

The art of engaging employees during turbulent times

In times of crisis, engaging employees effectively has never felt more urgent. But how do you take your workforce along with you when you don't know what the future holds?

Clear and consistent communication is a powerful business asset during the best of times. But when we're grappling with a global pandemic with dramatic economic and emotional implications for organisations, engaging with your workforce is no longer about parroting company policies or delivering a new update. It becomes a strategic and critical practice that can boost flagging morale and inspire confidence. It can give the people at the heart of your business the tools to stay afloat in a sea of unknowns.

COVID-19 has plunged the world into an unprecedented and uncharted uncertainty. Business and governments are dealing with variables that are constantly changing. Almost instantly, employees who are used to the rhythms of the office have become remote workers without the chance to prepare adequately. Often, they may be balancing their professional commitments alongside their caregiving responsibilities or dealing with physical separation from family and friends.

Amid this challenge, they are also being asked to adjust to dramatic changes in their working conditions and professional lives. To engage employees effectively during this historic moment, it's essential to prioritise clarity, create community and foster working relationships that lead to collaboration, co-creation and creativity. Setting the stage for a business that's equipped to bounce back stronger after this crisis isn't

about responding with anxiety. It's about rallying together, treating employee engagement as an ongoing dialogue rather than a one-sided conversation and tapping into the resources you already have.

Communicate with clarity

Through history, business leaders have responded to crisis by focusing on their external communications, tightly controlling their public narrative. But the circumstances around COVID-19 are evolving at such a breakneck pace that what's true today might be irrelevant tomorrow. It's never been more crucial for organisations to be transparent about their challenges and maintain clear lines of communication with those that are employed by them. It's also imperative to ensure that the stories organisations share with their teams and the messages they deliver to the public are completely aligned.

Many business leaders are dealing with obstacles ranging from cashflow to supply chain issues to disruptions to their industry. But they've also been gifted the chance to better understand what motivates their employees and build accountability. This can foster a culture of empathy, resilience and openness that can see their workforce thrive.

Your organisation may not have all the answers but it's essential to reassure staff that you have a clear process in place when it comes to responding to the crisis. It's equally important to communicate to staff how their roles have changed, the most pressing priorities for the business as well as how expectations may shift. So far, the pandemic has sparked a flurry of speculation and misinformation, which can exacerbate collective anxiety. That's why it's critical to establish a clear strategic narrative, communicate complex information simply and create a single source of truth where employees can ask questions and access important messages. Engaging with your employees ethically and responsibly – even when delivering bad news – can help steer your company through these testing times.

Connect as a community

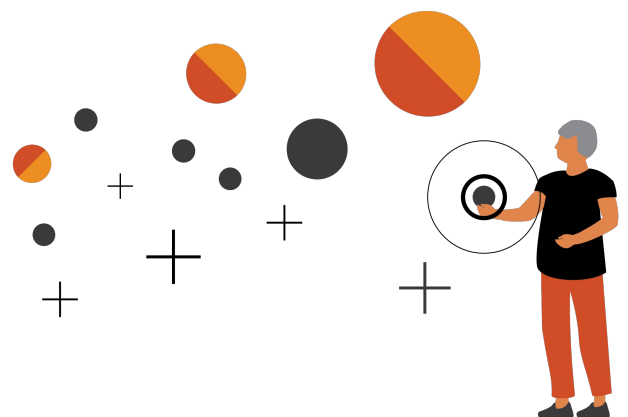
Humans are hardwired to band together in a crisis. During COVID-19, we've seen the power of camaraderie and connection in the shape of virtual catchups for friends who can't see each other or online groups to support vulnerable neighbours. The same goes for work. In times of crisis, feeling connected to a community, working towards a clearly-defined purpose and upholding company values – even if that company is dispersed around kitchen tables around the city – is vital to motivating and engaging teams. The old 'town hall' approach to leading, that sees the CEO deliver a forecast during a weekly staff meeting or make sweeping statements about the state of the business will no longer work. So, what does? Embracing the possibilities of virtual working to cultivate a sense of community among your employees and make everyone – even the new hire that may have never physically met her colleagues – feel like part of a team.

Connecting as a community during this moment will take ingenuity and imagination. It could mean developing new channels or social tools for employees to share stories or positive affirmations. It could mean embracing videos or augmented reality to create a sense of physical presence. Or it could mean holding a virtual festival that features tailor-made learning modules, online forums or digital competitions that gamify your employees' contributions and skills. Even small investments in building genuine community can have a big impact on your employees' purpose and morale.

Co-create with your people

In times of crisis, we each face unique circumstances. But for businesses that take a 'top-down' approach to employee engagement, this moment offers the rare chance to engage your staff in a bigger mission and give them a sense of ownership over the trajectory of your organisation. It's also a powerful opportunity to pool your team's collective creativity to respond to new challenges and co-create products and outcomes that can help your business endure. Developing a new normal shouldn't be the domain of an executive team. It's a collaborative process that should harness the strengths and talents of everyone your business employs.

When you are co-creating within a virtual workforce, it's important to create respectful dialogue, draw on different perspectives and life experiences when it comes to tackling looming challenges and give people the tools to test, iterate and learn. To engage your employees effectively during a crisis, it's vital to give them every chance to connect with each other and use their individual strengths to work towards a bigger whole.



Conclusion

Our current moment has thrown up challenges that organisations have never considered. It's also made the art of employee engagement more complex and urgent. Responding to a crisis with a process that is transparent, consistent and respectful will equip your staff – your company's most valuable assets – with the resources to work towards a stronger future and mitigate confusion and stress. Times of uncertainty are also times of opportunity. They can help your business grow in ways you may not expect.

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