World Changers – The podcast
Ep.6 Vive La Revolution

Elle Bradley-Cox 00:07
Welcome to world changers, a podcast exploring the trends making an enduring mark on our world of work, and how business leaders, HR teams and internal communicators can stay one step ahead.

Hierarchy is a staple of corporate life, careers have been built on it, power is wielded through it, and those at the top of the ladder aren't going to cede that place easily. But now we've glimpsed into the CEO's bedroom and seen frontline colleagues transform into superheroes. How will that revolutionise stereotypical workplace structures?

The pandemic may have accelerated the operational transformation of many businesses. But can we genuinely say the same about internal hierarchies? While we may have been presented with an opportunity to reinvent, the appetite to do so has been lukewarm in many boardrooms. So, is it time to shake up the status quo? What are the opportunities for businesses willing to break with tradition? What are the risks for those who aren't?

My colleague Daniel Lambie chose this theme as his world changer for 2021 reports. Later in this episode, I chat with Kate Shaw, senior internal comms manager at Nationwide to get her thoughts on what the future of work means for organisational hierarchies. But before that, I joined Daniel and our co founder and leadership expert, Rachel Thornton to explore Vive La Revolution, and everything that comes with it.

Well, Daniel, Rachel, thank you so much for joining me on today's podcast. So Daniel, your topic is Vive La Revolution. And my word, have we lived through it. COVID-19 brought us radical possibilities, digital collaboration is broken down invisible barriers. Now we're transitioning to a hybrid world of work, will all those possibilities vanish? And what's the effect it will have?

Daniel Lambie 01:56

Well, I actually think we're at another pivot point now. And if you look at your news app, or the television every day, we're seeing stories about big corporations making decisions about the future world of work, post-pandemic. And many of these are conflicting. And you have extremes on both sides of the spectrum, with some opting for, you know, quite radical reimagination of the world of work, and others being quite forceful about a return to pre-pandemic practices. That in itself is quite a fascinating illustration of the culture of organisations and of the values of their leadership, but I also see there being some bigger questions that we need to address that go far beyond the hierarchies of individual businesses.

What does hybrid mean for towns and cities and for the real estate and service industry that relies on an army of commuters. And what I've found interesting is one of the organisations previously encouraging a return to the office in the UK is the civil service, and they know the seismic changes that will happen across society and the economy of working from home becomes a default for the majority of people. Both the chancellor and the Prime Minister have made noises questioning the need, benefit, and value of long-term home working. So I think, Elle, to your question, the answer is "yes, no, and maybe." Individual businesses are behaving as their existing cultures dictate. And, you know, responding to the opportunities, or coming back towards what was the previous norm. But as the dust settles, I do wonder if the government will put pressure on business to find a way to lessen the shock to wider society.

Elle Bradley-Cox 03:25
What do you think that pressure will come with? Financial?

Daniel Lambie 03:28
Well, I don't know. I don't know if a government will have explicit policies around this. But I think there will be political noises about, you know, encouraging noises, stressing to business and the commercial sector, the impact that home working and hybrid working could have on some very fundamental things within society.

Rachel Thornton 03:52
I agree. And I also think it will be self evident to some business leaders what's happening on the high street, and what's happening in cities, and what's happening to real estate prices, and commercial property. And we'll see that, we're already seeing it, if you go into one of the big cities, you can see the change that the last 15 months have wrought on them, and imagining that those cities remain the ghost towns that they have been for the last 15 months for me, as a business leader, and somebody who's just concerned about the economy, that's a frightening thing, frankly.

Elle Bradley-Cox 04:28
Let's talk about, you know, the place for hierarchy in a post-pandemic workplace. So do you feel like that will have to change in some organisations? Are there effects to those organisations that don't make those changes?

Rachel Thornton 04:39
So what's the place for hierarchy in a post-pandemic workplace? If you think about it, hierarchy has existed for as long as human beings have lived together and worked together. And it's a fundamental necessity. People need to know how things get done around here, whether that's in a tribe, an ancient tribe, whether it's in a

group of people working together in a rural place in the world, whether it's a family, big extended family, or whether it's a small business like ours, or a large, huge business globally. So what's the place for hierarchy? If you think of hierarchy, just as a shorthand for how things get done, how decisions get made, how we escalate something that we're possibly in conflict of? Or how we get a decision, or do something that we don't know how to do? I think at its simplest form, that's what hierarchy is.

So is there a place for hierarchy? Absolutely, because without it, what on earth would we all do when we don't know what to do? Is the nature of possibly some of those more command and control hierarchies - if you think about where hierarchy was strongest, you know, it would be in the military, where decisions are made and orders are followed. And there are still organisations that need that. If you think about dangerous organisations or workplaces, you know, oil rigs and deep sea diving and the army, there's still a role for command and control. So I'm not saying that's always a bad thing. But I think as we evolve, and I think, the place for hierarchy is different, depending on what your organisational culture is. And I think most organisational cultures have been affected and have evolved in some way during the course of the pandemic. So I think, what's the place for hierarchy? I think it's different depending on your organisation. Some organisations need and thrive with a greater level of systemic and structural hierarchy. That's the way those kinds of cultures get things done. And they find it comforting, and they find it clear, and some people and some cultures need and thrive in that type of organisation. And then some organisations are much more fluid and agile, and expertise based and they rail against hierarchy and need it less and less.

So what's the place for hierarchy? I'd say, we still need it, because it enables people to get things done efficiently and effectively. And that gives them a route to follow when they don't know what to do. But I think the place for hierarchy is it really depends on how your organisation and your culture has changed in the pandemic. And strategically, what do you need to do as a response to the pandemic? Do you need to be flatter and more agile, more empowered and devolve decision making? Or do you need really clear, strong directional leadership whereby you might have had a really torrid time commercially, and what you need to do is get through the other side.

So it will be really different, I think, depending on your organisation, how you fared during the pandemic, from a commercial and strategic perspective, and what you need and want your culture to do coming out the other side of it. Yeah, and just thinking about something like the success of the vaccination programme, for example, where that ultimate, kind of, "these are the rules you need to follow to get this done" has actually shown us that, because I think lots of us have been in this kind of very agile, like getting stuff done fast, and maybe not ratifying decisions, but actually, where we've really needed that structure, we've embraced it, and it's gone really well for us, Daniel, any points from you?

Daniel Lambie 08:13
To Rachel's point, hierarchy and strong leadership at a time of crisis is critical and reassuring. And if you think, you know, when I was a child, if I had a nightmare, the first thing I wanted was a cuddle for my mum, and my dad, to reassure me that it was okay. And we've all had a bit of a nightmare over the last 18 months. So we need our leaders to be leaders and for them to make big important decisions that we can question or we can back but we need them to make those decisions in the first place.

And also think, looking at hierarchy, we have to look at the role of the line manager and, you know, that part of the infrastructure of our business, and how crucial line managers are going to be as we emerge from the abnormal into the new normal, and the role that line managers will play and Rachel and I, I know from the conversation we've had, both agree, line managers have been pivotal to the success of organisations forever. But that's more so the case. Now, if we're going to be working in a hybrid environment, they are the eyes and ears of the organisation. They are the only people that will understand both the strategic priorities of the corporate headquarters and the nuanced needs of the individuals in their teams. So those line managers and that role, that hierarchical role there, is absolutely critical.

There's been, you know, decades of time spent trying to flatten structures and flatten hierarchy and I dare say that will continue but hierarchy still has a value. In fact, you know, without it, and you know, experiments are proven when you try and remove hierarchy altogether. Without it is chaos and people feel threatened and exposed rather than empowered and liberated. So there is a definite place for hierarchy. It's just an evolved version of hierarchy.

Elle Bradley-Cox 09:58
I guess, thinking of who's doing this well at the moment, have you got any examples?

Daniel Lambie 10:02
Well, I've been working with quite a few clients over the last year or so on their hybrid way of working. And the people that are doing it best are the people who, as I said previously, they create a strong Northstar, they create a point that they want to get to. And that's the leadership, the leadership say, "right, as a business, this is where we need to get to", but then they involve their organisation in its broadest possible sense to help to deliver that direction of travel.

So again, this is where I think hierarchy has, and should evolve, that people don't sit back and expect the leaders to do all the doing, you know, they are involved, and they are empowered to help them to make the decisions to design the policies and to democratise the process that we go through to reinvent the world of work, because they are the people that are living it. So we involve them, we don't expect a policy or a process or everything that is the new rule book to be imposed on them. We tell them this is a new way of working, how are we going to make this work to the best advantage of everybody? So there's several advantages of that. It's about being open, honest and transparent about where do you want to get to, but giving people the opportunity to contribute to how you're going to get there.

Elle Bradley-Cox 11:16
I feel like the framing is really important there because someone like me, who's incredibly turned off by the words "policy" and "process". What are the sort of ways that people are making this sound sexy to employees?

Daniel Lambie 11:30
Again, it comes back to that point I just made, Elle, previously about the nightmare and the reassurance. You want that reassurance that you have a comfort blanket around you that, you know, you're not being left out in a

big bad world. And for some people freedom - my mother used to sing a song "freedom's another word for nothing left to do".

And, you know, it can be daunting being given complete autonomy and freedom, you know, so I think framing it in the way that we've got leadership and a hierarchy in place to provide you with the reassurance that there is a framework that you're working within, that you're not being left to your own devices entirely. And that's the use of language, you know, it's freedom within a framework. I mean, it's semantics, its terminology.

Elle Bradley-Cox 12:16
To someone like me, who loves their words, the semantics are important. Okay, well, let's talk a little bit about traditional structures then, because one of the issues with them is that, you know, some of the red tape and some of the structure does lead to bottlenecks. And so you've got the renegade folk kind of going around, particularly in the pandemic or just cutting through it to get those decisions made quickly. Last year definitely taught us the importance of being agile. But that brings risk, right? So how do how do good leaders balance that risk with decision making? Without getting stuck in the mire? When do we need to slow down when we need to speed up?

Rachel Thornton 12:54
I think it's worth remembering that, you know, that afore mentioned much-maligned red tape, if you work in, for example, a regulated financial or a legally controlled business, that red tape keeps you motoring, it keeps you operating, it keeps you legal. So there's sometimes, you know, kind of the need for the red tape. Sometimes organisations aren't as good as they can be at communicating and being really clear, Daniel mentioned guardrails before, when things are absolutely non-negotiable and this is the way we have to do it in order to meet our financial regulatory obligations, in order to just stay safe and legal. And when we can innovate, and we can wiggle, and we can do things a little bit differently.

And so I think that's really important, particularly in organisations that are complex. Once your organisation gets to a certain size, and if you go global, and if you go multi site, and if you have several lines of business, these are all very, very complicated organisational structures. And so I think organisations can benefit from saying when something is fixed, and when something is fluid. And then the people who don't like the fixed, like you, know when they can wiggle and know when they can be fluid and know when they can do their thing. And it's all right. But they also know when we absolutely need to do things this way. So, yeah, I mean, it really will depend on your organisation as to whether you do go for a more federated, "make your own decisions", freedom within a framework, or whether you have to, because of your line of business, because of the sector you're in, you do have to stick to "we have to do certain things certain ways". So I think how leaders do that is being really clear on when this is fixed. and when we have to do it this way, or when I get to make the decision and you don't and that's just the way it is. And then when you guys go off and dream up a new way of doing this, or you guys figure out the best way for your team, and you're part of the business to get this done, knowing that we're outcome focused, being really clear on what the outcome is. The way you get there is fine, because that's okay, you can get there the best way you possibly can.

And I think organisations don't spend enough time doing that exercise, understanding what's fixed, because in any organisation, then you'll know in ours, there are some things which are just fixed. And that's the way it is. And I think most organisations and most people who work with them understand that sometimes things are just the way they are. And then hopefully, we all know that there are some things which are totally up for reimagination and reinvention, or for doing it in a better way. And I think if you have those conversations, often as a leader, about what's fixed, just do it this way, please, and do it, you know, really strictly because there is a business reason for it. And then what's fluid? Yeah, we're totally open to innovation, and "even better if" and all that good stuff. And if we can be clear on what those two portions are, I think even the most free thinking colleague who likes to imagine everything they do, and do it all different every time they do, it feels that they've got some part of the culture, which is enabled. And when they're unable to do that.

Elle Bradley-Cox 16:07
Yeah, and the point you make about regulatory organisations and back to my point on language, I suppose, as soon as I would hear the words kind of, "it's the regulations, it's the rules" , you know, that's the line, right, you don't cross that line. But I just kind of love that freedom within the framework, because it makes you feel like you have a portion of that autonomy. And really, that's probably all I want, right, as an employee, that's the bit I actually care about - that I feel like I can influence change and make really good stuff happen on. And I think, I think your point on delineating between the two, making it really clear is a really strong one.

Rachel Thornton 16:44
It's so important when individuals are going through change, to feel a level of control, because change brings with it a huge amount of uncertainty, which makes us you know, kind of react in a very negative way from physical reactions to psychological reactions to behavioural reactions and giving people an element of control.

So I worked with a large financial services organisation that were going through a huge rebrand, and they were losing a name with which most of the organisation had real heritage and love for and they didn't like that. And they didn't like the idea of being called something else and becoming something else. But they were able to give them you know, significant, but not major decision-making power about things like interiors, and uniforms. And you know, kind of best way to do this, that and the other. And that amount, that level of control, knowing that, okay, we can't decide what we're going to be called, we can't decide what the logo over the door is going to be. But we can decide what the interior of the bank looks like. And we can decide what our uniforms look like, and we can decide how we greet customers, and what's our kind of best ways of doing things.

So I think giving people an element of control over the things that you can give people an element of control is, is really powerful, because people like choice, people like to feel in control. And people like to be consulted with a small c. So do that whenever you can, when going through any level of change.

Daniel Lambie 18:08
Just to back that up, you know, we're talking about back to the the word hierarchy, the hierarchy of needs. And you know, if we give people the ability to influence their day-to-day reality, and it could be the smallest thing like the tea that's in the dispensing machine. That's the thing, you know, that's the employee experience. If that tea is rubbish, giving them the opportunity to change that tea, those are the things which people want to be

able to influence and they don't necessarily want to be overwhelmed by the huge, big important strategic decisions that leaders are paid to make on their behalf.

I think looking at agility - in 2020 agility was, you know, besides "you're on mute" was probably the most used phrase or the most used words. But in its extreme, it can be very, very stressful. And this year, and next year, is about finding that balance between embracing all of the innovation and new ways of thinking that comes with being agile with the guardrails and the safety blanket around you to know that you're not gonna fall off that rollercoaster.

Elle Bradley-Cox 19:18
And as you say, you know, we've gone through that turbulent year, and we're on a bit of a change cycle, and it's not gonna happen overnight. So what should organisations and good leaders be thinking about right now?

Daniel Lambie 19:28
I've got three things if I may? The first thing that I'm seeing is schisms in the workforce, okay. And what you have now with the hybrid world of working more so than ever, and it's always existed, but it's existing more nowadays, you have a pocket of "haves" and a pocket of "have nots". So you, you have people who have the opportunity to be flexible in a working environment and work from home and work from an office and then you have people who don't have that opportunity, that their roles dictate that they need to be in a place at a time. And these are the people that we were lording as the frontline, the key workers last year. So we need to have a look at how we redress this and make sure that those key workers that we all stood on a Thursday evening clapping for don't feel like second citizens.

The second thing is leadership development. And what again I'm seeing is, a lot of leaders have found they've been able to manoeuvre their way through the last 18 months, but they haven't been given much support. And it's up to us, you know, as employee internal communications, employee engagement, HR, IT, it's up to us now to re-equip leaders with what they need in terms of the skills and the confidence and the knowledge to do their job in this hybrid world of working. And that comes down to some really simple stuff like how to use Teams. A lot of people have just, you know, the they've had Zoom or Teams installed in their machine and told to get on with it. So given them that practical ability to use what we have at our disposal now to the best of their ability, I think is it's incumbent on us as support functions to do that for leaders.

And then the third thing is progression and how we reimagine how we're going to make sure that people reach their full potential in a hybrid world of working. And a lot of career progression in the past relied, rightly or wrongly, on a physical presence and making your voice heard and that, in a lot of ways in this remote or hybrid way of working is more difficult. So we really need to work hard on making sure that we have a culture or businesses have a culture and infrastructure in place that supports a meritocracy where people are recognised and seem to be able to deliver what they can deliver without having to be physically present in a workspace. That makes sense?

Elle Bradley-Cox 21:48

It does, and it kind of goes back to some of the things that we saw when people were locked down at home in the pandemic. And you know, they were working from a tiny bedroom, but they were still managing to make their voice heard on video calls. And actually, how's that going to change? If they're coming back to the office, maybe perhaps with a shier, quieter person that they were before? Rachel, have you got any points to make?

Rachel Thornton 22:08
Yeah, I think there's a few things that I would probably be advising leaders to be thinking about. So, understanding their culture. I think it's never been more important to tangibly understand the culture of your organisation, it will have changed, and you probably have a view, but it's pretty hard to articulate what the culture of your organisation is. And even if you knew what it was before it will have changed and what do you need it to be in the future?

So I think managing culture and how your business evolves, and what you become and what you want to be, is really difficult if you don't know exactly what it is at any given point. So I'd say, be focusing on that, I think. I completely agree with Daniel, that, you know, even before all this, organisations didn't put an a focus on leadership and management capability from a communication perspective. Communication is the master skill of brilliant leaders and managers. And I differentiate between those two things, because although everyone talks about leadership, and everyone's a leader and, you know, you're leading yourself and all that stuff, I think there is a difference. Leadership is about vision and strategy and forward momentum. And management is getting stuff done every single day.

And, you know, I think there are different skill sets - not that you don't flip between the two at any given time. But I think that there's a real lack of time still placed on leadership communication skills, because everyone assumes if you are a CEO or on the board, you're brilliant to everything. And very few HR teams have got the bravery to say "you're not as good as this as you need to be and maybe we need to support you and upskill you" because communication isn't a skill that you naturally just to take on by osmosis. It needs to be practised. It's like any muscle you need to work on it.

And from a management and capability perspective, as Daniel has said, management are on the front line. And it's going to be even more difficult to manage when half your team is in the office. And you might be in the office or all your team's in the office and you're not, you're somewhere else. So everybody is spread out all over the country, it's going to be incredibly difficult. So they need support. And they need time and investment to get better at the basics but also learn new skills that this new world of work throws at us. Also, I think businesses need to honestly decide what's right for their business and their model, in terms of ways of working. And while choice is really important for everybody, sometimes some things need to be done in a certain way if and we need to have those honest conversations with colleagues. But, let them do things in their own time and give them a chance to kind of adapt. as we say, no, this type of work needs to be done here. That type of work could be done anywhere. And you know, so I think it will be horses for courses and it's going to take a long while to stabilise

Daniel Lambie 24:52

And just, if I may, to add Rachel's point about leadership development. We've got a finite window. There will be come a time, not too far in the future where people will develop new habits, and they wouldn't necessarily be the best habits. So we've got this finite window of opportunity to really influence the way that they behave. And we need to take advantage of that. Because if we leave it too long, they will find a new way of working, but it wouldn't necessarily be the best way of working. So that's a pressing need for us.

Elle Bradley-Cox 25:21
It's quite the leadership mindset to flip from that controlling mindset to an enabling one. What do you think that's going to take from people?

Daniel Lambie 25:31
Well, I've got a client I'm working with just now and he uses a brilliant phrase. And that's "you might not like change, but you will like irrelevance even less", you know? That's where we're kind of at, at the minute that leaders need to change they need to develop to adapt to the new ways of working, but it's up to us to show them that they are still valued, it's just that that value exists in potentially a different place to where they felt it did in the past, and you know, I make quite a cumbersome comparison. But I make the analogy of we shouldn't see leaders as teachers, or managers, as teachers taking registers and delivering lessons on how things are done. What our leaders are now is architects or designers of the safe places and the environment and the culture where people can grow and find their own way and thrive in a hybrid way of working. And if anything that makes the new world of leadership more exciting than the previous world, rather than saying, you know, you as a leader are redundant or your role is not valued, it's about reinventing that role to make them as valuable, if not more so, than they previously were.

Rachel Thornton 26:36
I completely agree. And I also think it's worth just making the point that there are lots of enabling leaders out there already, you know, this pandemic hasn't necessitated that all leaders change their sparks and turn into something else, I've met an incredible amount of very enabling, empowering leaders in my time. And I think if leaders are controlling, it's because the culture of the organisation rewarded them for that. So it's less about, you know, individual leaders.

And of course, there are some individual nightmares out there. But, you know, I think if you have more of a controlling or directional, which is probably a nicer way of saying controlling, if you've got leaders who are very directional in that style, either that worked for the organisation, and the type of work they were in, or there were no consequences to being so and so there's a real responsibility from a cultural and an organisational development and design to deal with that. I think that point about learning new skills and learning even better ways of doing something has to be sold in as an exciting and developmental and a valuable thing for leaders, not correctional, not remedial work, but as in learning new skills, which are going to be hugely, hugely valuable in their future and their future career.

And from a personal development perspective. If you get any group of individuals together and ask them, "do you want to be better? Do you want to learn new things?" it's very rare that people don't put their hand up and go: "No, no, no, absolutely happy with the way I am." So I think it's got to be pitched in that way.

Elle Bradley-Cox 28:04

Thinking of all the things we've talked about good advice you've given to businesses, do you think they're ready to take that on board, ready to take the plunge and kick off into the next way of working?

Rachel Thornton 28:13

I think lots of them already are. I think the last 15 months has completely revolutionised for so many organisations, how they do things. I would say it's probably going remote over lockdown, kind of, over the weekend, as we did way back in in March 2020. That was a plunge but I think so many organisations just did it. And were amazed by how successful they could be despite the situation.

I think as organisations evolve into whatever this new world of work is going to be, whether that's for the next 12 months, 24 or whether eventually you know, it turns into something completely different, it will be less of a plunge and more of a paddle. And I think, you know, kind of getting your toes wet and then going up to your ankles and then your knees and then maybe we'll be swimming. I think it's more that kind of thing, because I think if organisations plunge too much, it's destabilising. I think organisations need to change mindfully and strategically. And change doesn't happen overnight. It's it's an evolution thing. So I think some organisations are well on their way and most organisations realise that more change is coming.

Daniel Lambie 29:21

I agree. I mean, the plunge - we were all forced to take that plunge and some have adapted to it better than others and the way that we adapt, the way that businesses adapt to this will become a differentiator in the longer term. And if you think of the high fliers and the next generation of workers, they will come to expect a level of flexibility and a level of autonomy and those organisations that don't provide that, you know, people will make decisions about who they want to work for, based on different things from you know, previously, are they within commutable distance from me?

In the future, it will be: "am I able to shine as my own self, am I given the autonomy within the safeguards that I need to do a brilliant job? So, as Rachel said, the plunge has been taken, because we were forced to take it, we now need to properly redesign things to work in the longer term.

Elle Bradley-Cox 30:13

Even just listening to you both talk about it, it still feels like a lot, you know, there's a lot to do. And that, as I'm not a leader, that feels scary, right? Like, I dread to think what it's like at the top of the tree making these decisions.

Rachel Thornton 30:27

You know what, it's like I say, I can't remember, somebody asked me, you know, how do leaders possibly exist and function in this level of turbulence? And I kind of said to them, you know what? Running a business is always turbulent. And I know that this has been off the scale, because we've all gone through something so huge together at the same time, but I don't think you can ever stop planning, course correcting, adjusting, whether

it's someone unexpected leaving or a big piece of business disappearing, or a competitor coming right into your market, like a steam train.

For you running your business that is seismic, and that happens several times a year, if you've run a business. So, you know, I think businesses are more ready for this then we imagine. And I think leaders are used to operating at this level, not at this level, with everyone going through it at the same time, because then you've got your whole team who are completely struggling and wobbling at different times. You very rarely have that. But there's always so many factors that could potentially go wrong or change that i think leaders are better enabled for what's coming than we imagine.

Daniel Lambie 31:34
Again, adding to that, if you look at some of the big trends that we've seen emerging, these were things that were already in train before the pandemic. You know, a lot of these things: flatter structures, more enlightened leadership, more flexibility in the workplace, all of these things were already the things that were being considered, we've just really hit the turbo, we've really accelerated over the last 18 months and made a lot of progress in a lot of things. It's time now to take the foot off the pedal and just consider what the next steps should be and make sure that what we're putting in place now is sustainable for longer term.

Rachel Thornton 32:10
Yeah, so many organisations, leaders, HR directors, CEOs that I've spoke to in the last six months, they were now you know, as we start to ease out and look ahead and raise our heads and go "right, what's next?" are saying, you know what, we wanted to do this anyway. But we just, we didn't know how. This has absolutely played into our hands, whether it's closing massive offices, or coming out of this city, or, you know, going to a digital first workplace. It's kind of what people have been thinking about for the last two or three years, it just seemed momentous, and they didn't know really how.

I always say, never waste a good crisis, because it throws opportunity at you. And that's as well as the terrible kind of material impact of the pandemic, they will be, as there always are, whether it's a war or famine, or you know, terrible things that happen, there will be amazing things that come out of this too, the best leaders and the best organisations will be those that have already spotted them and are already chasing them down.

Elle Bradley-Cox 33:11
Beautiful point to end on. Thank you, Rachel. Thank you, Daniel, so much, both of you for your time, really, really appreciate it and hope our listeners got as much out of it as I did. The future of work, what it looks like, how it'll work, and what it means for our people is on all our minds right now.

Interview with Kate Shaw, Nationwide

For Kate Shaw, senior internal comms manager at Nationwide, she has lived and breathed it over the past few months as they prepared to launch their vision. I was really keen to explore how this had landed internally. how the organisation's structure and leadership is evolving, and what challenges and opportunities this presents for her team. Kate, welcome to World Changers. Thank you for joining me,

Kate Shaw 33:48

Thank you so much for inviting me.

Elle Bradley-Cox 33:50

My pleasure. So I mean, Nationwide has been so progressive with your future of work vision, really to be admired. I'm really interested to know how has it landed with various levels of leadership and management in the business.

Kate Shaw 34:02

So it's been really interesting because we have absolutely chosen to make our position clear before we've necessarily fleshed out the policies and the processes that sit behind the scenes. And that was very deliberate, because we want to help nudge people on the journey that we want to go on. And we want to help people understand how bold we want to be with this. And that does include our leadership population. So as part of the development of our future of work vision, we spoke to as many as we could.

So we have got a leadership population that are responsible, they're regarded as kind of influencers. So it's a mix of hierarchical and individuals, especially chosen to be part of that population. We interviewed about 170 of them. So they were informing our eventual future of work vision, they were absolutely part of the involvement of it. And I would say since launching it, the ambition has been recognised, absolutely. You've definitely got leaders themselves who are feeling like they can change there own ways of working, and they can absolutely embody it themselves. And you've got others who absolutely want some of the detail. So they're either getting questions from their team, or they've got questions themselves about "what does that actually mean? What's the actual working practices that we will pull up to make this actually real?"

So if I can give you an example, one of them is around inclusive meetings. So we have said, if one person is virtual, then everyone should be virtual. And we know that in practice, that's not necessarily going to happen every single time. But we do want people to start from an inclusive perspective. So how do I make this meeting as inclusive as possible, no matter where anyone is? And actually, that's probably the one that our leadership, have said, "Well, what about this example? What about this scenario? It's not gonna work, etc." So there's definitely something about helping people through that and acknowledging we don't have all the answers, and that we want to work with them to help come up with those answers.

Elle Bradley-Cox 35:56

So interestingly, when he said, if one person's virtual, then everybody should be virtual, does that mean that what you're trying to say is, say you're having Teams meetings together, that every person dials in, even if they're working in the office, maybe like a different part of the office, or however it is, so that you get these kind of inclusive boxes, and everyone has the right kind of space and airtime in Teams?

Kate Shaw 36:19

Absolutely. But I think what we are really encouraging is teams work out what it means for them. So some of our facilities are Teams enabled. So some of the meeting rooms, you can absolutely use it there and it's built in.

That's not the case across our whole estate. We only rolled out Teams last January, I mean, epic timing, clearly. And so there is something about teams having individual conversations about what works for them. So actually, it could be well, let's all join from different places, we might be in the same meeting. But the feedback we have played back to build this commitment was around, "I remember being the one person at the end of a conference call phone, and you all ignored me. I can remember being the person sat in a video conference box in in Bournemouth or London or wherever our offices are. And I didn't really feel part of the conversation." So that's the problem that we're trying to solve.

Teams has been the great equaliser, so everyone does have the same size box on the screen, you can engage in different ways depending on your type or your style. So you can raise your hand, you can use the chat, you can just talk whatever it might be. And people have said they've never felt more included. We don't want to lose that. And so it is deliberately there to spark that conversation. And actually teams might work it through, they might try some things and go "actually that didn't work for us next time. Can we try x or y?" And that's what we want people to do is give things a go. And our leaders really, really need to embody that without coming up with the answer for their teams.
And one of the biggest concerns is around compromise. So compromise is fine, we are all going to compromise in situations like this. And if you have got a team, one person says I don't mind dialling in for this actually, I know if you're all going to be physically together, but don't mind being on the end of the teleconference. But can we set some guidelines about how I could be fully included in the conversation? The advice we're giving is maybe don't make that person compromise the next time. So actually, it shouldn't always be the same person doing the compromising, it should be everyone's willing to work through how best to achieve things for the team. There will also be aspects of roles that require a physical presence.

So if a team needs to do a task in the office that is unable to be done anywhere else, then we would like teams to work through how they do that together. Not always the same person doing it unless that's what the team decides. So really empowering those leaders to have those local conversations, and really set up how they want to do it themselves.

Elle Bradley-Cox 38:40
I love the vision and speaking of vision, how do you think that vision will affect your hierarchy at Nationwide, and the challenges and opportunities that will come from that?

Kate Shaw 38:49
So I think even before this, we were passionate about reducing the hierarchy as an organisation. So we have a concept called "accountable freedom", which is around people understanding the frame of which they are to work within. So they know the goals, there might be regulatory rules, etc. But actually how they deliver something is down to them. And that's what we mean by the freedom part of it. So people are able to choose, it shouldn't necessarily be the hierarchy that makes the decisions. And there are other things that we've looked at through our people strategy. And we were already looking at "how do we reduce some of that hierarchy?" We reduced symbols of hierarchy across the organisation, especially while the building has been closed. You know, we've removed a few offices, we've got rid of maybe some of the perks that you've got when you hit a certain level, like car parking spaces and things like that.

So we are reducing things to help challenge the hierarchy. I think what we have seen during the pandemic is things being delivered at pace, and we've been able to innovate, which has been absolutely incredible because things needed to be done. So we had to get laptops out to 13,000 people, we had to equip them to make that happen. And we had to do that by making some really fast decisions and that does not work if you have to keep going going up a hierarchy to find the person who's ultimately willing to make a decision. I think we will face challenges with this. So in pockets, there are leaders who want to see a bit more, they want to, you know, get involved in some of the decisions because they can't see what's going on in the team. There are others who are like, "Well, great, I can, I can see the work being delivered, I can experience it, so I can be less involved." So I do think there will be a mix. And as always, depending on the skills and the capabilities of the leadership population, then we will have to work that through and provide the support.

But Nationwide has always been very open around wanting to reduce that hierarchy and help empower people to deliver things themselves rather than just because you have a certain grade.

Elle Bradley-Cox 40:44
I love that. And I really didn't have much of an idea that Nationwide was so strong on hierarchy like that. I mean, has that come from way back in the past, or has it just come from this early learning in the pandemic, where you've realised you just need to flatten it a bit more to get stuff done?

Kate Shaw 40:59
We were doing it before the pandemic. So I would say things started to change when our current CEO joined. So he's been there for five or six years. And when he first joined, we did a piece of work called The Big Conversation where we went out and spoke to as many employees as possible. So we had 22,000 bits of feedback on our purpose, on pride, which is our value set. And we very much wanted to understand what direction we should be taking. That has informed our strategy.

So we have our pillars, which are called our "cornerstones", you know, usual organisational jargon, but you've absolutely got a structure that people felt that they could feed into. So that tone has been set from then. And we've gradually been looking at opportunities to live and breathe that. So an example is our dress code. So we changed our dress code two or three years ago. And instead of going from quite a prescriptive, "no jeans" and then went "no rip jeans", we changed it to dress for your day. So actually, that's giving people the power to choose it for themselves. And so our branch people who are very proud of the role that they play on our high streets serving our members, they rightly choose to wear a uniform, because they're proud to do so others might wear different clothes because they feel like it. I always used to deliberately wear jeans into the office because I just felt more comfortable. It helped me work, but maybe with a smarter top, because that helped me get in the right headspace. Everyone could do what they wanted to do. That has then, I guess, led to other pieces of work.

So when we started talking about work anywhere, we also use the phrase "locate for your day". So if you can dress for your day, you can locate for your day. And so we've been talking about it for quite a while now. But as most people will know, in large organisations, it is difficult and slow to do things. The pandemic has helped to

speed some things up. And I'm really hoping we can keep that momentum going and look for more opportunities where we can make active steps to change things.

Elle Bradley-Cox 42:54
And I guess, sort of thinking about where we're going to now this hybrid world of work, what are the things you're doing to really equip your leaders for success?

Kate Shaw 43:02
So leaders are going to make or break this, I absolutely think that they will be the population that either causes drift back into the office or presenteeism or a complete mix. So you are definitely going to see people at different ends of the spectrum and how much they're engaged with this or supportive of it or whatever it might be. So we are looking at how we provide tools that help support people. So we've already started showing some support guides on things like hybrid working, collaboration, wellbeing, sustainability is one that we're going to be sharing next week, because we know it's not just about where you work, but how you work is going to be so key. There's a whole broader people strategy behind this. So it's not just about buildings and where you are. But it's about the capabilities we need for the future. It's about how we talk about performance. But you know, performance management, when we're not necessarily going to be doing that anymore. It's more about performance enablement, having clarity of goals so that people know what they're working towards. But absolutely, making sure leaders are fully trained, supported, coached, guided to do all of these things in potentially a different way than they've done it before. So we know that's tricky. We know all the psychology behind change. You know, "I've led this way for 20 years, I've always done okay. Why do I need to change it now?" So there is a real storytelling piece around this to help articulate the case for change. And that is because the world is evolving, because things are changing at such a rapid pace, we have to change too. And we have to be able to empower our people to move at that pace. And some of our older processes don't necessarily allow that.

But making time for leadership, making sure that we're engaging them in the right way, talking about society performance and their role in it, making sure that they know that how we work is linked to our end goal and our end performance and ultimately being really clear that we are doing this for valid reasons. So we have to be a more inclusive organisation. We have to have a more diverse range of thoughts of discussion of, you know, we have to represent the, the society that Nationwide operates in. And that is one of the absolute outcomes that we want to see as a result of this.

So if we can recruit where the talent is not where the office is, which is one of our other absolute commitments, then that will help us better represent the community within the UK. And that's another area where people really need help. So if we're saying we can recruit anywhere, and I have recruited a number of people in my team from our branch network, it's one of the reasons that commitment was created to give different people different opportunities. Previously, you'd like to move to Swindon, or to London if you wanted to work in a head office role. But actually, it's my job as a leader to help them feel just as part of the team as someone who lives in Swindon. And that's on me.

And so helping leaders understand that is their role is going to be key. And not just assuming that that means they're going to have to pay expenses for them to come and meet the team face to face. We've got to just help them into a new way of thinking, which is, "how do I do things differently, then? I know what the problem is, I know what the challenges are going to be. So how can I replace water cooler chats? How can I onboard someone? How can I look after those people starting in their career?" That is all going to be the role of a leader. And so we need to make sure that they've got the tools, the guidance and support to kind of take it and tailor it in a way that works for them for their team for the work that they do all of those good things.

Elle Bradley-Cox 46:31
It's really inspiring. It might be too soon to tell. But how is kind of colleague perception and expectation of that those leaders to do that, has it changed? Does it still need to embed a little bit?

Kate Shaw 46:43
So I think we're really clear that we're on the start of our journey. So as I said, we've shared our commitments very publicly to then help drive the change that we want to see. And I think the initial expectation and perception was incredibly positive. So not only because of our leaders, but actually we saw people who have previously left Nationwide, for personal reasons, and maybe had to move away, they've reached back out to our recruitment teams and said, "Oh, I'd quite like to come back in that case, what have you got?" So it's really positive to see that. And I think as we go through and make the processes come to life, or the policies that sit behind the scenes, or the technology solutions and the tools, we are going to keep having to go back to the commitments and say, remember what we did. And our leaders are going to have to do that. So employees are really up for this.

So the initial reaction was incredibly positive. And people still say, because we regularly talk about it are still saying this is wonderful nation was leading the way, this is really exciting to be part of. So we've just got to really hold ourselves true. And leaders are going to have to do that for us. And to make sure that we can't have pockets of "but not in my team. And not over here, I still require you in five days a week." And there's something about helping leaders respect the choices that their teams make. So a lot of this came from a desire to give people flexibility and choice in how they work and how they balance work and home life, which you know, it's taken the last 18 months, but everyone has a much better appreciation of what is important to them. And, and work is one of those things, but absolutely not the be all and end all. And so actually having a team where you might have different views, and you might have people wanting to work in different ways is going to be really tricky.

So how do we get leaders supporting someone who wants to be in the office full time through to someone who wants to be at home full time through to someone who wants to do slightly different hours, because they want to do the school run or you know, got some caring responsibilities or whatever it might be? How can we make sure that we're really visibly tackling where it's not happening, or where we're celebrating it, where it's really working and we've got some really good examples? So I think that the colleagues will want to see their leaders walking the walk. And that's that has been tricky during this because you've also got the culture of, "well, it's okay for them. They're more senior, they may have bigger houses, they may have an office space. I'm working

from an ironing board." We heard that story during the pandemic of someone who didn't even have a table to lean on.

So can leaders help identify those people who might need a bit more support? So they might need to go into an office because it's the best thing for them. And that could be for different reasons. It could be for financial, it could be for wellbeing, it could because their home environment is unfit. So those leaders have got to be able to walk the walk, but identify where their teams need more support. And I'm really excited about how we help leaders do that. Because it's a real opportunity that they as I said, they will live or they will they will live this or break it. That's not the phrase, but you know what I mean. And helping them make those decisions and empowering them to. It's not going to be a one size fits all experience for everyone and actually helping that mutual respect piece of, "Okay, I understand where you've made your decision. I am going to make a different decision and both are okay."

And we live in a world where the media wants to divide us. So with Brexit being the absolute example, you can't compromise in the media, you have to be one way or the other. You have to hate Meghan Markle, and love the Queen or the other way around. You know, it's all of those sorts of things. That's awful. We cannot live in that environment, and Nationwide's culture and ethos of community, we are a mutual, we are stronger together than we are apart, is absolutely where colleagues and leaders need to experience this and live and breathe it. And our ethic of care has to come out first and foremost, to help people understand that they have a choice. Sorry I'm on my soapbox a bit there!

Elle Bradley-Cox 50:47
No, I just couldn't agree more. When I think about, you know, in so many organisations, it's almost kind of employees expectations that leaders will tell them what to do. And I love that we're getting to this more adult, two-way conversation about what's right for each other. It's fantastic, really grown up.

Kate Shaw 51:08
It's exciting, but terrifying. And I think there are definitely pockets of where you see people want to have the choice and want to make the decision, and in other places. they're like, "I don't want that accountability, that's terrifying." So helping people know they can make choices, and they can change them later on. So this isn't about saying I want to be a home worker forevermore, because in six months time, what if you're having some building work done and you just fancy using a different space for, you know, time, or your home situation changes or whatever it might be your job might change, you might be doing a different role, you might want to spend some time with your new team.

I think it's about encouraging that flexibility and choice. And when you see the media articles around home working is dead, office, you will be back nine to five within two years, etc. Look at who the spokespeople are in those things. They are people who are either invested in cities, or investing in buildings or whatever it might be actually ignoring that stuff and talking to employees and leaders talking to employees to understand what their teams want. One of the other exercises we've done is we've provided a team talk so teams can sit down, work through what's important to them, what they've missed over the last year, what's worked really well, what's important to them as individuals.

So we all will know each other better. We've been in each other's houses, virtually. We've seen the kids, we've seen the dogs, we've seen the grandchildren, or whoever it may, we've seen partners, whatever. And actually, you know what's important to people. So how can we balance all of that, and respect that people are humans, and that their human choice to this is going to be flexible and different and that is okay. And not having that that one size fits all single answer that's going to solve everything for everyone. Because that does not exist.

Elle Bradley-Cox 52:46
I'm just smiling. I just couldn't agree more. And I hate to wrap things. So because I've really enjoyed talking to you, Kate. But this is a question I do ask all of our panellists when they join me. And it's thinking about people making the biggest impact in the world of work right now. I mean, I feel like you are! Who would you nominate as your 2021 World Changer?

Kate Shaw 53:08
So I obviously can't nominate myself. So I'm going to pick a bit of a random one here. And this might just be one that relates to me, but I'm going to pick Britney Spears. So I think based on what we've just talked about, about having control over things and people having control taken away, I think you've got an absolute example there. She's having to fight against her own family for control over her own life, over her own affairs. And we all want to be able to have control over our own life.

And so that's a basic human need that she has had taken away from her. And I think the bravery with which she is standing up and now choosing to fight for that is incredible. And in a world where it is okay to control that a woman's life in such a way I think we should all be standing up behind her and championing it.

And I think if you apply that to the world of work, you can allow people to have the choice and the control over how they work. It's their life. We don't own their life, it's for them to make the choices that work for them. And if we can give more of that control to people, then that would make the world a better place. So Britney Spears.

Elle Bradley-Cox 54:17
Absolutely belting choice. Love that Kate, thank you so much. Thank you for joining me on World Changers today really, really enjoyed your company and just your passion and verve for this topic, which is so important. Good luck to you at Nationwide and everybody there and thank you again.

Kate Shaw 54:33
Thanks for having me!

Elle Bradley-Cox 54:36
Our huge thanks to our contributors. And if this episode got you shouting "Vive La Revolution", do come and chat to us over on twitter @scarlettabbott or drop us an email at Hello@scarlettabbott.co.uk. We'll see you next time for another dive into World Changes 2021. World Changers is a podcast by employee engagement consultancy scarlettabbott, hosted by Elle Bradley-Cox. Find out more at scarlettabbott.co.uk