Keeping people happy.

In the worst case, the Engagement Manager was a professional corporate cheerleader; a box to be ticked so management could feel better about continuing their ways, unchanged, and gathering data about who's a team player and who's not.

These Engagement Managers keep the people "happy" by organizing countless wellbeing workshops, from Mindfulness to Yoga to Deep Breathing, scheduling more social events than anyone could ever attend and filling the feeds with breathlessly chipper emojis. They would excel at producing high-energy engagement videos of Happy Employees to fill the "Life@" stream.

The stress of our post-Covid lives often include the need to return, show our faces, be a team player and participate in as many group events as possible. We over-extend, pick up more projects and volunteer work than we should and find ourselves working nights to get it all done^[1]. The cumulative effects of trying to have it all delivered the opposite result; with all the yoga and mindfulness, employees were exhibiting increased stress and burnout and even more resignations.

In the best case, this person was a skilled communicator, part therapist and deep listener, part executive truth-teller and driver of data-driven incremental improvements in working conditions for all.

So, what is driving our discontent? Why are we so unhappy in our jobs now, that wasn't the case before the pandemic?

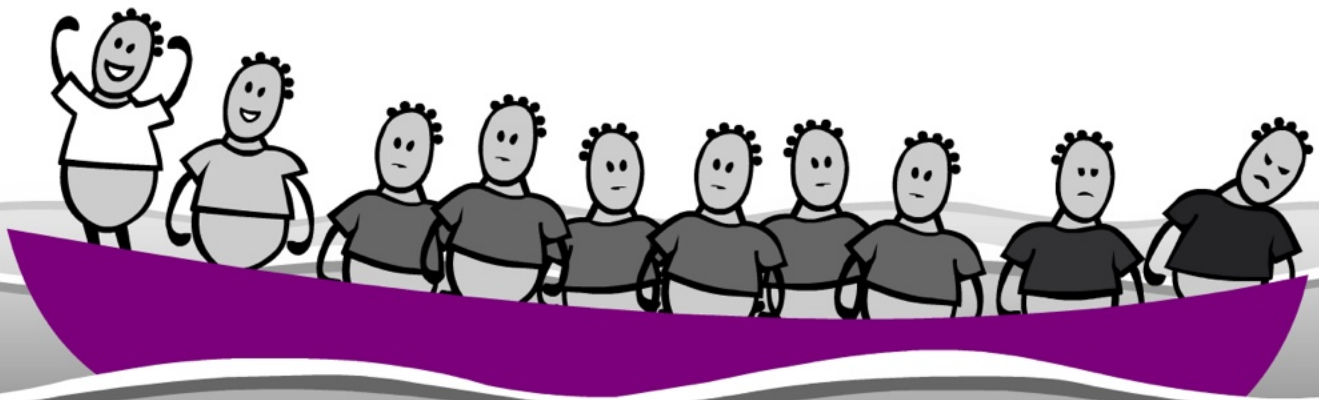
^[1] Booker-Drew (2019) "You've Got This: Too Many Office Social Events", Business Media Woman. Accessed August 14, 2022. <https://www.thebusinesswomanmedia.com/many-office-social-events/>

In the average company...

13% are engaged

63% are neutral

24% are disengaged



(according to the most recent Gallup 2020-2021)

Reason 1: Increased Workload

For as long as there has been work to do and an office to do it in – somewhere around the late 1700s - leadership determined the rules; what time to come and go, when and how to have lunch, take a vacation, what to wear, how to communicate and even who got the corner office with the view.

This dynamic was formalized in the 1800's with the rise of our urban factories, and spread to today's 9-5 corporate office^[i]. High-pressure creative industries sweetened the deal by offering some flexibility and “work hard, play hard” perks consisting of glamorous parties and offsite trainings. Covid took those perks away, turning those jobs “work hard, play never” burnout mills^[ii].

Today, the Great Resignation is only picking up steam. The numbers of people considering leaving their jobs rose from 41% to 44% in 2022^[iii]. As attrition gains speed and momentum, around the world, the effects of labor shortages are being felt in sectors from travel, dining, entertainment to retail to government^[iv].

With every resignation, workload increased for those left behind. Rather than cutting deliverables or killing projects when a team shrinks in size, the same tasks are spread across fewer people. The result is that we are working harder than ever: longer hours with greater intensity, fewer breaks, more tasks.

^[i] Beckett (2021), “How The Pandemic Has Empowered The Workforce”. Forbes Magazine. Accessed on January 23, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2021/05/10/how-the-pandemic-has-empowered-the-workforce/?sh=6048e3a62c12>

^[ii] Jane (2022). “How to navigate the employer-employee power shift”. The HR Director. Accessed May 7, 2022. <https://www.thehrdirector.com/features/future-of-work/how-should-you-navigate-the-employer-employee-power-shift/>

^[iii] Iacurci (2022). “The Great Resignation continues, as 44% of workers look for a new job”. CNBC. Accessed May 8, 2022. <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/22/great-resignation-continues-as-44percent-of-workers-seek-a-new-job.html>

^[iv] Fuller, Kerr (2022) “The Great Resignation Didn't Start with the Pandemic” Harvard Business Review. Accessed May 8, 2022. <https://hbr.org/2022/03/the-great-resignation-didnt-start-with-the-pandemic>

^[v] Gallup (2021). “Global Emotions Report”, Gallup, accessed on December 7, 2021. <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/349280/gallup-global-emotions-report.aspx>

^[vi] Jane (2022). “How to navigate the employer-employee power shift”. The HR Director. Accessed May 7, 2022. <https://www.thehrdirector.com/features/future-of-work/how-should-you-navigate-the-employer-employee-power-shift/>

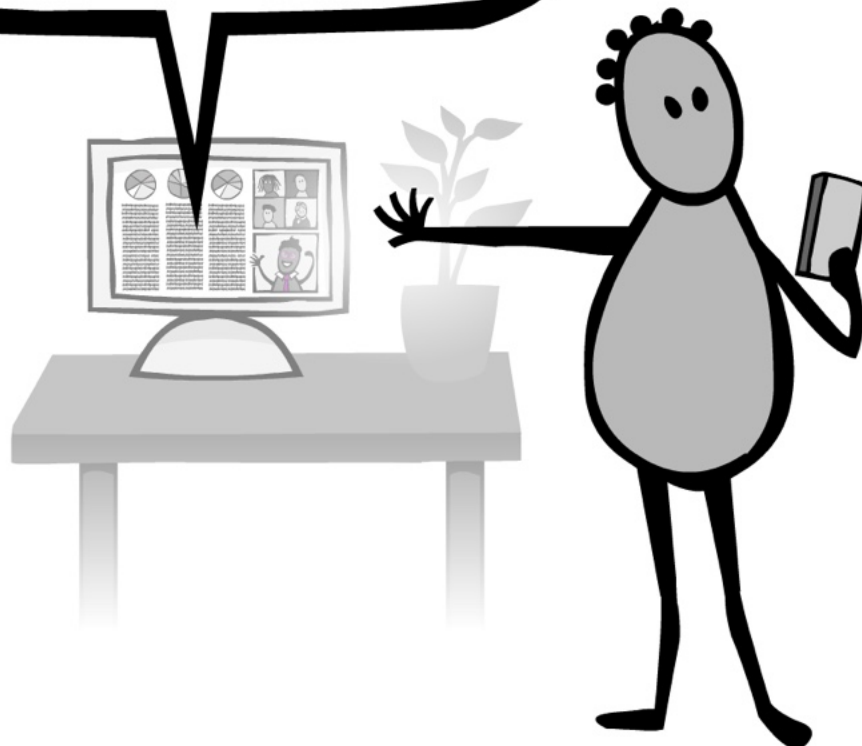
It's employee survey time again...



**So many questions.
Like any of this matters.
Nothing will change!**



**Survey results say
just 43% of people are
willing to come back
to the office...**



With high demand for delivery and increased pace of business transformation, workload spirals upwards and pressure grows. Customer demands have intensified and the emergence of an “always-on” workforce led to some 24% of us becoming disengaged: burned out, disaffected, exhausted and feeling negatively about our jobs^[1].

In 2021, 52% of us reported working longer hours when working remotely. ^[2] We work harder with less time and money for training, conferences, mentorship or passion projects. Market volatility and high energy costs replaced permanent contracts with temporary ones, removing trust, stability and feeling of irreplaceability (and thus, loyalty) and other benefits that made these high-intensity jobs rewarding. Politics, outsized egos and petty rivalries determine far more about who gets ahead.

In short, we have created toxicity. We have spent the past 20 years creating a working environment that is anathema to what humans need to thrive.

Reason 2: Workplace toxicity

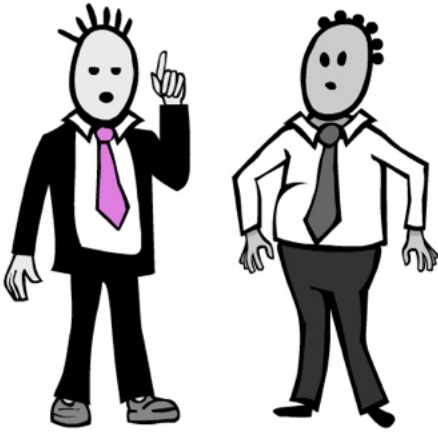
We’re cautiously entering our first post-Covid winter, still not really sure whether all of this is over, but now with a new crisis: inflation. We are still stressed, overworked, still balancing our lives at home and commitments at work, still trying to figure out how often we can return to the physical office and who gets to decide. Expectations are changing, teams are being broken down, built and re-formed. Add to this a multicultural population with diverse views and identities and what you have is a recipe for conflict in the workplace.

Conflict isn’t just unavoidable, but a sign of a passionate, high-functioning team. Conflict is healthy when it’s a constructive clash of ideas and visions driven by people who care about what they do.

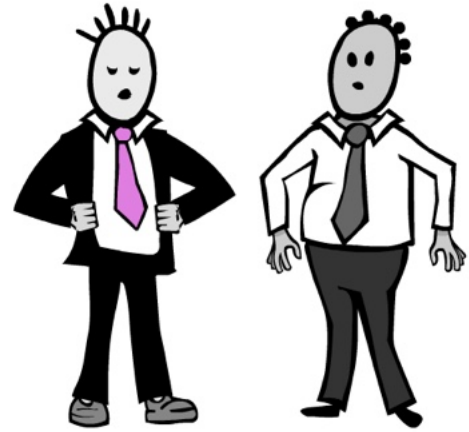
^[1] Gallup (2021). “Global Emotions Report”, Gallup, accessed on December 7, 2021. <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/349280/gallup-global-emotions-report.aspx>

^[2] Jane (2022). "How to navigate the employer-employee power shift". The HR Director. Accessed May 7, 2022. <https://www.thehrdirector.com/features/future-of-work/how-should-you-navigate-the-employer-employee-power-shift/>

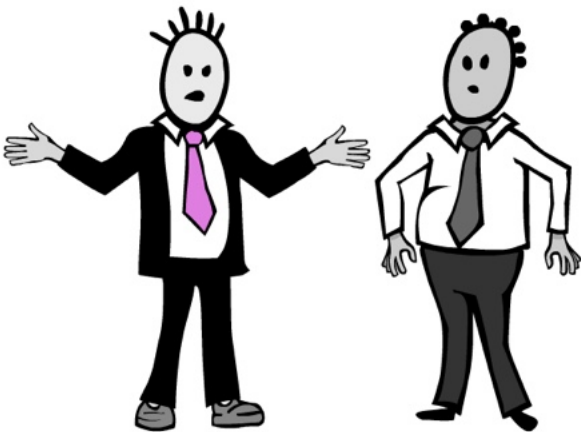
Workplace toxicity



condescension



negativity



passive
aggression



aggressive
aggression

But sometimes it's a result of insecurity, and often it's personal. Then it's not about the ideas at all but a manifestation of built-up micro-aggression and misunderstandings, erupting between individuals, between or within teams, department or board members.

Low-functioning teams results from a breakdown in trust, when individuals engage in knowledge hiding and backstabbing. It can occur vertically, up or down the chain of command when a boss punches down or an employee is constantly calling in sick. Sometimes it's mono-directional, when one person experiences micro-aggression, bullying or worse, harassment.

In the pre-Covid workplace, conflict between two individuals often resulted in the sudden and quiet disappearance of one of them, practically overnight. The weaker of the two – the new guy, the freelancer, the loner, the one with fewer friends (or lovers) in high places – is the one pulled from the herd and removed. Often the person is quickly forgotten.

But the feeling of insecurity, that everyone is replaceable and not worth starting 360s for, contributes to an organization-wide feeling of insecurity and distrust. Which feeds more conflict, back-stabbing and undermining, resulting in lower engagement. More burnout and increased resignations. Higher workload, more stress for those remaining.

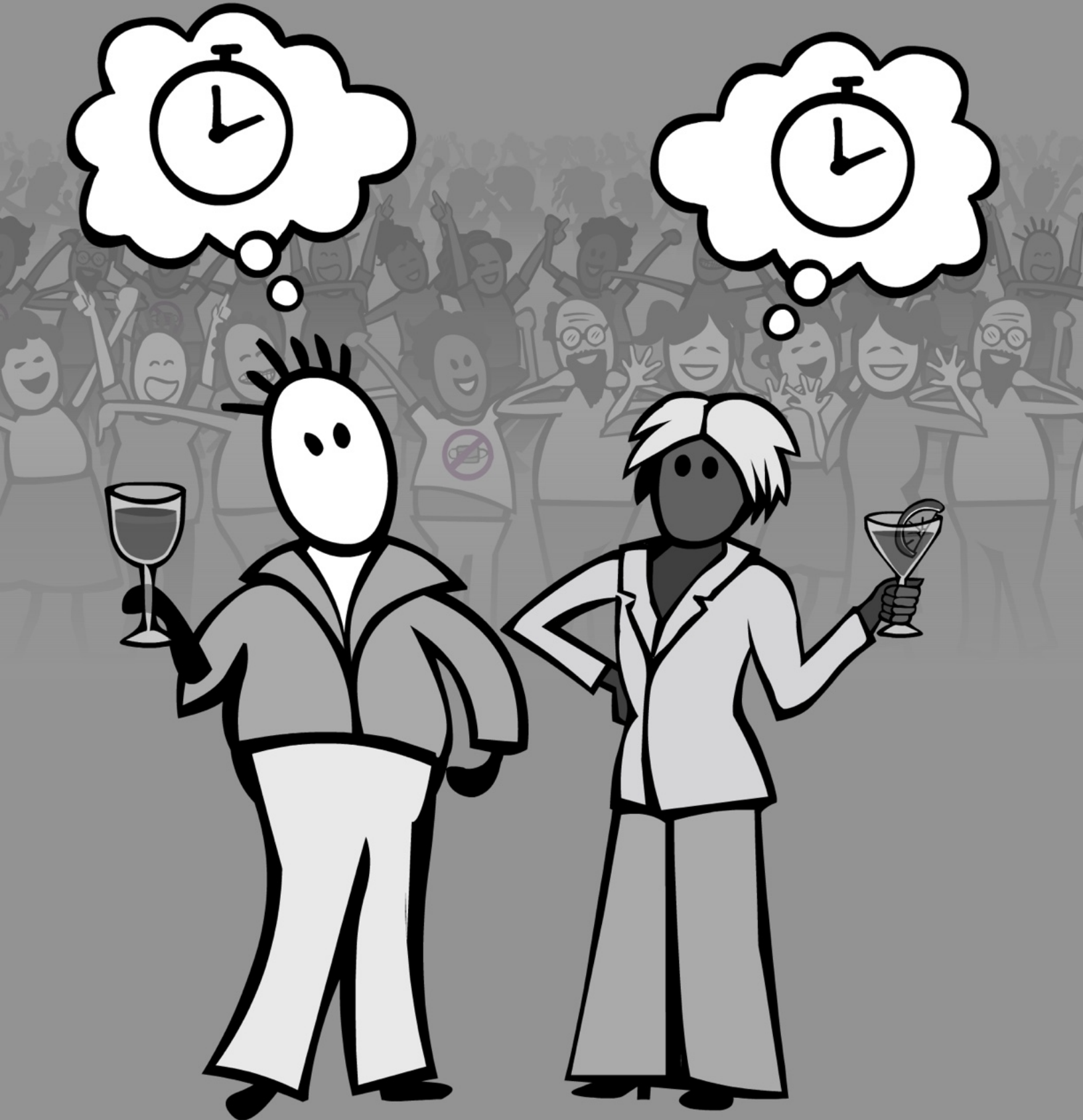
Reason 3: Forced Fun

Fun! At work. It's possible, of course.

It's so important for our overall experience to enjoy the company of the people we work with, understand them as humans, and deepen our friendships and connections. When these moments of fun as a team occur in the right way (workload adjusted to compensate, events do not cut radically into personal time), it's a great investment in a team.

Whether it's a simple after-work glass of wine at the local pub or a full-scale two-day retreat in a hotel on a golf course, fun greases the wheels and provides that base coat of mutual, human-to-human understanding that gets us through the tough times. It gives us a reason to stop and help a colleague even as our heads are exploding with overwork and deadlines.

Forced Fun



But when fun is forced, the effect is exactly the opposite of what is intended. Voluntary activities - organizing that team outing, setting up long, complex birthday rituals, forced Mani-Pedi Mondays, weekly running clubs we join because we know the boss is an avid middle-distance enthusiast – that we don't really want to do but join anyway to “show our faces”, “be a team player” or other reasons, lead to less rather than more engagement.

Organized fun is part of every great place to work. No workplace should be without these small moments of joy and relaxation with the people we work with. But in the end, an hour is an hour. Every new activity we add to our team schedule, whether work or play, all add to our overall workload and less time on our sofas watching cat videos.

And so often we plan these events in a reactive sleep cycle with no regard to who picks up the pieces at home, when no one is around to let the dogs out.

Reason 4: “Re-org” overload

A “**re-org**” is a systemic, passive-aggressive firing spree that an organization engages in when it wants to transform, innovate and “go lean”. Generally, it starts with a small, select group of powerful individuals deciding, behind closed doors that There Shall Be a New Organization with a New Structure, which triggers a mass reshuffling of pieces on the chessboard. It can be the result of an acquisition, the sale of a department or simply as a cost-reduction exercise.

The result is a wave of new titles, promotions and demotions as per a certain date. Teams are broken down, re-formed, fused into other teams, often with new managers, tasks and responsibilities.

The New Structure is carefully planned with timelines, colorful boxes and arrows, often by expensive external parties. The re-orgs are given cool, snazzy brands (NExxT, CHANGEup), a fancy logo and stylebook, and a timeline, and is rolled out at a Town Hall or in a series of chirpy newsletters and social posts. An exciting change with new opportunities with shorter reporting lines and efficiencies for everyone

The Re-Org.



The re-org may reduce the total workforce by 20-30%. About 50% of the workforce is informed that their current jobs will no longer exist and will have to apply for new ones in the New Organization. The new jobs could be their old ones with a different title or team or a wildly different proposition below or above the set of responsibilities, with matching salaries to boot.

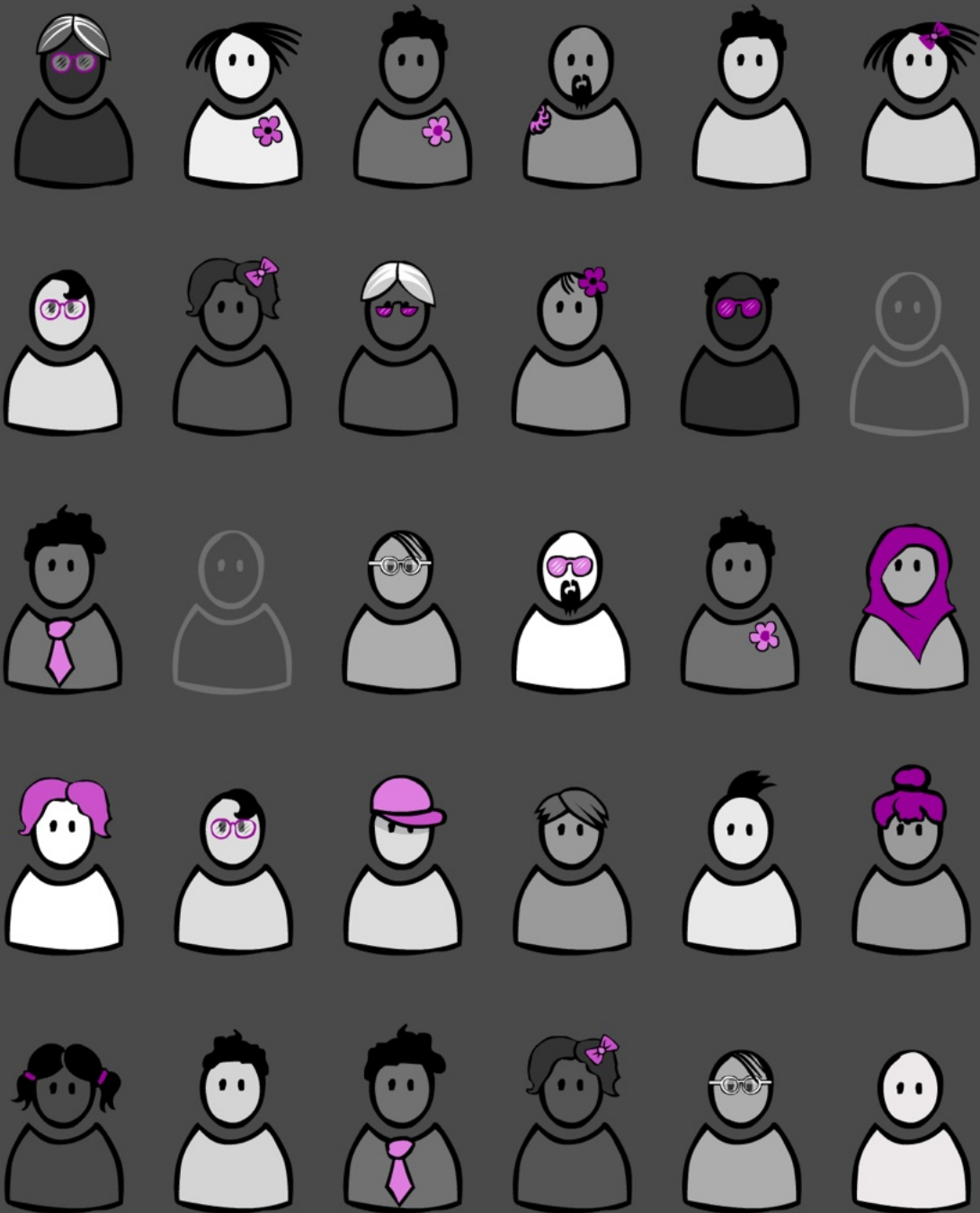
Employees choosing to do nothing results in their contract simply ending. They can watch the clock tick down and pack up their plants and go home. Even if they have a permanent position, it was only permanent in the old organization.

Coincidentally, employees who most impacted happen to also be those easiest to fire; those with annual contracts, the recent hires, the foreign workers or externals. Entrenched veterans with decades-old permanent contracts are unshakable fixtures; too expensive to pay off, too embedded to pry loose.

Over the course of several months, the organization becomes a semi-detached Lego house turned upside down and shaken. The figures whose feet were stuck to the floor remain in place while the things that aren't - people, coffee cups, picture frames and ergonomic chairs - fly down and join the heap of disaggregated parts in the plastic tub, either becoming material for the New Organization or they simply leave.

The resulting weeks and months as the clock ticks down devolve into a morass of pure toxicity. Very little meaningful work gets done. It's a blur of high-stakes musical chairs as employees dance and spin, psych each other out, game the system, gossip and shamelessly curry favor with those making the decisions. Colleagues who were once results-oriented partners become shark tank competitors in a hair-pulling, eye-gouging, trash-talking free-for-all. Letters and CVs are polished, strategic lunches are held and friendly coffee meetings are held to gather information.

The Disappeared

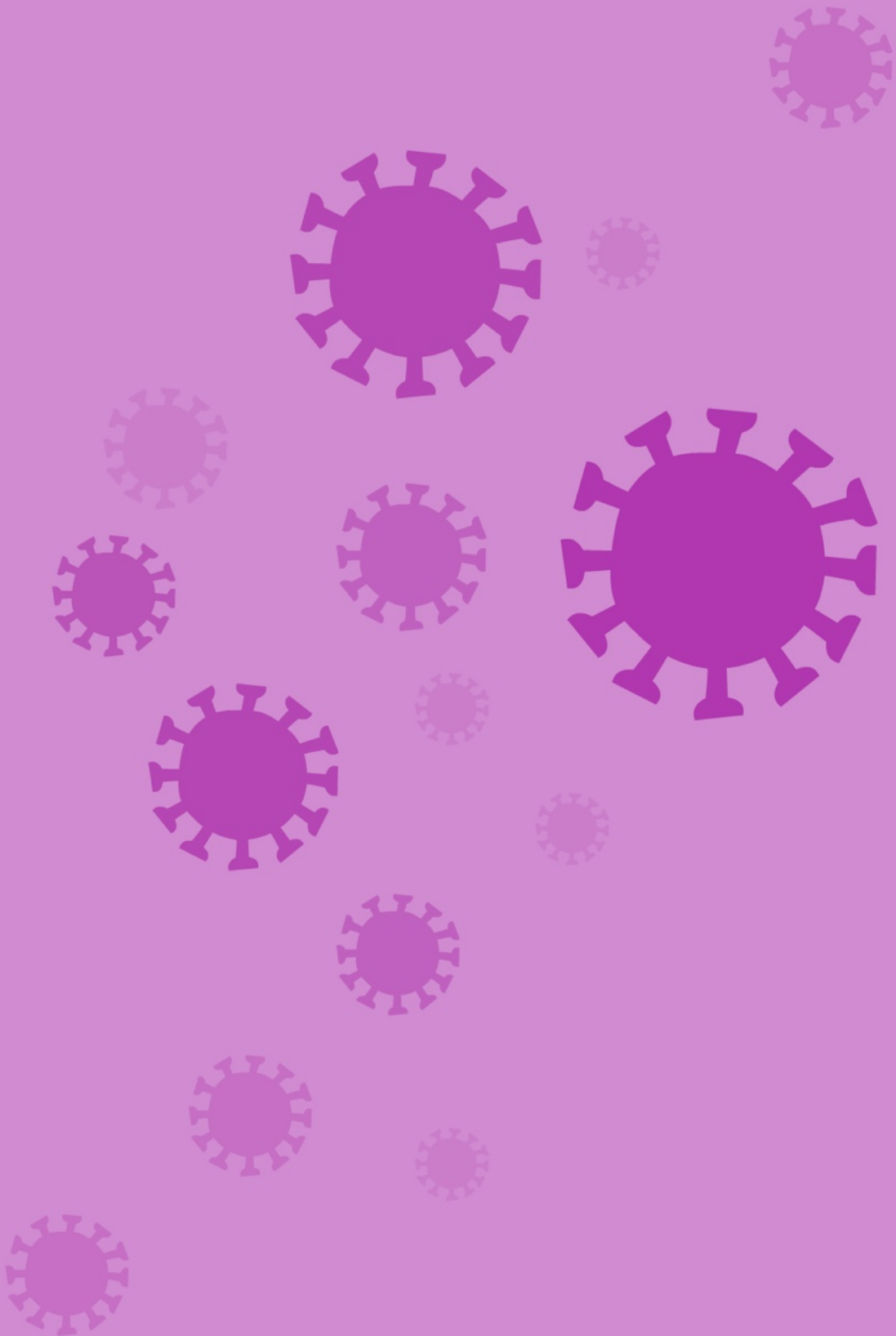


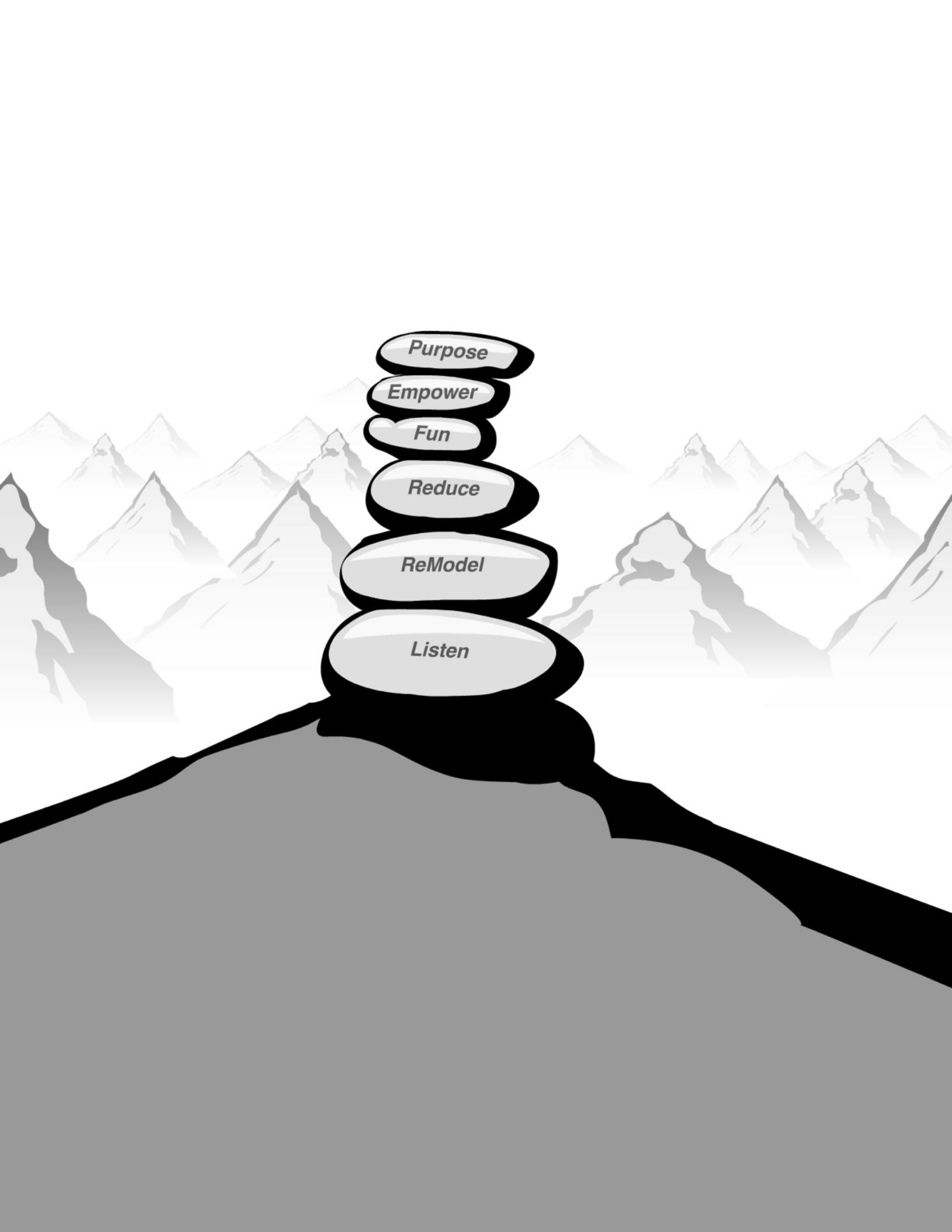
Leaders spend hours selling, explaining the change and calming the nervous workforce. The messaging is disjointed, the re-org is “unavoidable”, as though it were an act of God; a flood, a hurricane, that “happened”, that leadership had nothing to do with. The poison that is now coursing through the body is either unseen by the top or written off as just the cost of doing business. It saves management from that icky task of having to let under-performers go.

Long after the re-org has come and gone, the toxicity remains. The atmosphere is strained and dysfunctional as those who remain make sense of their new jobs, teams and managers. The “forming-storming-norming” cycle occurs in fast-motion, on a wide scale as multiple teams work out their personality issues and find their grooves at the same time. Having survived this re-org, they wonder when the next one will be, and whether they will survive that one, too.

Traces of The Disappeared remain like ghosts no one speaks about. His name is still found on documents, PowerPoints, projects. Her photo is still on org charts and social feeds, which little by little, get renamed, replaced and redistributed until all memory of her is gone.

In the post-Covid workplace, employees are sufficiently empowered and equipped to push back. They can rate their employer quickly and easily using sites like Glassdoor and LinkedIn, they can comment openly on company posts and keep active chatter humming. In the post-Covid world, dirt and true testimonials spread at the speed of 5G and the internet never forgets.





Purpose

Empower

Fun

Reduce

ReModel

Listen

Terminology.



TERMINOLOGY

This book introduced a few new terms, and here's a glimpse at some of them.

Burn-In – Hard to spot and nearly impossible to measure, “burn-in” is similar to burnout but occurs when engaged teams consistently work on weekends and evenings because they feel the urgency and want to give the 110%. A high-culture syndrome and often a self-inflicted condition afflicting high-functioning teams operating in an unsustainable state of perpetual over-delivery.

CC-The-World Emails – The act of compulsively and passive-aggressively hitting “reply all” to over-communicate non-essential information to all involved and increasing everyone's collective workload in the process. Examples include: “Here is the file you need”, “Thanks!”, “You're welcome!”, “Well done!”, “No problem”, “By the way, how are you feeling?”, “Happy birthday!”, “Thanks for the muffins, they were delicious.” And so on.

Chief Engagement Officer (CE_NO) – a C-Suite position that does not currently exist, but should, according to the Handbook for Post-Covid Engagement. This would be a high-ranking executive position just under CEO, responsible for the happiness and satisfaction of every member of the workforce, globally as well as internal communication, employer marketing, onboarding, employee empowerment and leadership messaging: CEO BFF.

Co-CreaPalooza - a digital or hybrid highly collaborative process involving the full community using a visual collaborative board (such as Miro), asking certain vital questions are asked about the future of work. This can include subtle changes to the mission or purpose, defining the list of company values, agreeing on universal rules around physical vs hybrid working.

Cultural Deep Dive - A multi-layered internal research project carried out by an external, third party or multi-disciplinary internal team who will not suffer any professional consequences for bearing bad news or delivering embarrassing results. The purpose is to gather extensive data from the working population, both qualitative and quantitative, using a variety of methods to learn about the underlying culture of an organization. A whitepaper, executive summary and three-pronged action plan is the result, communicated widely with highly visual tooling, such as PowerBI.

CYA Emails – Sending an email which puts a verbal promise or agreement in writing to necessary stakeholders with the goal of Covering the Ass of the sender. To ensure accountability, prevent finger-pointing, document who is responsible for what and by when.

Double-Track Listening - A combined listening campaign based on two parallel courses: the quick turnaround, pulse-taking “Listen and Deliver Loop”, and slow-burning “Deep Listen” in-depth data collection. These two run at the same time but have very different goals and deliver two very different results.

Disappeared, the – Traces and artifacts of those who are No Longer With Us: people who were quietly or not so quietly let go. Not much is said about them during team meetings or in daily banter, but their names appear on annual reports, in cc chains, and the empty shells of their meeting invites remain on agendas for weeks and months. Also useful for blaming all manner of current mess even long after their departure.

Engage-o-meter – Tracking the Employee Experience (EX) to ensure consistent high levels of engagement and satisfaction, which translates into the collective Employee Journey (EJ). Much the way the Customer Experience (CX) and Customer Journey (CJ) is tracked and mapped. This reveals pain points, moments of truth and moments of wonder and can effectively inform policy decisions and shed light on employee “churn”.

EX (Employee Experience) – The aggregate set of experiences that define an employee’s life cycle in an organization. Starting with their pre-boarding and onboarding experience, EX tracks the quality of an employee’s interaction with her team, her manager, her reports, her role in the wider organization, how she is supported with tools, software and services, and how her future path is guided.

Fattening the Pipeline – The act of pulling people into an upward career trajectory, choosing selective “stretch” projects, new challenges and goals just beyond their natural comfort level, right from the start of their time in a role.

Forced Fun – The “voluntary” and supposed-to-be-fun engagement activities that often take place outside office hours that no one has time for but we are compelled to attend to demonstrate our commitment to “team playing” or the company. These activities are neither fun nor increase our engagement but add to our overall workload as well as cut into our personal family or free time. This includes being asked to organize them – an extended team outing, birthday events, drinks, the weekly yoga class.

Forced Purpose – When employees are asked to provide proof of their engagement, explain why they love the company (often at camera-point), why they go the extra mile and do what they do, why they love the brand.

Gamification - Studied seriously in the workplace for more than two decades, but under-utilized. We know that gamification works for training, skill building, awareness, problem solving and engagement. It improves performance and has the capacity to make mundane, repetitive tasks more enjoyable.

Great Disengagement, The – Another way to describe the feelings behind the massive global pre, and post-Covid resignation. It describes the feeling of being disenchanted with current workload, conditions, leadership behavior, lack of respect, purpose, direction, empathy and consideration. Feeling uninspired and detached from daily tasks, often coupled with active job-seeking and quitting fantasies.

Great Resignation, The – Also known as the Big Quit and the Great Reshuffle, this an ongoing economic trend in which employees have voluntarily resigned from their jobs en masse, beginning, according to some metrics, as early as 2009. Wage stagnation with rising cost of living, job dissatisfaction, working conditions, lack of purpose and vision, lack of flexibility... culminating in the Covid-fueled feeling of a global general workers’ strike. The term “Great Resignation” was coined by Anthony Klotz, a professor of management at Mays Business School at Texas A&M University, in May 2021.

Hostage Video – Creepy, 1-3 minute heavily solicited video clips of employees talking about how much they love their job. These are “hostage videos” when they are requested by management and used for purposes of employer marketing, internal engagement or digital external campaigns and often pop up on social feeds, internal or external, to mark certain occasions. When grass-roots and/or unsolicited, they are just videos.

Human2Human – Messaging, outreach or communications of any kind (one to one, one to many, many to one) in digital or live format, that is authentic, vulnerable, respectful and honest, closely resembling a conversation between two people. The key is active listening during the broadcast to change the direction of the messaging based on reaction.

Invisible Diversity – The presence of human characteristics not immediately apparent to the outside world, such as a person’s religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, military experience, socioeconomic background, marital status, nationality and more. This is a much larger picture than visible diversity (physical disability, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender). Incorporating invisible diversity allows fresh ideas and unique perspectives, which lead to better products, improved customer experiences, increased employee retention and a wider range of problem-solving capacities.

Listen-and-Deliver Polling - Weekly, short bursts of easy questions that are dropped into every imaginable platform (mail polls, social surveys, Mentimeter word clouds at events or Kanban board snapshots during a retrospective) that ask fun, easy questions about office life, like: “What is your favorite type of bagel?” with all possible answers pre-approved, pre-budgeted and deliverable within 24 hours. The polls run on Slack or Teams for 3-5 days, and the winning item is implemented as soon as possible.

Onboarding in the Dark – Onboarding in a digital-hybrid environment where less than 50% of the staff is present at the office, and minimal support from management. The new hire, partially (or fully) working from home is required to map hundreds of stakeholders, interests, departments and individuals in his head using only the two-dimensionality of digital channels without the benefit of team members to ask for help explaining basic office functions. Onboarding in the Dark can mean getting sent (passively) a few learning videos, text about company history, a handful of online coffee meetings with key individuals combined with the unrealistic expectation that the new hire will be hitting targets and contributing meaningfully after about 30 days.

NonBoarding – A general lack of onboarding, when the new person is expected to “hit the ground running”, “get thrown in to the deep end of the pool”, “sink or swim”, “let it all just wash over you”. He is expected to “know” things, or to “ask for help”, figure out company structure, culture, who all these people are and what they do and how to do his job without the assistance of any planned, compressible learning track, the ability to shadow a supervisor or predecessor for a period of time.

Post-Covid (PC) – The period in our history after the Covid pandemic, generally lasting from 2019-2022. Just as the Second World War defined and shaped a generation, so too has Covid molded how we feel about our work, our social interactions and thoughts about the people we spend our time with. People all around the world living and working through this moment in history share similar experiences, frames of reference, stories, challenges, social feeds, videos and memories of events.

Pre-Covid or Before Covid (BC) – Anything in our current history happening before the 2019 appearance of the first Covid virus, back when we went to our offices every day, did not have to carry a Super Green Pass around with us wherever we went, didn’t even know what a PCR or antigen test was (and frankly didn’t care), when we gathered freely in large groups for human social events, such as weddings, parties or dinners in live restaurants (not home-recreated delivered) without the use of masks, hand sanitizer or distancing.

Re-org – A passive aggressive firing spree that a company engages in when it wants to transform, innovate, reduce costs and “go lean”. Generally, it starts with a small, select group of individuals deciding, behind closed doors that There Shall Be a New Company with a New Structure. A mass reshuffling of pieces on the chessboard ensues, with new titles, promotions and demotions as per a certain date. Teams are broken down, re-shuffled and re-formed, carefully planned with timelines, colorful boxes and arrows, and launched in a big, splashy way with branding and awareness campaigns as “something exciting” for everyone.

Social Seeding – A framework offering a current set of pre-approved assets (photos, videos, text and hashtags) for employees to use following company events or new releases to post to their social media platforms (LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok). It can be as simple as a series of dated folders or fancy, a dedicated app. When this is well done, each employee becomes an employer marketing ambassador, spreading approved news, facts to celebrate or changes.

Speakers’ Pools – The practice of building a group of young, talented speakers from every level of the organization and passing speaking roles to them, rather than the leadership of the organization. This sends two messages: one, that the organization cares about putting the least among them out front, in the spotlight and two, that the young individual feels that the organization actively invests in her future.

Workation – One of the lingering gifts Covid has given us, the “working vacation”: an out-of-the-(home)-office experience where an employee will put in a typical remote working day from a (foreign) location and then enjoy a change of scene during their off-time. This works for adventure travel, tourism as well as friend and family visits. The idea is to have a change of scene, take a break from the routine but still continue to work as usual.



What else?

Liked the
Handbook for
**Post-Covid
Engagement?**

You might like this one.

