

# Lessons in Talent Meet Pressure with Poise

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By Nikki Gonzalez, Chief Talent Officer, Vantage Risk

October 2022

6 min read

**Vantage launched** in the second half of 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic raging and bringing its strong headwind of uncertainty. Remote working was a forced necessity. The timing proved auspicious and served to reinforce our vision. We embraced the circumstances as an opportunity to think and do things differently. Our team was motivated to build a unique company grounded in talent, technology, and curiosity and creativity. We would be unencumbered by legacy reserves, data and technology architectures, or unintentional cultures. We had a clean slate and purposeful path forward.

Our tagline, “We see risk differently,” captures the philosophy we embraced and informs my role as Chief Talent Officer. Seeing differently encompasses more than Vantage’s underwriting or risk transfer focus. We spend a lot of time thinking about the culture we want to create. How will we attract and retain the best talent? How do we reinforce our ambition to be technology-enabled, data-driven, intellectually curious, and innovative? What does building a diverse and inclusive organization entail? Looking back on the past two years, a few things stand out as contributing to our sustained progress

on our journey to create a culture that unlocks the power of our colleagues:

- We share responsibility for shaping the company culture and living our values: Do What’s Right, Be Transparent, Relentlessly Curious, Make a Difference and We are Better Together
- We’re deliberate about diversity and inclusion - creating an environment where everyone feels they belong and are part of something bigger.
- Authenticity and openness help us better support each other. Encouraging bringing our whole selves to work and stressing the importance of well-being and mental health.
- Everyone at Vantage is a recruiter – great people want to work with great people.
- We celebrate each other’s effort in taking risks and learning fast. Respectfully challenging ideas, soliciting feedback, and supporting each other’s successes and working through mistakes together are shared norms.

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From early on, our colleagues embraced these principles. They took the initiative to form Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG), and Wellness working groups to collaborate and drive related initiatives. Thanks to their efforts, we have courageous conversations around allyship, create sustainability action plans, and encourage each other to be more active. Standing up a new specialty insurance/reinsurance company has given us a unique place in the industry's competition for talent. Vantage has been deliberate about DEI from Day 1. We have focused on building teams inclusive of internal diversity such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and age which starts with our Leadership Team and cascades throughout the organization. We've embraced individuals from outside of the insurance industry and across geographies, leveraging different backgrounds, experiences, and points of view.

At Vantage, we understand that we can positively shape our collective and individual experience of work and life. Our approach to wellness and mental health begins with open and honest discussions to actively promote mental health, remove stigma, and educate leaders on how to support colleagues. We're creating an environment where individuals support each other and are increasingly comfortable talking about mental health -- shaping a strong community of supportive colleagues.

Our sense of belonging is reinforced through weekly all-colleague meetings which always start with new hires sharing fun facts about themselves. We've heard about the aspirations of our long-distance marathoners, musicians, and travel enthusiasts. We also fiercely protect 15 minutes every Friday on everyone's calendar. During this time, colleagues are randomly paired for a brief chat. It's an opportunity to get to know each other, learn about each other's work, and build company-wide support structures. Our in-person team building events are similarly grounded in our learnings from intentionally developing cross-organizational ties. If you want to get to know your colleagues, I can assure you that there's nothing like bowling -- no frills, healthy competition, and everyone in unflattering shoes. Miniature golf provided a close second.

We have bridged distances in ways that exceeded my expectations. These efforts have proven their value with our colleagues. They share that they feel part of something and continue to prioritize building strong connections and relationships as a shared accountability.

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They raise issues and share experiences with each other. They consistently prove to be smart, creative, genuine, and caring professionals who are dedicated to building something special.

Much of my prior career was spent at established companies with established cultures, teams, and infrastructure. What I newly appreciate is shaping a fresh company culture and bringing it to life with the full capabilities of our talented colleagues. There's always the nuts-and-bolts of a startup environment. You're rolling up your sleeves and manually issuing the first payroll. The twists and turns are inevitable as you build out systems and processes. The environment calls for focused listening, continuous improvement, and constant change. It can be demanding and exhausting. At times, I've had to remind myself of advice I've shared with many in the past -- to be a duck -- gliding along the surface while paddling frantically under the water. I have never paddled faster and tried harder to keep moving forward with grace.

The effort, exhilaration, and excitement of creating something tangible is unforgettable. From a few dozen pieces of paper that loosely outlined a vision for a new company to having over 200 colleagues across the US and Bermuda is an accomplishment proudly shared.

## About the Author

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Nikki holds more than 25 years of cross-industry experience building teams, developing talent, and driving culture that delivers business results. Before Vantage, Nikki was Chief Human Resources Officer at AXA XL. She also served in previous Human Resources management roles at The Hartford, GE International and GE Capital, and NBC Universal.

*This article was edited by John Flannery, Vantage's Interim Head of Marketing and Communications.*

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