

Inspiring your workforce in times of crisis

By Colleen Casey

Perhaps no aspect of life is more altered by COVID-19 than the labour market. After ten years of nearly uninterrupted growth, organisations across the world are dealing with a level of disruption not seen since the Great Depression.

While organisations grapple with the economic fallout of the pandemic, employees are faced with a number of factors getting in the way of their engagement. Furloughs and increased workloads, an increase in stress and activity for anyone providing vital services to the community, priorities that seem to change by the day if not the hour, the challenges posed by working (and schooling) from home, the list goes on and on.

The engagement needs of your workforce have never been more real or more pressing, but it might seem philosophically preposterous and logistically complicated to address at the moment.

An engaged workforce is a lofty goal in the best of times, let alone at a time when most of us are left focusing on our base level physiological, psychological and economic needs. Yet addressing engagement has never been more critical to your organisation's ability to deliver on your mission and your strategic priorities (however different they may look from January).

While the world of work may feel upside-down, employee engagement is an evergreen equation. It's about maximum satisfaction for individuals and maximum contribution for the organisation, and your employees are relying on you more than ever to help them experience it.

We have identified four key guidelines for keeping your workforce engaged: contribution, connection, communication, and confidence. Following these four dimensions, or **four 'c's**, will help keep your employees performing and experiencing satisfaction during these unprecedented times.

Contribution: It is clear that in the current context, giving 110% on the job is not easy. But in spite of all that is happening, employees still need to feel that they are making an impact. Whether it is providing protective equipment for your employees working in essential businesses, or the appropriate tools for those working from home, you can help employees reach maximum levels of contribution by providing them appropriate resources.

Additionally, "home schooling" presents specific challenges for working parents. Providing flexibility in schedules and work hours will help employees meet both their professional and personal obligations.

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Beyond resources and flexibility, employees need know what is important for the organisation now. Discussing their immediate work priorities; and how they may have changed since the beginning of the year; is crucial to keeping employees aligned and performing amidst the disruption.

Connection: With many of us sequestered in our homes or working in the highly stressful environment of essential business, the need for community has never been stronger. This starts with the immediate team, maintaining the connection with colleagues and having check-ins with the manager on a more regular basis. If you're team is working from home, make sure to leverage video chats during team meetings and one on ones to satisfy the need for face-to-face interaction.

Also, remember that social distancing does not have to mean the end of socializing. Collaborative technologies are a great tool for hosting after hours work events, allowing colleagues to connect and decompress outside of regular business hours. Outside of the immediate team, senior leaders need to determine actions that will demonstrate their commitment and caring for their people.

Communication: Your organisation's tactical and strategic responses to the situation we face is paramount, but how you chose to communicate to your employees during this time is equally important. Make sure you are communicating frequently, honestly, and with empathy, providing clarity on what you know (and don't know) about the situation, setting expectations on what is to come next and acknowledging the emotions of your workforce at this time. Remind them of your mission and the impact you make on your customers and the larger community.

Confidence: During this time of upheaval and fear, your employees are looking to you to be the steady rock in a sea of uncertainty. Building trust and confidence is key. Senior leaders can build trust by deciding on and sticking to a course of action to address the immediate needs of employees and the organisation. Make sure to explain the rationale behind the actions being taken, explaining what the decision making process was and who was involved. When communicating the plan, make sure to articulate your vision for the organisation's future and explain how these actions will ensure your long-term success. Paint the picture of what the future could like, and how it might be even better than the past.

So what's next? Admittedly, maintaining employee engagement at the moment is a herculean task. The road ahead will be long and difficult, and you will no doubt have to re-evaluate your strategy and priorities as you weather the storm. While we may not know how or when this situation will be resolved, keeping engagement at the forefront of your strategy and part of how you do business on a daily business will support your ability to deliver on your mission and goals during this difficult time.

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