

RED SKY THINKING

THE (SIX) BIGGEST
WAVES IN EMPLOYEE
ENGAGEMENT

AND HOW TO RIDE THEM

JULY 2022



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Gone are the days of seeking a fancy job title, an impressive salary, perhaps some work-life balance and a sprinkle of company perks. Employee engagement is now all about the even bigger bucket of employee experience in and outside of the workplace, which in turn is influenced by buzzwords to define our *new normal* (or just our normal, really), like hybrid working, ways of working, future of work, flexibility, purpose, relevance, authenticity, transparency, accountability, leadership, culture, empathy, psychological safety, mental health, well-being, wellness, fairness and equity — just to name a few.

In this white paper, we examined coverage, case studies and surveys once again to observe what's changing and why, what it means for the future and how we can make the most of it in the present. Here are six topics we found most conversations to be focused on, as they relate to the evolving landscape of employee engagement and experience.

Some new waves and some recurring ones with a new twist — here are the six topics:

1. Purpose

Being more purposeful, being more transparent about it and bringing others along for the journey

2. The middle

Supporting middle managers in the role they play as custodians of a company's DNA

3. Empathy

Applying natural curiosity to make the practice more tangible and actionable

4. Content

Facilitating genuine interactions and deep connections through employee-created content

5. Inclusion

Focusing on inclusive content, fighting microaggressions and fostering psychological safety

6. Burnout

Taking action to support employees by normalizing conversations and being a mental health ally



1

Be purposeful about your purpose.

We've been talking about purpose for a long time — and so has everybody else. The trouble is, performance is no longer enough for the masses, purpose must be, well, *purposeful* — anchored in one's core business, values and actions. Companies that define a values-based purpose for their existence and pursue strategies aligned with that purpose can gain many advantages: greater innovation, better collaboration, more engaged employees, more loyal customers and better financial performance.

As employees (and other stakeholders) increasingly question organizations' impact on their industry, communities and the planet, purpose has become a two-way, always-on topic that is constantly evolving in response to what's happening near and far. As such, it's also something that employees (and other stakeholders) want to have a conversation on — not be talked to — so when it comes to purpose statements, *silence is not golden anymore*. Brands should also be bold but measured when making such statements, as stakeholders continue to raise the bar for transparency into how a brand is going to meet its pledges, requiring any boldness to be backed by data and actions. As Red Havas' **From Pledges to Progress** white paper highlights, nearly three-quarters of consumers think brands must take a stance now, but only 36% are satisfied with the concrete action companies are taking to make the world a better place.

And finally, *think global and act local*, the age-old motto still stands, only brands need to approach their purpose with more of a *glocal* approach. An overarching purpose framework can serve as the connective tissue across markets, while allowing a brand to be relevant in each of the communities where it operates through focused engagement. In addition, brands can and should act as multipliers, bringing their value chain along on their purpose journey to create a ripple effect — and, of course, activate their employees and other stakeholders in their purpose as well.

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Read more about being purposeful:

Leaders: This is how your team wants you to respond to political issues

(Fast Company, May 22)

How boards are responding to the social responsibility challenge

(Fortune, April 28)

How To Manage Constantly Shifting Public Expectations

(Chief Executive, April 12)



2

Mind the middle.

Middle managers are the definition of who can *make it or break it* when it comes to employee engagement. They have been in focus as a key driver of employee turnover in recent years — with the power to make employees leave due to their incompetence, unprofessionalism, lack of support or poor treatment. However, the conversation has recently shifted to the critical role that middle managers play as *custodians of a company's DNA*, whose informal networks and proximity to employees are not only invaluable sources of insight for executives but also underscore the benefit of their influence when mobilized in the right way.

Knowing that talent retention these days is not a compensation problem but a connection problem, there seems to be growing recognition of the need to invest in middle managers so organizations can reap the most benefit from their effectiveness, by ensuring they have the right tools, training and support to be a business advocate, innovation agent and culture caretaker. Red Havas' **2021 Employee Engagement** white paper also discussed the shift from formal, presentation-style executive communications to informal, employee-led touchpoints that middle managers need to adopt in order to effectively connect with their teams. Because the same way they have the power to make employees leave, they have the power to make them stay.

With the right resources, middle managers can also:

- Reinforce key messages relating to strategy and priorities
- Emphasize the collective why and connect employees to the business vision
- Create a culture of psychological safety, authenticity and inclusivity
- Foster an 'attitude of gratitude' by recognizing big and small wins formally and informally, and encouraging employees to pay it forward
- Help employees uncover their own passions and find alignment with their organization's purpose.

Talent retention these days is not a compensation problem but a connection problem.

Read more about supporting the middle:

What's most needed from managers now

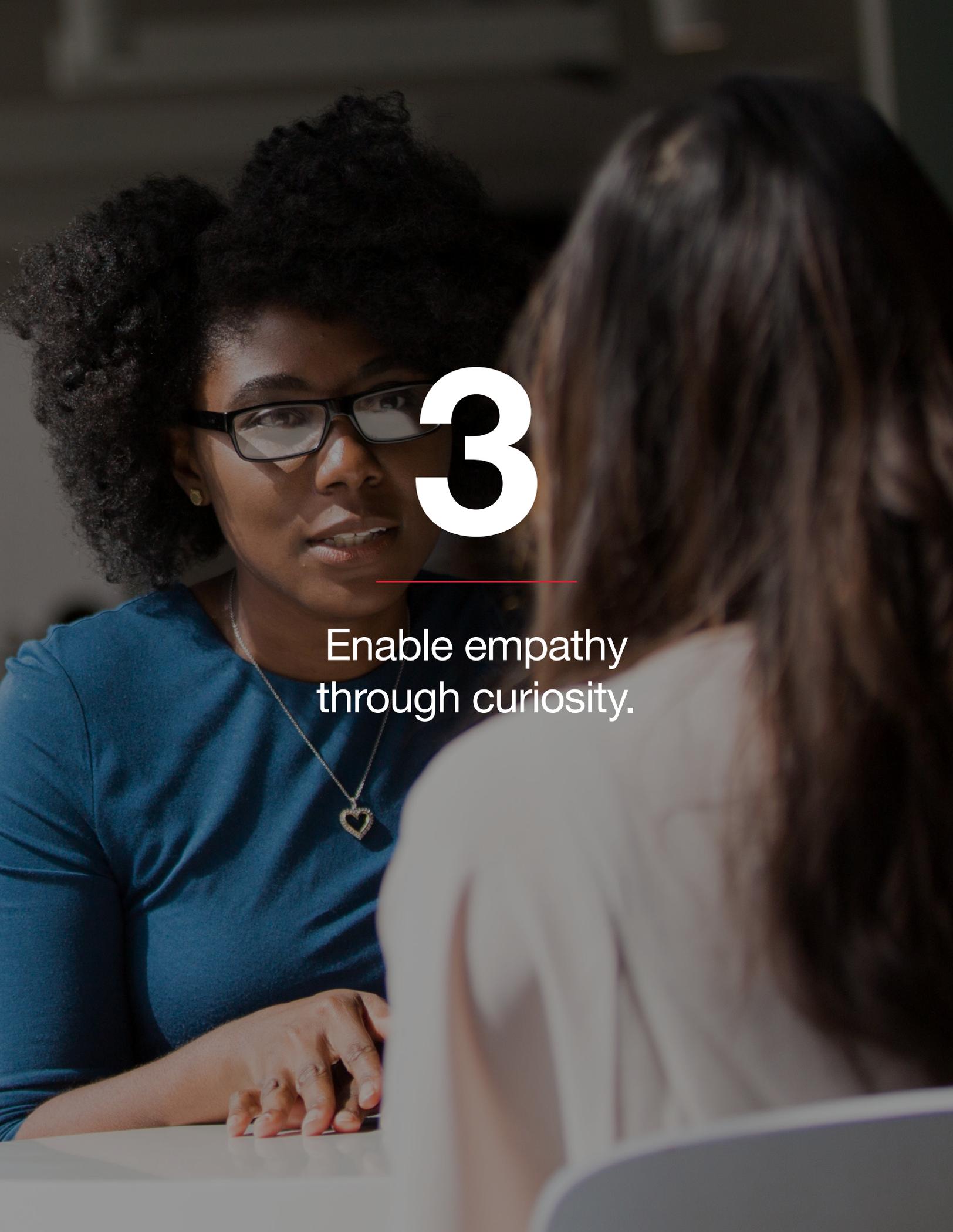
(strategy + business, June 6)

5 reasons why focusing on the middle will get you to the top

(Fast Company, April 25)

Real Solutions for Middle Manager Stress and Improved Employee Wellness

(Nobi Academy, April 17)

A woman with dark curly hair, wearing glasses and a blue long-sleeved shirt, is looking towards the right. In the foreground, the back of another person's head with long dark hair is visible, slightly out of focus. The background is dark and blurred.

3

Enable empathy
through curiosity.

From pandemic aftershocks to climate crises, economic and political pressures, dissatisfied, disengaged or departing employees continue to experience uncertainty and adversity around the globe. It is times like these when people are at their most vulnerable that empathetic leadership matters the most, because of its power to give us a sense of normalcy, safety and comfort when our world is in turmoil. The old ways of leading — like command and control — aren't going to provide this comfort, nor will they help employees overcome the challenges and seize the opportunities that disruptions present. Instead, leaders must practice authenticity, listening and compassion to foster psychological safety, inclusion and belonging.

Even though the pandemic is fast on its way to becoming an endemic, many employees still face the same struggles they had over the last two years, so empathy is becoming part and parcel of competent leadership. But while turning up the HEAT — to lead with humanity, empathy, accountability and transparency; a term coined in our **Leading Through Crisis** white paper — remains a hot topic, the conversation has shifted from the benefits of empathetic leadership to the challenges of actually showing it in an authentic way. Alas, many leaders from the middle to the top find it a tall order. So instead of pushing themselves to be more empathetic, they could try to be more *curious*.

To make the practice of empathy more tangible and actionable, leaders should simply exercise their curiosity muscle regularly, which most people — particularly successful leaders — possess. By applying natural curiosity to learn about their employees' passions, aspirations, experiences and concerns, they can then tap into those insights to make meaningful connections, take positive action, foster psychological safety, support employee well-being and bring out the best in their teams. In an ideal post-pandemic world, this practice will become peer-to-peer as much as top-down — and this is where communicators can help, by removing barriers, providing tips and resources and, of course, modeling it ourselves.

In an ideal post-pandemic world, practicing empathy through curiosity will become peer-to-peer as much as top down.

Read more about authentic leadership:

Stop Telling CEOs To Be Empathetic

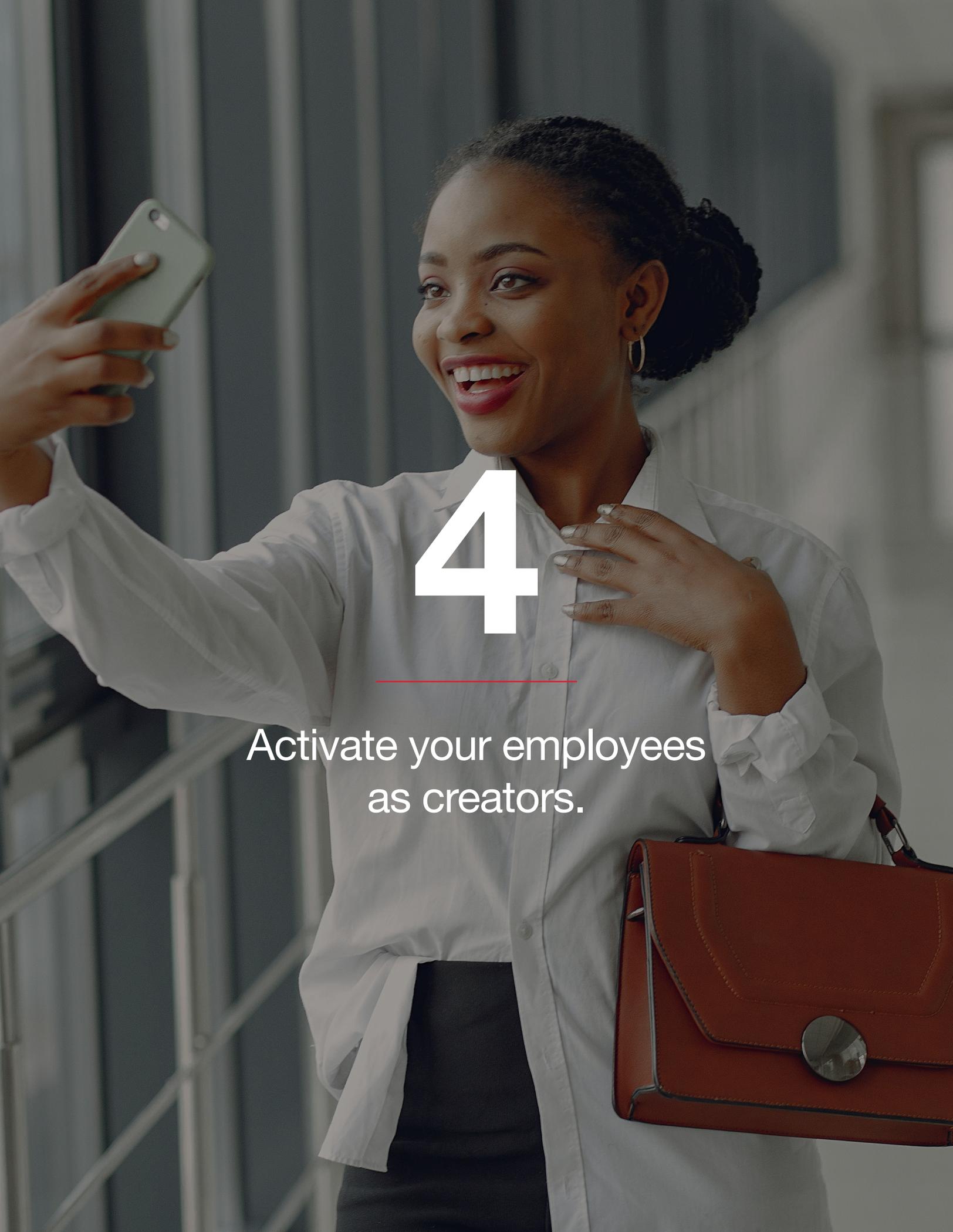
(Chief Executive, June 3)

What It Means to Lead in a Multipolar World

(INSEAD, May 10)

The Best Leaders Have a Contagious Positive Energy

(Harvard Business Review, April 18)

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a white button-down shirt and a red bag, is smiling and taking a selfie with a smartphone. The background is a blurred office or hallway setting.

4

Activate your employees
as creators.

At a time when many organizations are hiring influencers, brand ambassadors and champions, it's important to remember that the most passionate, knowledgeable and effective advocates of each brand are actually the people working for them. Using employees as *content creators* offers multiple benefits by humanizing the brand via personal stories, experiences and voice, resulting in a priceless *show vs. tell* to showcase their purpose, culture and accomplishments, while organically engaging, recognizing and retaining existing employees, and enabling more direct employee-to-employee connectivity — at no extra cost.

In-house co-creators are not only able to facilitate genuine interactions and form deep connections with consumers, employees and other stakeholders alike, but they will effortlessly do so on key topics once considered off limits, such as diversity, equity and inclusion, climate action, well-being and mental health. **A Case for Person-to-Person (P2P) Communications**, our white paper from the first year of the pandemic, already highlighted the future of communications as person-to-person led, with employee-created content getting up to eight times more engagement than brand-created content. By now, we have also seen the benefits firsthand, so the conversation is shifting from the why to the how.

While enlisting employees as co-creators can't be a mandated effort, equipping them with a clear, easy-to-use, flexible and adaptable framework will certainly encourage activation. Backed by a supportive, people-first culture, the right framework will offer employees guidelines to promote their favorite part of the job, the company and the culture, and allow them to speak up about other things that may be on their mind. The best part: their creations don't need to just be external. In fact, organizations should showcase more pictures, stories and testimonials of their employees inside the workplace to create a sense of belonging, strengthen corporate culture and foster psychological safety — which in turn will encourage even more co-creators to get involved.

Employee-created content is getting up to eight times more engagement than brand-created content.

Read more about tapping your in-house co-creators:

It's time to tap your secret recruitment weapon: your workforce

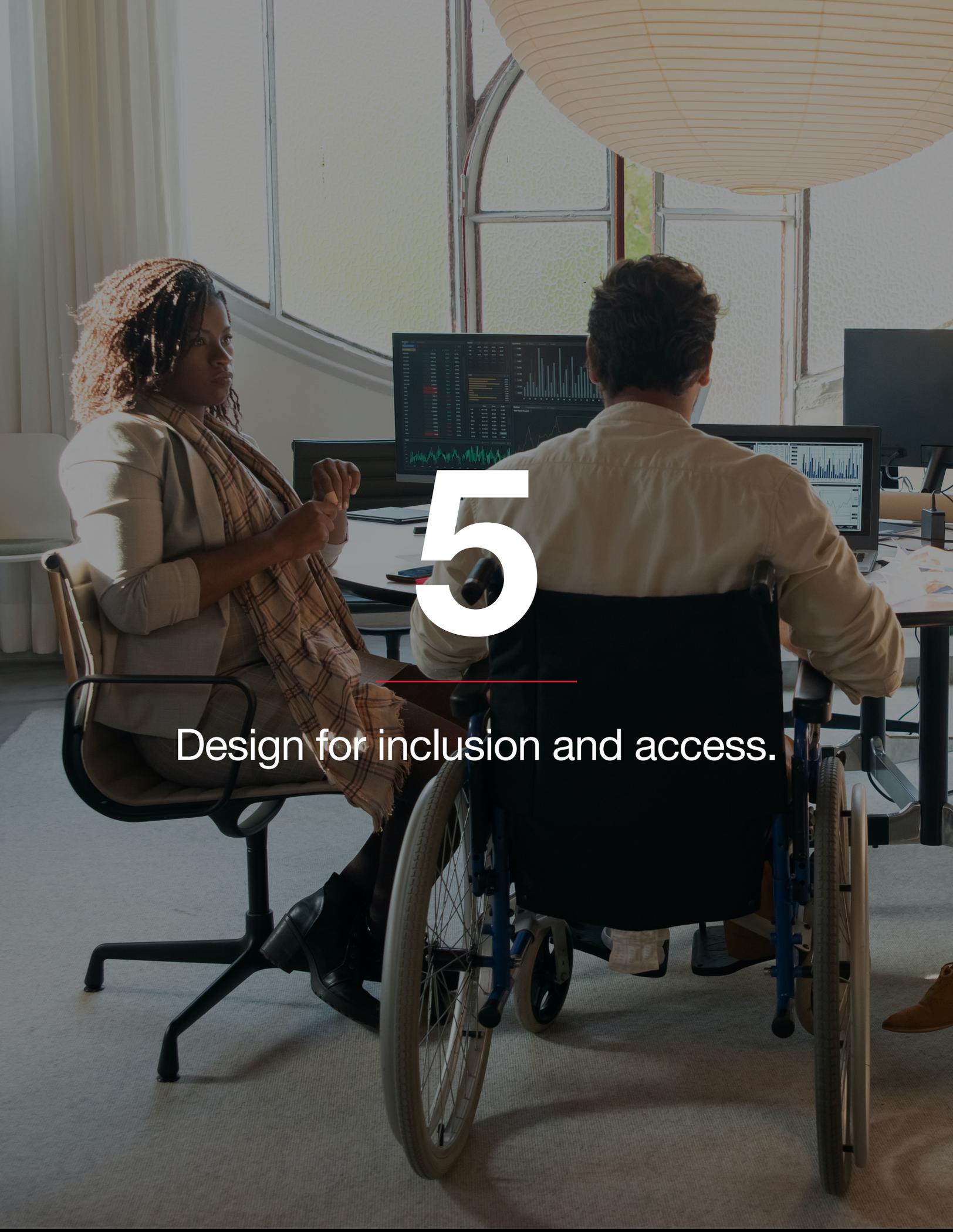
(Fast Company, May 24)

How to encourage employee-generated content

(PR Daily, May 10)

Four Steps To Engage Employees and Create the Ultimate Brand Ambassadors

(Forbes, April 7)

A woman with braided hair, wearing a light-colored blazer and a patterned scarf, sits in a black office chair on the left. She is looking towards a man on the right. The man is wearing a light-colored shirt and is seated in a blue wheelchair, facing away from the camera towards a desk with multiple computer monitors. The monitors display data charts and graphs. The office has large windows in the background and a modern, curved ceiling light fixture. A large white number '5' is centered over the image, with a thin red horizontal line extending from its base to the left.

5

Design for inclusion and access.

Inclusive language — one of the topics of our most recent white paper on **Content That Cuts Through** — and accessible design acknowledge the full range of human diversity with respect to language, ethnicity, gender identity, ability, socioeconomic status and other characteristics. While gender-neutral terms are top of mind these days, non-biased content, diverse visuals, and accessible channels and formats also need to be considered to ensure that groups aren't feeling left out because of content that is unfamiliar, unavailable or inapplicable to them.

Microaggressions also continue to be the topic of conversation because of their power to cause emotional and physical harm. While often unintentional, if they remain unchecked, such seemingly small comments — that come across as negative, hostile or derogatory to the recipient — may impact a workplace, its interpersonal dynamics and culture for days, weeks or even years. Employees must feel comfortable to voice their concerns and provide timely feedback to their leaders and peers about the need for inclusive language and actions, while leaders at all levels must be seen — and held — accountable for building an inclusive culture with zero tolerance for microaggressions.

Hand in hand with inclusion and access, a recurring topic we've seen across several trends is the emerging focus on psychological safety. When it comes to DEI, it is just as critical as it is for encouraging empathetic leadership or tapping into employee-created content because it fosters an environment that values inclusion and creates a *safe space* for people not only to bring different ideas and perspectives, but bring their true, authentic selves. Designing for these principles at the workplace will help people who have been historically marginalized feel included and can create a truly equitable culture.

Employees must feel comfortable to voice their concerns and provide timely feedback to their leaders and peers about the need for inclusive language and actions.

Read more about fostering DEI:

Psychological Safety Unlocks the Potential of Diverse Teams

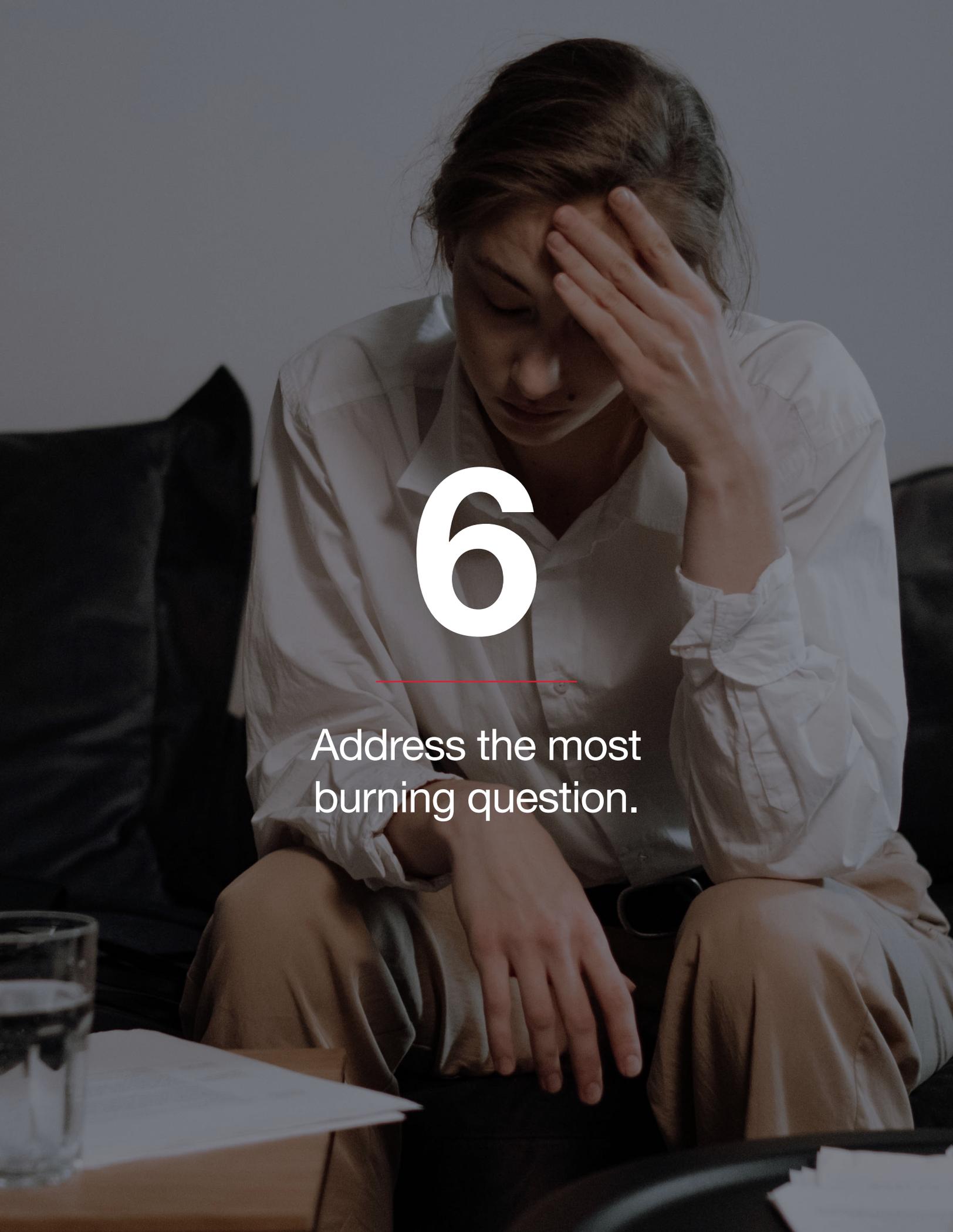
(INSEAD, April 27)

Inclusive language is a crucial part of accessible design

(PR Daily, April 15)

How a mindfulness coach with a Harvard MBA recommends dealing with microaggressions at work

(CNBC, April 10)

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and light-colored pants, is sitting on a dark couch. She has a distressed expression, with her right hand pressed against her forehead and her eyes looking down. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. In the foreground, there is a wooden table with a glass of water and some papers.

6

Address the most
burning question.

Burnout continues to be a ‘hot’ topic, its positioning slowly shifting from an individual to an organizational issue — after all, workplace-related matters are its top drivers. While burnout and associated stress, anxiety and depression all remain high — with the war in Ukraine compounding pandemic-related fears, frustrations over labor shortages and soaring inflation, and hybrid-work exacerbation especially among parents and caregivers — more and more organizations recognize the need to pay attention to employee mental health and well-being.

A recent global study by McKinsey & Company on **What employees are saying about the future of remote work** found that almost half of the workforce reports feeling some of the symptoms of burnout — and that’s likely an underrepresentation of the real number. Moreover, according to **Fast Company**, 77% of employees believe workplace mental health isn’t talked about enough and only 30% feel their employer cares about their mental health. As a result, there is certainly more that organizations can and should do to prioritize mental health, integrate well-being into their operations, continue to de-stigmatize open conversations about both between managers and employees, and address the structural causes of workplace stress rooted in how they operate.

A recent survey by ManpowerGroup, a client of ours, on **What Workers Want to Thrive** highlights immediate actions that organizations can take to support employee well-being, such as adopting practices like Entry Interviews, creating a culture of compassionate directness, and encouraging employees to practice *microsteps* to help create long-lasting change. What we also loved seeing in discussions of late is the idea of being a *mental health ally* and the importance of leaders at all levels to be able to normalize conversations, share their own struggles, help tackle any underlying issues and effectively support their teams in order to increase engagement and job satisfaction, positively affect interpersonal relationships and boost work performance.

77% of employees believe workplace mental health isn’t talked about enough and only 30% feel their employer cares about their mental health.

Read more about supporting mental health:

Stressed, Sad, and Anxious: A Snapshot of the Global Workforce

(Harvard Business Review, June 14)

Mental health at work: how accommodations can help employees—and companies—thrive

(Fortune, May 22)

How to Be a Mental Health Ally

(Harvard Business Review, May 9)



UNBLINKERED THINKING UNEXPECTED IDEAS

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