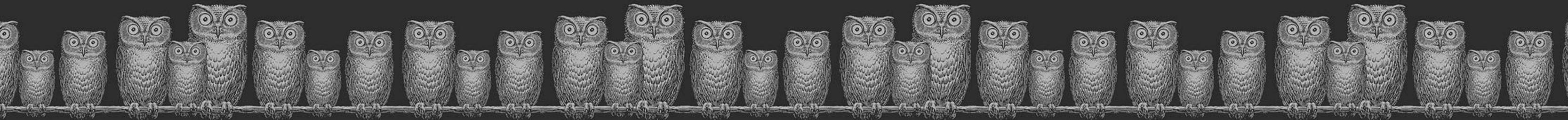




CHARLOTTE STREET
PARTNERS

COMMUNICATING THE CORONAVIRUS JOB RETENTION SCHEME



FROM A DIFFERENT PLACE

FOREWORD

Inevitably you will have colleagues, employees, friends either on furlough or working from home as a result of the Covid-19 crisis. We see three main communications challenges for organisations furloughing employees: ensuring continued employee engagement while people are not at work; managing reputation amongst external stakeholders; and communicating the return to work of your people.

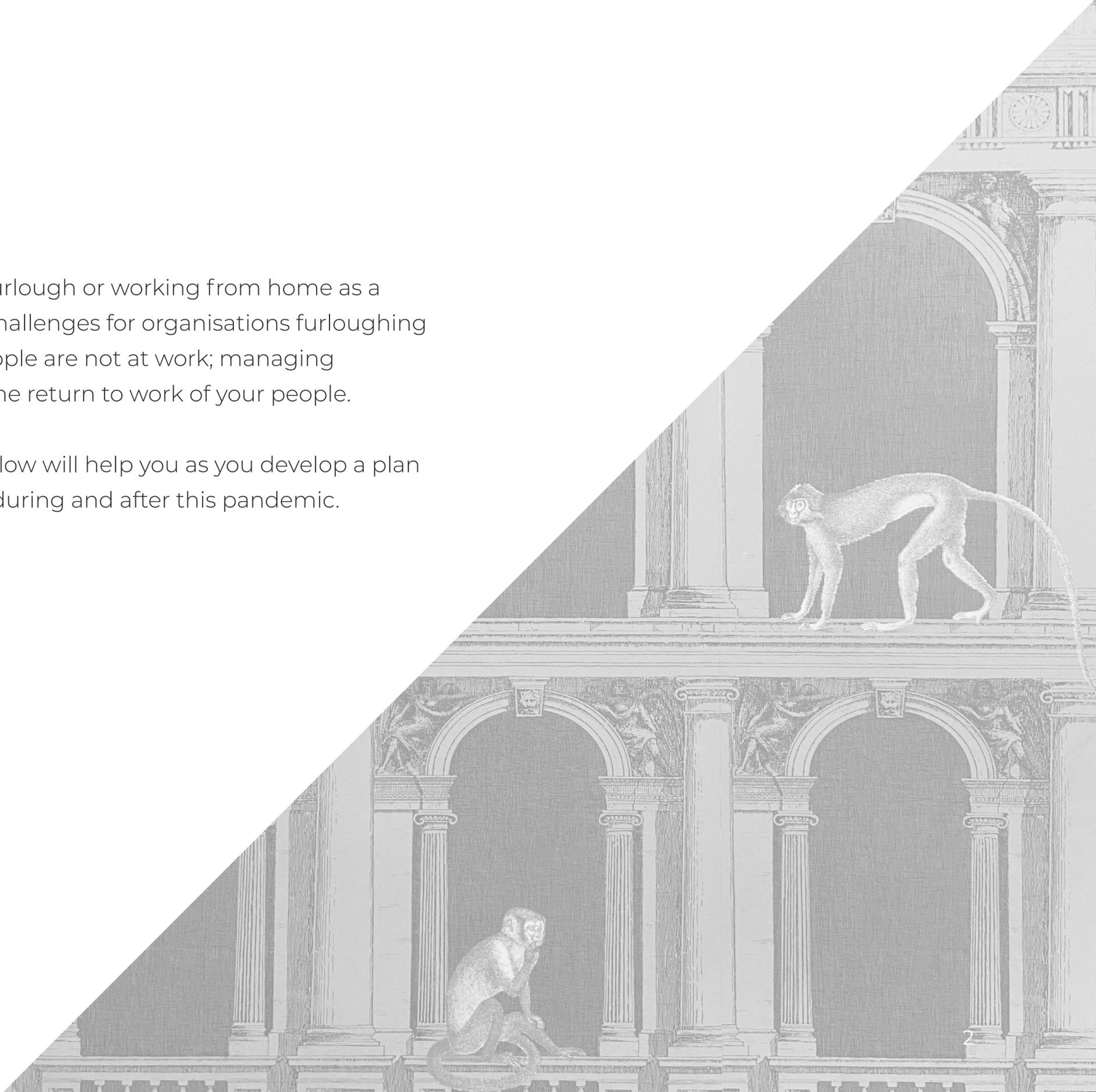
We hope the thoughts we've pulled together in the pages that follow will help you as you develop a plan to address those three challenges and look after your employees during and after this pandemic.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Harriet Moll'.

HARRIET MOLL

Employee engagement lead



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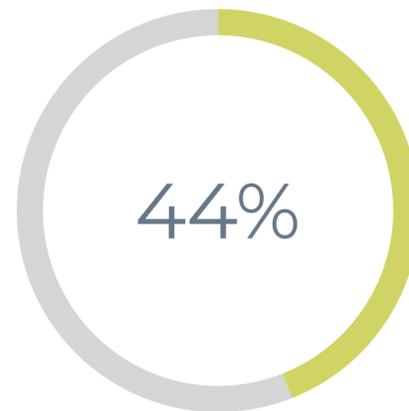
4. Communicating the return to work

STATS CHECK

About **half of UK companies** are planning to furlough at least some of their staff because of the coronavirus

£30-40bn

The estimated cost of the job retention scheme to the taxpayer over three months



Percentage of companies that said that at least half their staff would be paid through the scheme. One-third said that they were planning to furlough **more than 75% of their workforce**. A fifth of businesses had closed operations temporarily (source: British Chambers of Commerce)



The Treasury has estimated that about **10% of the private sector** workforce would be laid off temporarily while their employers take advantage of the government job retention scheme.

Using data from the British Chambers of Commerce, the Resolution Foundation found that this number was likely to be **more like nine million**.

A quarter of employers in the UK said they expected to cut jobs permanently, with **one in 10 expecting to lose between 11% and 49% of employees**

INSIGHT: FINDING PURPOSE



MALCOLM ROBERTSON

Founding partner

The word 'furlough' is said to have derived from the Dutch word 'verlof', which means leave of absence. It was used in the UK until the early 1900s, referring to military personnel on leave.

Not commonly used outside the US or Germany – which revived the idea post the financial crash – furlough is a word that has become much more widely familiar in recent weeks and in dramatic and alarming circumstances.

In understandable haste to protect jobs and the income of citizens in the eye of a public health storm, vast numbers of employees in the UK have been furloughed – essentially rushed into a sustained period of absence.

That speed of reaction – both from government and employers – was necessary, and there will be a large cost to be borne, not least in terms of the long-term mental health and wellbeing of the many people affected.

The rules of furlough are pretty stark and they prevent employees undertaking any element of their job or even engaging with their employer. So, while some of the anxiety around your employees' finances will have been lifted to an extent, it is fair to assume that as the period of furlough extends into and perhaps beyond the summer, other significant concerns may arise.

Your furloughed people – already tired and weary from the daily worries of their health and the health of their loved ones – may gradually lose the sense of being part of an organisation and a team.

For many, the sense of purpose that drives them every day will have been lost. Here, we try to provoke some thinking about what that means and to provide some practical advice.

Giving these important issues some attention now will put your organisation in a stronger position as it emerges from this period of upheaval and uncertainty and into whatever new world exists in the future.

PUTTING YOUR VALUES TO THE TEST

“

If you're not going to take the time to translate values from ideals to behaviours — if you're not going to teach people the skills they need to show up in a way that's aligned with those values and then create a culture in which you hold one another accountable for staying aligned with the values — it's better not to profess any values at all. They become a joke. A cat poster. Total BS.”

BRENÉ BROWN

Research professor at the
University of Houston

Companies are faced with myriad uncertainties. We don't yet know whether the furlough scheme will be enough to allow businesses to retain staff over the long-term. We don't know if employers will be in a position to welcome furloughed staff back at the same level of pay. We don't know if the demand for those jobs will be there when the restrictions are lifted. The list goes on.

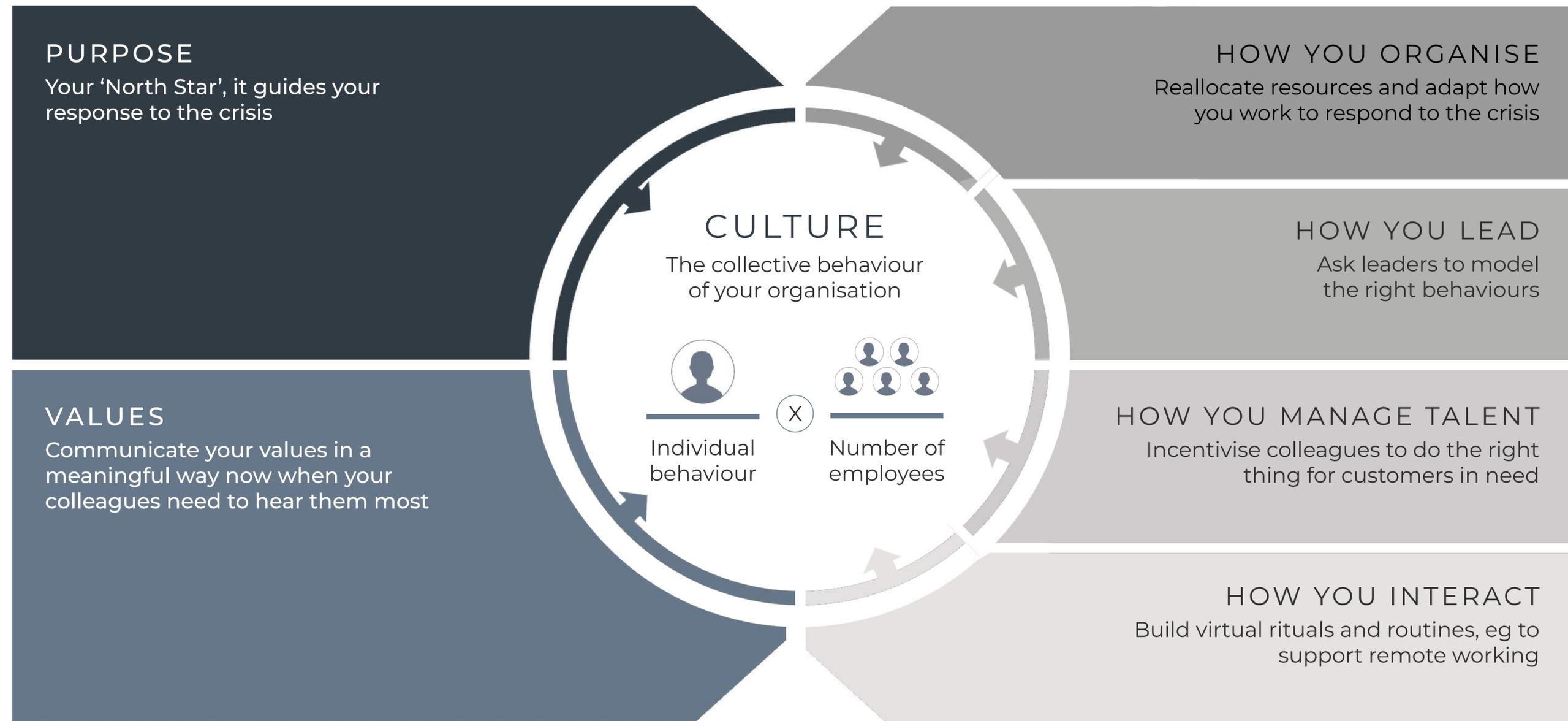
In the absence of any meaningful clarity, we have to plan for the future with what we know right now. For many of us, the most obvious guide is our values.



PUTTING YOUR VALUES TO THE TEST

INTERNAL COMPASS

ACTIONS





PUTTING YOUR VALUES TO THE TEST



Questions around purpose, culture and values are being asked in the knowledge that the actions leaders take in these difficult moments will define them in a post-Covid-19 world.

It is possible that the rules of capitalism will change to some extent beyond the crisis. Strong values will matter as much as or perhaps even more than profit. The word 'sustainability' will mean just that, across all social and economic measures, but especially around employees and how they are cared for in good times and bad.

It goes without saying that customers, suppliers and other external stakeholders will remain important, but it is what companies do for their people during this – or any other – crisis represents the true test of whether the values on which they pride themselves during the normal times bear scrutiny during the more testing times.

INSIGHT: VOLATILITY



PAUL GRAY
Consulting partner

Sometimes we describe the world as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, shortened to VUCA. There is academic rigour and evidence behind the acronym – see work by **Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus**, and also how the American War College used VUCA to describe the world after the Cold War.

If ever things were volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, they are now. Spare a thought for those leading in such times – but also spare a thought for those with few or no resources, trying to navigate (or just survive) in such a world.

However, we can go beyond just describing the world. We can also look at VUCA as a prescription, not a description. We do this by changing the words to a set of responses: to values, understanding, connections and agility.

Our values are a source of stability in turbulent times: you know what your values are, as an individual and as an organisation.

Understanding is possible, even in a spate of constantly emerging and apparently changing information: stick to trusted sources and don't be deflected; we can help you with that.

Connection has never been more important: use whatever means you have to keep the connections you do have, and to build more; we can help you with that.

Agility is possible – especially if your values are strong, your understanding is developed, and your connections are nurtured; we can help you with that. There are no simple answers but there are some simple things we can do.

V

Remind yourself of what makes you worthwhile, and what your core **values** are; they haven't been shaken by events.

U

Build your **understanding** through trusted sources and don't allow yourself to be deflected by every wind that blows

C

Maintain and build your **connections**; and get in touch with someone you trust, to share your thoughts and feelings with them – and offer safe spaces to others, to share with you

A

And keep moving: don't let the restrictions immobilise you or your organisation; keep your body and mind **active**; maintain your **agility** in tough times



IN PRACTICE

COMMUNICATING THE 'WHY'

If you, like many businesses, moved at a necessary fast pace to furlough employees and don't feel you've explained why as comprehensively as you would do if it was happening today, there is still a place for doing it.

If you can, be clear about the purpose of furlough: it is to **retain** valuable staff, not to lose them. Employees are furloughed not because they are of little or no value to the company, but because external pressures mean that their jobs can no longer be carried out.

It is all very well *saying* that an employee is valuable. But framing any decision to furlough in relation to the wider and specific challenges facing your company will help to *demonstrate* their value.

Where has the demand decreased, where is the supply chain broken, how has the workload diminished? And how are we expecting this to pick up, have we done any forecasting?

The more detail you can provide, the better, but it may not be possible to do that given the uncertainty that exists everywhere. So just be open – talk about what you know and what you don't know. Strike the right tone – be straight but compassionate.



IN PRACTICE

COMMUNICATING THE 'HOW'

Practicalities will no doubt be front of mind and defining the parameters of the scheme is important. Providing an open forum for questions and responding to concerns quickly and openly will help to provide a measure of reassurance to employees who will likely never have experienced anything like this before.

But, beyond standard engagement, there is more you can do.

If your employees are interested, offer to help them make a plan around their personal development and relaxation. What objectives have they set for themselves and can they make progress on them with this time? How can the company support employees to do this? Think about whether you can schedule online training, recommend books or reading materials or brainstorm passion projects such as charity work. Note that you will have to pay employees at least the minimum wage if they undertake training that will ultimately help the business.



It is also worth encouraging activities which keep your employees engaged with each other, particularly if they are all on furlough. Distribute the names and contact details of those who wish to keep in touch and structure virtual activities, for example a Zoom book club, weekly quiz, Friday drinks or a group exercise class. This will help people maintain that connection with the organisation and with the team in which they are a part and helps people feel a sense of purpose, even though they are not currently working. It will also help with mental health more generally as we all get used to spending most of our days in the confines of our homes.

Similarly, it's important to be mindful of your employees' personal circumstances. New government guidance on the job retention scheme enables employees who have caring responsibilities to be furloughed by their employer to support them to care for dependants. If this is the case, you may want to have an informal chat with them to gauge the demands they have at home. We wouldn't want employees to feel pressure to participate in training, volunteering or even the more social aspects of planned engagement



IN PRACTICE

COMMUNICATING THE 'WHEN'

Providing a visual aid like this indicative timeline can help employees to process the furlough period. Try and break it up into bitesize three-week chunks and reassure employees that you will check in with them frequently.



WELLBEING

Employees will all cope differently while on furlough, depending on varying home environments and responsibilities.

Without the routine of work, it will be important for those on furlough to devise ways to manage their time and develop coping strategies while in self-isolation.

Dos

- Contact employees weekly to check in on their wellbeing and provide an update on their furlough situation (even if there aren't any changes). Never leave them in the dark.
- Look out for your furloughed employees' welfare and provide them with helpful phone numbers.
- Offer ideas on what they can do during furlough, eg volunteering websites.
- Encourage your employees to switch off from work tasks and stay healthy.

Dont's

- Contact them unnecessarily. Once a week should be enough but you can judge it based on previous conversations.
- Ask them to do any work for your company. This is strictly not allowed and neither is contact via work email addresses.
- Ban them from seeking new employment or usefully filling time through volunteering or studying.
- Make them feel compelled to participate in organised social activity.

EXTERNAL REPUTATION AND STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT

FROM A DIFFERENT PLACE

HANDLING FURLOUGH ANNOUNCEMENTS

Organisations and those who lead them are likely to be working under more pressure than they will have felt before. The changing nature of the crisis, and the demands placed on individuals, society and the institutions they lead have only added to the challenge.

Furloughing employees and communicating such decisions to employees and the outside world must be undertaken clearly and sensitively.

Many of the normal rules of engagement do not apply during this crisis, and neither will they be applied when judgements are being made during and in the aftermath of it.

Companies are accountable now and in the future to employees, government, the media, investors, and society more widely. Not just for the decisions they made, but how well they engaged with their people and other stakeholders.



CHECKLIST: GOOD PRACTICE

This checklist of good practice aims to ensure your organisation is as well prepared as it can be for the inevitable public interest in, and scrutiny of, the choices that are made and implemented over the coming weeks.



EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION



It goes without saying that the health and wellbeing of your employees matters above all else in this crisis and they should be engaged properly at all times. Leaders must be visible regularly (which is much more challenging than usual at the moment), and accessible in some cases to employee groups and their representatives. We can advise on technology options for such engagement. Communication with employees in the case of furlough should happen before public statements are made. All the advice here applies to the style and tone of your communication with your people as well as external audiences at this time.



TONE OF VOICE



The importance of tone at this time cannot be overstated. As we've said before, this is a health crisis and a matter of life and death for us all. Talking purely from a business perspective is likely to provoke an aggressive reaction, so empathy becomes more important. It is not just what we say but how we say it.

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KEY MESSAGES



What are the most significant things you want to say? Be clear about the decisions taken, how you've reached them, the impact they will have on your business and your employees, and how you feel in doing so. Don't worry about needing to refer to what you did or said before this crisis hit. People need to know what you are doing now and how you are considering the future.



TEMPLATE Q&A



Take the time to produce an exhaustive Q&A for internal and external purposes. Put yourself in the shoes of your stakeholders and think about what you would want to know if you were them about the furlough process. In doing so, you will be better prepared to answer the most difficult questions you are likely to face, not only from your employees but from the full range of other stakeholders. The media, unsurprisingly, is scrutinising the conduct of businesses and their leaders forensically during this period and those that are judged to have come up short are being called out.

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EARLY WARNING



Have you thought carefully about the stakeholders you should engage before you make a public statement? For listed businesses, this is not always straightforward, but taking people by surprise is never a good strategy. We can work with you to identify stakeholders, internal and external, who will likely comment on whatever announcements you make. It is important that they do so from an informed perspective, to help temper criticism and influence the wider public.



CHOREOGRAPHY



It is likely that you will be communicating to many audiences at the same time, from your employees to government, policy makers and beyond. You should consider every channel available to you and pull together an appropriate and detailed plan, including consideration of leaks to the media and others. The right actions, for the right reasons, communicated in the right order.

COMMUNICATING THE RETURN TO WORK

At first glance this may seem like wishful thinking, but it really is never too early to plan for the re-entry of your workforce, either from furlough or after a sustained period of working from home.

Some companies operating globally may well have experience of this challenge from other regions already, as their people navigate a return to work in parts of Asia and Europe. Likewise, companies in the UK, particularly in the construction and manufacturing sectors, will be anticipating the gradual reintroduction of workers over the coming weeks.

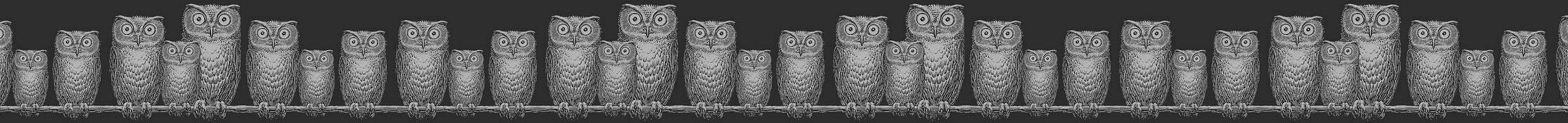
This will require very considered thinking. Firstly, you need to ensure your workforce feel safe and comfortable. Put a strategy in place in advance, keep communication channels open and routinely evaluate whether the policy is right for your company and your people as time passes and things change.

Secondly, a period of heightened stress will ensue for those who remain on furlough. Communicate with them openly and honestly, with a realistic timeframe for their return to work.

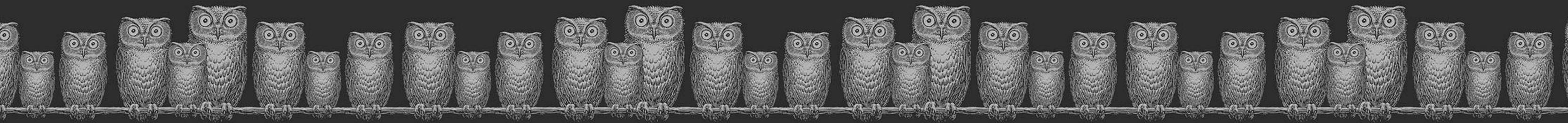
And finally, think about external perceptions and the long-term reputation of your business. If you are planning the gradual reintroduction of visible workers on the periphery of key worker status, you can expect some initial pushback from the public and, potentially, the media. Similarly, if you are planning on reintroducing workers in an office context, you may attract criticism from employees themselves.

You can mitigate these concerns by developing a comprehensive strategy document for increased distancing, and enhanced cleaning and sanitising at your places of work. Set out the case for re-entry and how it aligns with government measures in your key messages and Q&A documents, and use social media to establish a direct dialogue with concerned parties. Now more than ever, your people need to feel engaged.

For employers of every size and scale, the reality of meeting the varying needs of their employees during this crisis, some of whom may be furloughed when others are not, some of whom will be let go while others remain, is a challenging one that requires a substantial degree of sensitivity, understanding and compassion.



THANK YOU





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FROM A DIFFERENT PLACE