Manar Morales:

What I think ultimately it is. It's not about the FaceTime that you care about. It's you care about that people are making connections and that you start to evaluate, are people making those meaningful connections? What does their work product look like? What is their level of responsiveness look like? And judge those things, but not just FaceTime.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Welcome to the Stronger by Association podcast. This podcast will share stories about how associations are solving problems in the United States and around the world. This is brought to you by American Society of Association Executives, ASAE. A membership organization of more than 46,000 association professionals, industry partners in the United States and 50 countries. Our members make the world safer, better, and smarter. There are 60,000 associations in the United States, and it feels like every leader is wondering, how do we go back to the workplace post vaccine? How much will flexibility be a part of our workforce, and what structure can we set in place? So today we have two really great leaders on these issues to help association leaders think through this process. How can we ensure that what we learned during the COVID pandemic will help us as we adjust to the new norms of work.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

I'm now pleased to welcome our two guests for today's podcast. First of, we have Manar Morales, President and CEO of the Diversity and Flexibility Alliance. I think tank dedicated to helping organizations create inclusive cultures that advanced diversity and flexibility to attract and retain top talent. Manar has been advising organizations on flexibility and initiatives related to diversity inclusion, and in particular, the advancement of women for more than 20 years. She's here to share lessons learned during the pandemic and best practices for the association community as we prepare to return to the office and reevaluate our flexible working policies. Welcome Manar.

Manar Morales:

Thank you. I'm thrilled to be here with you.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

To start things off, what's one thing that listeners should know about the new "workplace".

Manar Morales:

I think the one thing that's really important is to stop thinking about how we can go back to the status quo. A lot of people before used to use flexibility and say it was the status quo that would prevent us from incorporating flexibility. And I think looking at the new workplace as a huge opportunity, that can be a win-win for both organizations, as well as their employees, is really important. And to be thinking about how we're going to leverage of the future and leverage the lessons of the past.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

That's a great point. And I'm really excited for the conversation we're going to have today. Our second guest is Charles Moore, Principal of Thrive Street Advisors, and executive coach and consultant who helps leaders achieve more impact an organization's better execute on strategy. He has tenure at Capital One and McKinsey among others, and we're thrilled to have him share his expertise. I'm also a big fan of his Monday Musings, career and leadership newsletter. Welcome, Charles.

Charles Moore:

Thank you. It's good to talk to you both.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

So the same question for you. I'm curious, what's one thing that you think listeners need to know about the new workplace?

Charles Moore:

I think Manar's point was really insightful, in that new is both a mix of old and new. And all the stuff that we've learned over the last year we're not going to throw that out when we get back to what is the new normal. And I think the leaders who will be most successful will carry that learning mindset into this next phase to really figure out how they can be most successful.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Wonderful. So the first question is, I would say that probably the majority of our listeners have not returned to work yet. They're still in this hybrid environment. Haven't seen their coworkers in more than a year. What do you think association leaders should be focused on at this juncture?

Manar Morales:

Okay. I'm happy to go. I think it's really... What happened during the pandemic was we quickly have to shift to virtual work at a moment's notice, right? But the return to the office takes a lot of planning and thinking about how do we leverage what we have learned and create an entirely new environment as we come back. And that employees are going to be looking to leadership to not just go back to the status quo, but really to be thinking about how can we be innovative and recalibrate the workplace.

Manar Morales:

And that takes time and it takes more than just a policy, and we'll dig deeper into that. But I think thinking about what are the implications of moving to a new environment that go beyond just what are we going to do about our telecommuting policy? Which a lot of times that's really been the focus right now. A lot lot of organizations are like, well, what's the new telecommuting policy we're going to roll out, as opposed to, we have to create an entirely new culture when you do hybrid or if you want to do entirely virtual. Whatever it is that you're moving forward to, takes a lot of time to be thinking about it so much more than just a policy. So for us, I'm constantly encouraging leaders to say, yes, you have to pivot on a moment's notice, but to plan for the future well takes time. And that those conversations should be happening now and including a broad group of stakeholders in that conversation now.

Charles Moore:

Yeah. And I would say when we are at the start of the pandemic, to Manar's point going to work from home it's like flipping the switch, going back into the office is not like flipping the switch. There's a bunch of tactical things involved, starting with the fact that people will get the vaccine at different times. Their community, health situation will be different across geographies. People's education and childcare will come back to "normal" at different paces. And so even as we start going back into the office, it really is going to be a staggered thing. We're going to be in the messy middle for some period of time. And I think leaders should be thinking about what the destination is, but also be comfortable with what it looks like in that messy middle, as we're all making the adjustment.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

I feel the messy middle on this issue on when can we go back to conference attendance? Definitely, that's on all of our minds. I will key this one up for Manar first. How do you define flexibility in the workplace? And so what is it and why is it necessary?

Manar Morales:

So we always, at the Alliance, look at holistic flexibility when we're talking about flexibility and that it's flexibility, that is de-gendered, de-parented and de-stigmatized, meaning that it is for everyone. And that it's not a one size fits all that. It looks different depending on your role, depending on what kind of flexibility works with your role. And so I would encourage everybody to be thinking about not just telecommuting as we move forward, not just the flexibility of location, but flexibility of time, and actually doing an audit to be thinking about how do we create flexibility that is available to everyone, even though it might look different, based upon what your specific role is. And to move the stigma out of it, to take the stigma out of flexibility, to see it as really a driver of not work-life balance, right?

Manar Morales:

For a long time everybody would talk about flexibility is a work-life balance tool. And we kept saying, flexibility is not a work-life balance tool. Because, I think everybody can relate to the fact that now people are working longer and harder than they ever have. Yet everybody has total flexibility, right? So, say boundaries are a work-life balance tool, not flexibility. But flexibility is a driver of talent. It's a driver of your ability to recruit, retain, advance talent. It's a driver of productivity. It's a driver of engagement, can be a driver of wellness. And ultimately it's a driver of profitability. So flexibility really should be looked at as a business imperative rather than a work-life balance tool.

Charles Moore:

I swear I won't start every answer with, I completely agree with Manar. But, I do agree with all the things she just said. And one thing that I would amplify from that is having flexibility is not just about the physical location, it's about your overall approach to how the work gets done. And so if you're a leader and you're trying to micromanage and still claim that you're providing people flexibility, that's not going to get it done. To really execute it, you need to implement a series of structures that really empower people and enable them to think differently about fundamentally how the work gets done. And if you're not doing that, then it's really hard to gain all the benefits from flexibility. And you probably end up in a space where you're telling people, yes, you don't have to come in to the office on Tuesday, but you're still not going to get the best of that person in whatever time they spend working on Tuesday.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

How do we avoid going back to the world where people with the most FaceTime get promoted the fastest? Is that something that will come out of the pandemic?

Charles Moore:

My personal opinion is that there are certain things that we are wired to do as human beings. I think we value things that are social. I think we value the in-person interaction more than a virtual interaction. And I think that will always be a challenge for people who, in this case, physically are not in the room. That's not to say that those things can't be overcome, but I think it would also be a stretch to say, it'll be completely easy for someone to be in a hybrid environment or a completely working from home

environment and still maintain all the benefits of relationship building and proximity that will come from being in the room. I think it'll just be challenging and people should probably have their eyes open to that.

Manar Morales:

I think that there are a lot of myths around flexibility and what it does, right? So we call them the myths of the five Cs. That the minute that we create a flexible environment, what we often hear is fears around loss of control, loss of culture, loss of collaboration, loss of contribution, loss of connection. And when we're designing flexibility initiatives, I keep saying, it's not that you shouldn't be afraid of those things. You should. But we call them myths because you can create structures and systems around it so that it doesn't have to happen. So when people look at, well, how will I know that people are working that often comes in with the FaceTime, and they equate FaceTime with some sort of reassurance that that person is working because I see them in front of me and they're working. But with technology today, just because you see somebody in front of you doesn't mean they're working, right?

Manar Morales:

They could be on their computer looking for their next job. They could be shopping. They could be doing all sorts of things. They could be on social media. You don't know what they're doing. You really know what they're doing based upon their responsiveness, based upon work product, based upon other things that you actually value. So it's really important that people are not assuming that FaceTime means people are productive or better. But things like meaningful connections and driving things of conversations and things that can happen when people are face to face. What you have to think about is, how might we do that in a virtual world.

Manar Morales:

And in a hybrid world, it's not all or nothing. You have those opportunities to make sure that people are building the kinds of meaningful connection. So what I think ultimately it is, it's not about the FaceTime that you care about. It's you care about that people are making connections and that you start to evaluate, are people making those meaningful connections? What is their work product look like? What is their level of responsiveness look like? And judge those things, but not just FaceTime.

Charles Moore:

Yeah. I really liked that point. And I will sometimes say that my best decisions in life were also the worst decisions. And what I mean by that are it's all those situations where I should have gone home, but I had another drink and stayed out for the adventure and built relationships with people because we were on that adventure together. There's a lot about that, that is uniquely in the in-person environment. But the core of it is about, are we sharing the same experience? Are we sharing something about ourselves? And there are ways to replicate that kind of trust building interaction, even through virtual devices. And so, yeah, I totally agree with that point around reframing, but not getting away from the need to build those connections, build the trust, build the relationships that are just really important. Especially once your work is less about just the quality, in an objective sense, but how subjectively people view you and whether or not you're part of the team.

Manar Morales:

And I think that moves away from the people who would telecommute just when they were in the office. I used to call it telecommuting from the office. People would go in, They would go to their office,

they would shut the door, they head down, they were working really hard. They weren't doing what you would associate with the benefits of being in person. And so that's why we can say, to Charles' point, right. Reward those behaviors of the connections and the things that I'm doing and think about all the different ways that you can do that.

Charles Moore:

Yeah. But I will tell you one thing that I worry about, and a colleague and I, we used to always joke that innovation is directly proportional to time spent bullshitting. Excuse the language. But it was really about the fact that we never scheduled a meeting and came up with a good idea. It was always, we were coming out of the meeting. It was the end of the day, we were in a mindset that said, we can explore. We're just sitting there shooting the breeze. And I think that that's really important. And one of the risks in a hybrid environment and a work from home environment is that we cut up our schedule with so many meetings, we're back, to back, to back. And some of that, the mindset benefits of being in a relaxed state, I think still are at risk in these different models. And so it may not be that we have to be in person, but it may mean that we need to create other structures around it to retain all the ingredients of whatever success means in our organization.

Manar Morales:

Yeah. I completely agree with that, Charles. I think those are the serendipitous moments that we have to figure out ways that we are going to recreate those moments, and also think about when we are in person, are we giving ourselves opportunity and time to have some of those moments as well. Because it's not going to be all or nothing. In a hybrid environment, somebody is working two days from home. There are three days where we're having opportunities to create those types of connections, but it is about being mindful of that. You're absolutely right.

Charles Moore:

And serendipity is a much more articulate term than I use for it.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

I'm curious to hear what are some strategies for associations to adapt for this new flexible hybrid workplace?

Manar Morales:

I mean, I think in the first part of when you create a flexible work initiative at all in your organization is to ground yourself in the business case for it first, right? If we build a strong why, then you can make it work. Where I've seen it not work is where they're not building, what is actually the business case for us? Why is this a have to, and a need to, and not a nice to have. When we moved from that environment and that conversation that flexibilities and need to, and it's a driver of our bottom line, organizations will make it work much better than when they're thinking, oh, this is just a work-life accommodation or work-life balance tool. So I think that's the first thing, is to be really thinking about, first of all, how do we make sure that we establish that compelling purpose?

Manar Morales:

And then you move through to how do we create a shared vision of what might flexibility look like for us and how might we make it work. Rather than, can we make it work? I would say, shift that conversation

to how might we do that? How might we maintain culture? How might we maintain collaboration? All of those things that we're afraid of, you need to shift into re-imagining how might we do what we used to do in a new hybrid environment, if that's the right choice for us or what other forms or flexibility are. And then you can actually design the initiative. Once you get through those first two phases, that third phase is how do we recalibrate and really design the initiative. And then how do we recommit to flexibility? In other words, how do we integrate flexibility into the culture?

Manar Morales:

That's why I say, it's so much more than just looking at a policy. You actually want to integrate it into everything that you do so you maintain that culture. And then finally, how do we reinforce flexibility? Which is how do we measure the impact? How do we constantly look at what is the ROI on flexibility? And look at it as an iterative process, we're constantly going to be looking at, okay, is this working? Is it not working? Is it meeting the business imperative that we know that it can? And if it's not, it's not that flexibility doesn't work. It's that we're doing something wrong. And so we need to go back and look at what is it that we're doing wrong and how can we constantly iterate what the initiative looks like.

Charles Moore:

Yes to all that. And perhaps a more general point around diversity, that just bringing different people to the table or in this construct, different ways of working to the table does not help teams at the limit. It actually makes teams less effective. What makes them able to generate the benefits of diversity is being able to look fundamentally at the work and rethink it all. And so to Manar's point, it's not just about flexibility as, say an HR policy. It's about who are the people we need to be successful. What is the best way that we can approach the work? And are we always iterating and thinking differently about how can we be more effective in this? And when you're asking that question then a lot of the policies you might pursue become a little bit more evident, but if you just put a policy on top of an existing system without really scrutinizing it at all, it becomes a recipe for not realizing any of the benefits.

Manar Morales:

And that point Charles makes around it diversity being really important. Those are one of the implications. So we talk about what is the impact of flexibility on inclusion. And a lot of times, people from underrepresented backgrounds felt not seen or heard in the office, and now you're going to hybrid and they're feeling completely like they are out of sight, out of mind, and that there is going to be a huge implication on inclusion when you move to a hybrid environment. And so being really mindful of the impact of flexibility on inclusion, and thinking about are people not getting the kinds of relationships that they need to have? Are they not getting the kinds of assignments that they need? What is the impact of it?

Manar Morales:

And I think when I talk about it being more than just a policy, it's talking about, what are the implications of it on diversity and inclusion? What is the implications on your real estate and your technology, which a lot of people are thinking about. But that impact on people is a really important piece of looking at flexibility to make sure that it's actually working well.

Charles Moore:

I would say good leaders are asking themselves those questions all the time, about every subject.

Manar Morales:

A hundred percent.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Are there individuals or groups of individuals who might need more or different considerations as we think about this?

Manar Morales:

I think that whether it's individuals that need more... I think what the question around what works for that individual person or the individual role is really important, right? How can you be most successful, even when you're thinking about flexibility in terms of flexibility of time, right? If I know that I am much more productive and I happen to be a person who much more productive early in the morning, I'll get up at 5:00 or 4:30, if I have to do something that requires a lot of thought. Because I'm much better at that time than I am at 7:00 or 8:00 at night. So allowing and empowering people to choose when it is that they're going to be most productive and giving some leeway to flexibility of time is helpful.

Manar Morales:

But again, I think that it's about not that one size fits all. It's asking. Within the comp, I mean, there are guard rails, right? There are times when people have to be in meetings, or there are things that require a certain kind of core hours to be available for that. But I would caution people from assuming that just because you're a mom, you require a certain level of flexibility. And for example, if you're a dad, you don't need it. There are things to be thinking about, how do we de-gender, de-parent, de-stigmatized flexibility to say that everybody needs it. Everybody wants it. It just looks different based upon that individual person in their role.

Charles Moore:

Yeah, I totally agree that it's an individual by individual analysis. And when you're setting an organizational policy maybe helpful to be thinking about groups of people, but as a leader that is building relationships and trying to get the best out of specific human beings, then the question is not what do you need because of these characteristics of yourself, but what do you need just because you are a unique individual whose contribution are valued.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

What are the positives that we can carry into the new workplace?

Manar Morales:

I think that one of the positives of this past year is that we've all seen that flexibility works. But the biggest thing, the biggest barrier, so we say the biggest competitor to what I do is the status quo. Because everybody would say, well, we don't really think it's going to work, or we've never done it that way. And then once the pandemic hit and everybody have to go virtual and they have to go virtual really quickly, I think what we've accelerated year response flexibility, because it used to take organizations years and years to decide that they could do one day a week at home. And now they have to go to operating a 100%. And now it's become part of business continuity plans. It's not, if this is going to happen again, it's when this might happen again. We have to be prepared as businesses.

Manar Morales:

And so I think it elevated that, it exposed a lot more people to seeing that it works. I can't count how many times, countless times, that I would be on the phone with a CEO or a leader to say, who would have thought it worked. I would always chuckle thinking in the back of my mind, I did. I mean, I built my organization on the fact that this works. But I'm glad that everybody is coming to that realization that this actually works. And people who had thought before, I could never work from home, have started to realize to the benefits and the advantages. To not say that people are not excited about going back to the office at some capacity, but they're realizing hybrid could actually work or they're realizing the benefits of having positions that are a hundred percent flexible and the impact of diversity that that can have.

Manar Morales:

I can widen the net of who I look for in terms of recruiting for positions, if in a particular location, I can't get the kind of talent that I want. I can look at recruiting to a much wider pool. So I think there are lots of advantages to what has happened around flexibility in terms of the office place.

Charles Moore:

And I think I would reframe benefit or advantage to be opportunity. And I think one of the things that happened, unfortunately for some leaders for the first time this year is that they were turned on to the fact that they should be cognizant of what's going on in the lives of their employees outside of work, and that they should have a basic empathy and allowance for them to live a full life instead of just worrying about how they are at work. I think there's an opportunity for leaders to make sure that they continue that mindset. And it's really a learning mindset going forward. I fear or I think that there is a risk that we will lose it, that learning mindset, when we're in an environment that doesn't feel as urgent as the pandemic. And so I think for leaders, they really just have to keep their foot on the gas, as it relates to understanding people on their team and what they need and continuing to learn about how work can get more effectively done all the time.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Charles, you talk about a learning mindset. Is there one book that you've read recently that you think would help leaders either as they think about going back to work or just as they're leading their teams in general?

Charles Moore:

That's an interesting question. It's not a book that I read recently, but I am a big fan of Jim Mattis' book, Call Sign Chaos, and I'm going to paraphrase something he said in the books. I don't have the quote in front of me. But he basically says, if you're not learning and reading all the time, then you're not a good leader and you're putting your team at risk. And so I think some of... There's not a one specific book that's going to turn people on for the need to learn. I think it's really incumbent upon leaders to just believe that that is important and always take that approach to everything that they're doing. As I was telling, so I have a four year old and a two year old. So I try to give them life lessons. And my daughter said the other day, "I know everything." And I said, "Well, here's a list of things you don't know."

Charles Moore:

But then I just kept on drilling to her. Like you're never going to know everything you could possibly know. So hopefully she picks up that learning mindset. And hopefully for leaders who are above the age of four, they already have it.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Manar, is there one thing that you would leave our listeners with to be cognizant of when they're thinking about how to plan their venture into the new working world?

Manar Morales:

I think the idea around looking at this more than an initiative. That is the one thing that I keep saying to organizations, that you were in survival mode for so long around, how do we just survive through COVID that taking it to the next level of thinking about how can we thrive in a post COVID world? And that flexibility is part of that conversation and that there is a huge opportunity to recreate a culture that really becomes a win-win for both the organization and the employees. Is something that I want to make sure every leader is thinking about, and thinking about it now. There's a lot of you will say, well, can't we just come back.

Manar Morales:

I get that question all the time. Can we just bring everybody back into the office and then think about what we want to do? And to Charles' point, you will have missed that opportunity to lead with empathy and carry what it was that most of your employees wanted. During this time when we were doing trainings on how do you lead remote teams? The first thing I would say is to lead with empathy. I said, normally I might not have put that. Although I think it always should be an important part, but maybe as number one. But now I said it wasn't new. You've had an opportunity to either create loyalty or lose it. It's your choice, but people will remember how you made them feel during this time. And people will want to continue to see that level of empathy in the future. So I think it's really important that you plan for the future now.

Charles Moore:

I totally agree. I probably said that 20 times now already. I'm just so struck how the questions, Manar, that you mentioned are questions that I think leaders should be asking themselves all the time. And so the question about what is our culture and what do we need to be effective? What's going to be different about tomorrow. How do we continue to update those things to be successful? I think those are just good routines for leaders to have. And so in some sense, the bigger thing is that is not an initiative just on flexibility. It's an overall mindset to, was it going to take for us to be successful? And one of the interesting things about my time as a coach and consultant in a different way is I have the opportunity to observe a bunch of leaders in their environments. And if there's anything that I've seen as a single biggest mistake that leaders make, is that they're essentially applying yesterday's to do list to today's challenges, and yesterday's approaches to today's challenges.

Charles Moore:

And when someone is asking themselves the question, what is the most important now, how do I continue to get better? They almost always avoid that trap of applying yesterday's approaches to today's challenges.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Thank you both so much for joining us today. This has been a great conversation. I think it will help a lot of people as we think through how to go back to the workplace. So thank you so much for joining us, and we hope to have you back on the podcast to see how things unfold.

Manar Morales:

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Charles Moore:

Yes. It was great to talk to you both today.

Mary Kate Cunningham:

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Stronger by Association Podcast. We had a really great discussion with two insightful leaders. I think this will help a lot of us, as we consider the path forward. Don't forget to subscribe to the podcast. And one final note, that the Power of A Awards application is still open. You can apply to highlight something that your association has done to better the US and the world. And the deadline for that is May 7th. Thank you so much for listening. For more information, visit www.thepowerofa.org, and stay tuned for more episodes.