

# Capturing the Opportunity for Recognition and Gratitude

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By now, you've probably seen [the viral Extra gum commercial](#) that captured everyone's attention with its take on the global sense of joy that would accompany the end of the pandemic. You've probably also realized that reopening hasn't felt quite like the watershed moment that the commercial predicted. Although things have been steadily trending in the positive direction, uncertainty around new variants, emerging findings on the long-term effects of COVID, and stalling vaccination rates in some areas have made it clear that reopening won't be the clean break from the pandemic that everyone had expected.

Leaders have been waiting for so long to get back into the things that they've missed, regain the momentum they had before the pandemic, and revive some of the initiatives that were put on hold for over a year. And so, despite the uncertainty, there is a strong pull to get back to "business as usual" as quickly as possible. Some leaders are setting concrete plans for when everyone needs to return to the office. Others are recalling employees back to their roles after they were redeployed during the pandemic. There is great energy around moving on. But this push forward, without a pause to reflect on the experience and its outcomes, can pose risks and create missed opportunities.

## Team members are not the same people they were

If things simply go back to the way they were, there is a risk of not acknowledging that many employees are not returning as the same people they were when they left. Those who had the opportunity to work remotely have experienced not commuting, having more time with their families, working and collaborating differently. Those who got redeployed to different roles have developed a new professional identity. To return to the same way of working and deny that people have changed would be at an organization's risk, fueling what has been dubbed as [the Great Resignation](#).

Take, for instance, [Adele](#), a hospital employee who was redeployed from physical therapy to phlebotomy during the pandemic. She was assigned to an ICU full of COVID patients after just two weeks of haphazard training, going from a role where she supported patients' recovery, to one where many patients were rapidly deteriorating. Initially, she felt like a disappointment, missing half of the blood draws in a critical care situation. But eventually she got to the point where she could do more advanced procedures. She felt proud of herself.

When she finally felt like she knew what she was doing, the pandemic started to recede, and she got a text from her boss telling her she needed to come back to physical therapy. As she describes her reaction, “I was really furious. I did not want to go back. I couldn’t believe it.” Returning to her old role after finally embodying a new one felt like whiplash.

## Growth in ways we may not have imagined

Jumping right back in, without pause and reflection, also prevents leaders from recognizing the ways they and their people have grown and from capitalizing on that growth moving forward. Over and over again, people stepped up and demonstrated great resilience in the face of crisis, a skill that will, no doubt, prove to be useful moving forward. Leaders learned to engage people and foster connection without in-person interaction. Employees learned new skills as businesses pivoted, and they got a crash course in balancing competing priorities while working from home. If leaders don’t take the time to examine the different ways everyone has grown and deliberately earmark what they want to carry forward, these new skills will dissipate as everyone snaps back into old routines in the “return to normal.”

## Taking time for recognition and gratitude

To capture the growth opportunity and limit the risk of the Great Resignation, we recommend that leaders take an intentional pause. Not just a break to recharge, but a time to reflect, recognize the changes, and, perhaps most importantly, express gratitude. It is through this process of recognition and gratitude that organizations and their people collectively recover and create a new path forward.

There are countless things to be grateful for as we emerge out of the crisis: colleagues who stepped up and supported each other; the patience of team members while new ways of working were tested; the flexibility of family members as personal space and time were coopted for work. It should not, however, be an exercise in expressing platitudes, a generic “Thanks for all you’ve done!” Rather, it should be a true understanding and appreciation of the concrete ways in which people contributed over the pandemic.

## Where to start

Set aside some time for reflection, sooner rather than later, before you’re fully immersed in your old habits. To help you get your thinking started, here are a few questions you can ask yourself:

- Thinking back to before the pandemic, what are one or two ways in which you are different?
- How could you build on the ways in which you grew over the last year and a half?
- Thinking together with your team members, what are some things that you learned during the pandemic that you could carry forward?

- As a leadership team, what are the new habits or practices that you have implemented to create clarity, connection, and authenticity in your organization? Which ones are important to continue after the pandemic?
- What are one or two things you could say to specific colleagues that would make them feel good about the things they were able to achieve? One way to think about this can be in terms of the different types of relationships that can help you overcome challenges, as discussed in [a recent Harvard Business Review article](#):
  - People who helped you navigate the interpersonal dynamics of the pandemic response
  - People who helped you see a path forward
  - People who lent you a “shoulder to cry on”
  - People who helped you find opportunities to laugh
  - People who reminded you of the purpose behind what you do
  - People who helped you put things in perspective

These questions will help you think through the ways that you, your team, and your organization have grown over the pandemic, how you want to build on that growth, and the people who supported you through this challenging time. With these insights in hand, you'll be in a stronger position to take advantage of the post-pandemic recovery.

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