Galvanizing Your People Amidst the Global Pandemic

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As organization leaders around the world come to grips with the COVID-19 pandemic, the heightened adversity is forcing many to manage their people far differently. A sweeping and threatening disruption like COVID-19 dampens employees' outlook on their livelihoods and their lives, as well as the lives of their loved ones. It can create extreme anxiety that reduces their sense of control and ability to process information.

Greater anxiety, in turn, has a cascading effect on job performance. Specifically, it can compromise safety, quality and productivity. Believing their organization is operating under tremendous uncertainty and financial pressure, employees realize they must change their work habits – e.g., make decisions faster, complete tasks faster, help colleagues struggling in their jobs, and so on.

Helping employees navigate through these dark times will be critical to many organizations' short-

and long-term survival. Leaders who step up to the challenge will shorten and reduce the pandemic's negative impact on their businesses.

But doing so requires a talent engagement strategy, a plan that guides leaders on how to interact with their people in the right way, at the right time, and with the right information. Such a strategy can also help employees shift from seeing themselves as being helpless to deal with the crisis, to people who can play a beneficial role in helping their companies to reduce its impact.

Creating a Talent Engagement Strategy

Helping employees manage the pandemic-related pressure and changes in their work is essential. It requires leaders to build an empathetic bond with employees. But this is not at all easy now given that many workers are operating from their homes.

Nonetheless, if leaders believe that much remote work will stay remote after the pandemic has subsided, they will need to continue building and strengthening their empathetic bonds with employees. Leaders who think through three questions will take the first big step toward building stronger bonds and creating an exceptional employee experience:

Q1: What do we need to convey? When they're under high stress, people have difficulty hearing, understanding and recalling information. In a crisis, begin every communication with empathy. Then use concise and to-the-point messaging with visual aids and infographics. Regular bulletins, employee and customer success stories, and analogies that help clarify complex messages will increase understanding. They will also boost morale and send positive vibes across the organization. Astute communication and articulation are key success factors.

Q2: Who should initiate engagement? Of course, leaders must take charge here. However, internal change agents (who often don't manage people) can also be highly influential. Because of their unquestionable credibility and expertise, change agents are admired and trusted by others in the organization. People in a crisis tend to believe the messenger before judging the message itself. Now is a good time for leaders to get the change agents on their side.

Q3: How do we need to react? The COVID-19 crisis followed the typical pattern of initial shock followed by denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. The right leadership reaction to the first five conditions is to listen with empathy before explaining why changes are ahead (including those that will be part of the new normal) what they are. To help employees prepare for those changes, leaders need to establish a learning mindset. This involves embracing change as new facts emerge and making adjustments to the game plan. But here, again, leaders must start with empathy, addressing people's concerns with openness and optimism.

Seven Elements of Successful Crisis Engagement

Knowing what they need to convey, with whom and how, company leaders are ready to engage the workforce. Seven factors will keep engagement levels high and productive:

a. **Leadership availability and accessibility** in providing information and guidance on the pandemic. Active and visible sponsorship is the leading contributor to successful change. Sponsors, those who can hold employees accountable for executing the required changes, need to be visible.

b. **Empathy:** We can't state this enough. In a crisis, employees will remember how leaders made them feel, so empathy and understanding assume prime importance. Companies need to sensitize managers to be empathetic, and in turn suggest that they deal with others (including their families) empathetically. Leaders need to personalize messages to the right level (through segmentation) and deliver them through channels an employee prefers.

c. **Increased communication:** Regular updates via trusted communication channels (email, intranet, employee apps or virtual town halls) give employees confidence that leaders have plans in place and things will return to normal relatively quickly. Make sure you always link any message about changes that must be made to the improvements those changes seek (e.g., cycle time and quality improvements). Digital forums such ideathons and hackathons can be great ways to surface ideas at all levels and let employees play important roles in formulating ideas that help the company rebound.

d. **Open communication:** Everybody understands that this type of crisis could be a once-in-a-lifetime event. Its seriousness requires transparent communication. Nothing less will build trust and stronger intra-organizational relationships. But because many organizations' people can't be in the same room right now, gaining trust is much more difficult. Remote working necessitates individual leaders to be authentic, to openly address uncertainties and be open with their vulnerabilities.

e. **Feedback:** Creating a collaborative, open and inclusive virtual workplace requires everyone, especially supervisors, to first listen to their teams. Develop various channels to capture employee feedback on how they are coping with the

new normal. It will go a long way toward making employees feel valued. Collaborative team sites led by managers can be an open forum to hear emotions and ideas for change. With remote working efficiency being tested, managers play an increasingly important role in keeping team members engaged. Managers need a collaborative approach to making all stakeholders aware of the specifics of the changes that must be implemented. Their people best know how to do the jobs they are now doing. Feedback loops that let them explain their frustrations with their new work routines can help – as long as they are not met with reprisals. Engage them. Hear them. But avoid criticizing them. Instead, help them work things out.

f. **Competency building:** This is a great time to reskill workers with lots of downtime in the crisis. For example, many prognosticators of the workforce of the future expect people not to be working in isolated silos, but instead to be part of geographically dispersed agile teams, connected by technology. Now is an opportune moment to train idle remote employees on agile methods. Leaders should also help employees hone their skills through AI-infused online learning tools. These will assess an individual's level of competency and recommend the right training. In the new normal, continual education and training – delivered far more to people's computers and far less in classrooms -- will be essential to maintaining a talent edge.

g. **Digital enablement:** With the right technical support and a few simple "do's" and "don'ts," the right technology can help teams keep up their agile working models without being in the same room. Leaders need to make digital training and self-learning tools available for different cohorts (basic, advanced) to teams and departments.

Remote working will be a huge part of the new normal. But making it productive requires companies to give employees the requisite psychological safety outside the office while communicating the best practices of remote work. Leaders must define clear objectives to give employees the autonomy and empowerment they need. Leaders should help them establish a clear cadence of work tasks, using a suite of digital tools and new media.

Despite the brutal impact of COVID-19, the pandemic has pushed the reset button on leadership style and change management for the better. This is a great opportunity to redefine work and workplace, boost employee confidence and ensure that we have a loyal and competitive workforce to drive growth and transformation ahead.

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