

# Businesses driven by empathy will lead the post-pandemic world

 By [Robert Grace](#)

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The human race is a resilient one. Comprising equal parts scepticism and optimism - dependent on the day or situation - we always manage to see ourselves through trying times despite the obstacles that lie ahead. It's what has carried us through a modern pandemic and, despite all manner of losses, we have generally emerged more resilient than before with lessons learned and a reframed sense of normality set to thrive once more.



Robert Grace, Founding Partner: Head of Strategy at M&C Saatchi Group South Africa.

One of those learnings is that human interaction is essential to our survival because it causes a spark that can't be replicated during a Teams call held over an intermittent internet connection. Great ideas are often sparked by casual interactions or as a result of people gathering around a challenge or opportunity in person. This human energy, which can't be digitised, is the catalyst.

Historian and author Theodore Zeldin understood this in the last century, saying that "all invention and progress comes from finding a link between two ideas that have never met". It's in that meeting of ideas that we make progress as humanity.

**Empathy is at the heart of creative work**

In the creative industry, we believe the basis of truly impactful work is empathy because genuinely understanding another human being's experience allows us to forge authentic connections. Interestingly, one of the unexpected offshoots of working and engaging remotely is that we've become more 'human' because of the ways we've been exposed to different people's experiences.

Seeing people facing the challenges of working from home or struggling with isolation or loss has made us understand each other as human beings in far more profound ways – not just as employees or clients. If we can maintain that level of empathy as we come together again, it can only be better for all our relationships – and it will reflect in our work.

There was a flurry of creativity – as there always is in a moment of crisis or where there's a tension – when the pandemic struck. Then, as the days blurred into one and we wandered through the fog of uncertainty, a certain monotony crept in because we were denied new experiences and the creative spirit suffered.



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### Work that is resonant, rather than relevant

In the creative industry, there was initially a lot of extremely relevant work that held up a mirror to society – but as we all experienced this 'Groundhog Day', all the work started to look the same because it reflected an experience that was so universally shared.

Whether it was for a car brand, bank or retailer, if you removed the branding, it would be difficult to determine which brand or sector it was for. That's why we need to shift to work that is resonant, rather than relevant, by returning to that human insight around empathy – and to do that, we need to come together again.

M&C Saatchi Abel was one of the first agencies to get our teams back on our campuses, full-time. We actually opened our campuses as soon as we could, as early as April 2020 under Level 4 of lockdown, because we understood that many members of our team needed the campus environment.

Whether home wasn't a workspace conducive to concentration and creativity, or they struggled with poor internet connectivity and load shedding, our campuses became a refuge for many of our team members. We've always maintained that our spaces are campuses and not offices. They're spaces where our teams feel at ease, can be safe, be themselves and interact to spark the energy that introduces those powerful ideas that Zeldin spoke of.

### That human connection

When we returned to work full-time at the start of 2022, bringing our full staff compliment of 350 safely back to our campuses, we did it because we knew it was important to re-introduce that human connection. We've hired around 50 new people over the course of the last two years so it was critical for our teams to connect, get to know each other and develop a rhythm in terms of what we do and how we do it.

Building a relationship with and between employees is a core business strategy (and the right thing to do). Those organisations that have invested the time, care, and commitment needed to build a strong relationship with their teams will continue to succeed and reap the benefits of an engaged and supportive workforce. If as an organisation you're experiencing resistance or hesitation, look back at the fundamental values and trust within your culture and organisation because you may have a bit of work to do.

The last two years have definitely shown the benefit of flexibility and the need for agility. With our teams now having

experienced both remote and on-campus working, our plan from the second quarter of this year is to introduce a more flexible model that puts time on campus as the centre of gravity, but allows our teams to work wherever they feel they can do their best work, while also allowing for the other demands on their time.

But it's all about a mutually beneficial relationship underpinned by shared values, respect and accountability. Establishing employee buy-in, instilling trust in the roles they each play, and clearly and consistently communicating the underpinning policies are all key.

We're excited for what this all means for where we find ourselves as a business, for our people and ultimately for the work we do for our clients. Embracing this sense of freedom and flexibility is born from the understanding that we're in the ideas business – and ideas don't come from machines, but from people. People with empathy.

## ABOUT ROBERT GRACE

Robert Grace is a founding partner and the head of strategy at M&C Saatchi Abel Cape Town.

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