

First Friday Five: Mark Ishaug

What does the workplace of the future look like to you?

Our in-person clinical and residential locations will continue to follow public health measures for the foreseeable future. Many of our clinical direct service staff adapted to providing virtual counseling and support this year. We continue to improve our telehealth capabilities and techniques for those clients who can receive care virtually. However, many of our clients require in-person services and we do that safely. Thresholds' workplace of the future may very well include some continued virtual services as an additional option for the individuals we serve.

We have close to 90 different locations throughout the Chicago area. While we have a few non-clinical office locations, most of our clinical direct service staff work with clients where they are, out in their communities. This presents an opportunity for us to embrace a more fluid, mobile workplace that moves seamlessly between in-person and on-the-go remote work. The nature of our work also means that we have to trust individual employees to manage their time and operate with a fair amount of autonomy, which we think will continue to be a growing trend in the future.

When the pandemic lockdowns took effect, Thresholds quickly moved most administrative staff to remote work. The future workplace for these employees will likely involve a mix of virtual and in-office work. With our focus on supporting mental health for our employees as well as our clients, we are evaluating future options to keep some administrative staff 100% remote but want to ensure that they have opportunities to come into the office periodically for team building, engagement, belonging and wellbeing.

What changes will leaders need to make to be successful in this environment?

Research shows that in the United States, about 1 in 4 adults suffers from a diagnosable mental health condition in a given year. However, *everyone's* lives have been impacted by the pandemic. Supporting employee wellbeing and mental health is an important component of business success.

Even if employees are doing OK, they may have family members or children who are struggling. In addition to the health, economic, and social injustice crisis, people are also experiencing an enormous amount of anxiety after living in a lot of uncertainty for more than a year. Remote employees have the added challenge of work and personal boundaries overlapping. Some employees are worried about safely returning to the office, are experiencing hesitancy around taking the COVID vaccine, or are fatigued from the constant decision-making around risks with few straightforward answers.

The pandemic will start to fade soon and the economy will start to rebound. The social and mental health implications will linger. Now is the time for leaders to double down on their emotional intelligence. Our employees went through an enormous period of transition over the past year,

and now we're starting another year of an enormous transition to the next stage of this pandemic, and our job is to provide them with the support they need.

Practice self-care and model it. Create a culture of understanding where employees know that it's okay not to be okay, and organizations embrace supportive tools that embody the core of human need. Leading with empathy and love will help put your organization and employees on a stronger footing for the future.

What impacts will the workplace of the future have on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)?

The compounding crisis have created a profound "DEI dichotomy." Long-standing work and health inequities for women, people of color, and vulnerable populations were exacerbated by the pandemic. At the same time, the world is experiencing genuine, expanding awareness of systemic racism and making more rapid, substantive changes to address these injustices.

First, the COVID pandemic amplified DEI inequalities. More women than men left jobs due to child care and home schooling needs, and the largest proportion is Black women. Projections shows many women might not return to work. This reverses the prior gains women made in the workplace. Furthermore, women and Black, Indigenous and People of Color are a large segment of essential workers. They face greater risks of getting COVID and often do not have access to quality healthcare safe work environments.

Add to this the DEI challenges created by virtual work, where the lack of in-person interactions can reduce visibility and career advancements opportunities for BIPOC employees. And financially when businesses have to dramatically scale back and spend unbudgeted money to implement improved HVAC systems, cleaning and other safety protocols, funding for workplace DEI programs are at risk of being postponed, reduced or cut.

The good news is the second part of the dichotomy. DEI can no longer be just lip service. It's time for organizations to practice transparency and examine their current business practices. Change is essential. Open discussions and DEI training about things like: allyship, bias, identity, "isms," culture, and so on, are important but not enough. The horrific deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others shook the world. Eyes, minds, and hearts were opened in ways that are spurring meaningful actions.

Thresholds has a long-standing history of advocating for those who are disenfranchised and live in marginalized communities. We acknowledge that while we have done much within our agency to model the tenets of cultural humility, we still have work to do internally to ensure that our workplace, our hiring, and our practices are walking the walk. It's a process that we're committed to.

There is hope for real, concrete DEI work to transform organizations. I am optimistic that businesses now have more opportunities and momentum to take DEI to new levels, which in turn will generate increased employee wellbeing, productivity, economic growth, and innovation.

What priority shifts have you, or are you making to ensure operational excellence in the workplace of the future?

We want to continue to strengthen and prioritize Thresholds' flexible response to an ever-changing world.

Our employees, essential workers in an unprecedented global pandemic, have been amazing and adapted quickly. Their jobs include things like helping a person living with schizophrenia navigate new and strange public health measures like mask-wearing and distancing, guiding and motivating teens – who were already overwhelmed by anxiety or depression – not to regress and shut down as COVID is upending their life, helping find safe ways for medically vulnerable clients to access food when deliveries are scarce, and more. Thresholds staff learned new skills, showed up when needed, and shown an enormous amount of heart and flexibility – these are all values that make our workplace excellent, and we hope to continue to empower our staff to show the same resilience and agility moving forward.

Thresholds has always used the latest evidence-based approaches to providing care, and we participate in academic and professional research studies. Looking to the future, we will continue to strengthen employee agility by providing “upskilling,” especially as new online patient care, social work and mental healthcare platforms are added to the toolkit. For example, Thresholds has been developing an internal smartphone app as a multi-faceted resource for staff with alerts, guidelines, tools, and more. Other tech advances could include incorporating the use of new wearable biofeedback or anxiety management devices with our clients.

This commitment to being a learning organization supports operational excellence. We’re one of the few providers of our kind to have an entire training and workforce development team and to offer in-house continuing education training. This resource is invaluable – for example, in addition to the clinical trainings they do so well, our training team has provided resources throughout the year to help our employees transition to remote work, to do deep anti-racism and cultural humility training, and to process traumatic events that hit too close to home. They help us set a culture of ongoing learning in a real way.

What is the one question you wish people would ask you, but don’t?

What would your answer be?

The question would be *“What have you learned from this pandemic year that you will apply and use going forward?”*

My answer is, “Things that were viewed as ‘impossible’ before are possible.”

It’s truly amazing to see the sheer speed at which adjustments were made. Changes like shifting to teleworking, installing wall-mounted thermometers in our lobbies and touchless faucets in offices and residences, allowing employees to “borrow ahead” from their sick time balance for COVID-related scenarios. I think we all surprised ourselves with how quickly critical changes were accomplished. Going forward, I am more confident that we really can make other key changes faster than previously thought.

I have the deepest appreciation and respect for the many incredible staff and clients at Thresholds. I am in awe of their dedication and compassion every day.

Mark Ishaug



Mark Ishaug has dedicated his career to advocating for the rights of stigmatized and vulnerable people. As the CEO of Thresholds, Mark has overseen expansive growth, but also a culture shift that embraces change, innovation, transparency, and yes – love. Thresholds has been recognized for seven consecutive years as a Chicago Tribune Top Workplace and a Chicago’s 101 Best and Brightest Companies to Work For. Mark serves on the board of the National Council for Behavioral Health, Kennedy Forum Illinois, Illinois Association for Behavioral Health, and the Civic Federation of Chicago, as well as on the Membership Committee of the

Economic Club of Chicago and the Leadership Fellows Association Board of Leadership Greater Chicago. Prior to Thresholds, Mark worked as a leader in the fight against HIV/AIDS as CEO of the AIDS Foundation of Chicago. Mark holds a master’s degree in political science from Northwestern University and a bachelor’s degree in government and international studies from the University of Notre Dame.