6 Manager Activities to Maintain Employee Performance and Engagement During a Potential Pandemic

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Pandemics have the power to evoke a variety of emotions that can disengage and distract employees from their work. HR leaders must equip managers to help employees stay engaged through the disruption and uncertainty brought about by potential pandemics such as COVID-19.

Much of the commentary around COVID-19 has been focused on its impact on sales and supply chain disruptions. For HR leaders, the initial focus has been on protecting employees’ health, supporting remote working, and ensuring continuity of operations. But soon, HR leaders’ response will need to move from managing safety and health issues to managing the employee experience. This involves providing the flexibility and support employees need while balancing business needs.

To restore productivity and deliver employee experience in this difficult time, one critical area organizations will need to focus on is the fallout from the potential pandemic on employees’ emotions. Regardless of how long the virus outbreak lasts, COVID-19 and its ripple effects will have significant impact on employees’ personal and work lives, leading to emotions such as employee anxiety, frustration, and burnout. These feelings, when left unattended, can affect employees’ productivity and engagement, leading to work errors, poorer work quality and eventually influencing an organization’s ability to survive in these difficult times. In a recent Gartner snap poll for APAC HR leaders conducted after the COVID-19 outbreak, employee productivity already features as a top concern for HR leaders (41%) and managers’ concerns about employee engagement (75%) is the top complaint they are getting from employees[1].

Manager Activities to Maintain Performance and Engagement During a Potential Pandemic

In response to COVID-19 and other potential pandemics, most organizations are focused on scenario planning and necessary operational responses to ensure business continuity. However, such plans often do not address and impact employees’ ability to focus on their work [2]. To ensure employees maintain focus through continued uncertainty and disruption, managers can play a key leadership role by ensuring fast, informed, and empathetic decision-making. HR should help managers at all levels do six specific activities to ensure employees get the requisite support to tackle the emotional response:
- Sense employees’ need for support.
- Promote dialogue to build understanding.
- Focus on objectives to create clarity amid uncertainty and disruption.
- Model the right behaviors to reduce the likelihood of misconduct.
- Tailor recognition to acknowledge employee efforts under challenging circumstances.
- Encourage innovation to drive engagement.

Sense Employees’ Need for Support

HR must help managers recognize signs of distress among their people, both directly (through conversations) and indirectly (through observation). HR can provide managers with up-to-date information and guidance to enable their conversations with employees about sensitive subjects arising from the potential pandemic, including alternative work models, job security and prospects, overall staffing impact and tension in the workplace. HR should advise managers to have regular conversations with their employees to surface challenges and concerns. This will help employees feel supported and cared for. HR can support managers through discussion guides, training, or as simple as email reminders with the latest updates on the situation and general principles for how to deal with it.

Promote Dialogue to Build Understanding

Managers can ensure their communication efforts help rather than hurt engagement by having a two-way dialogue rather than trying to dictate instructions or “sell” changes the organization is, or will be, making in response to the potential pandemic. Our research shows that employees’ understanding of organizations’ decisions and their implications during the change is far more important for the success of a change initiative than employees ‘liking’ the change. The two-way communication with managers and peers can be far more effective than scripted “official” communications designed to emphasize the positive and downplay the negative [3]. These opportunities not only provide employees with the information and perspective they need, but also allow employees to express and process negative emotions and improve their feelings of control. HR leaders should encourage and help managers create opportunities for two-way dialogues to discuss a realistic picture of both the positive and negative implications of the potential pandemic.

Focus on Objectives to Create Clarity Amid Uncertainty and Disruption

Managers can have a greater impact on discretionary effort by setting clear objectives that connect employees’ efforts to the organizations’ priorities, rather than trying to redefine activities and behaviors associated with individual roles in response to a change event [4]. Seeing one’s work contribute to company goals is one of the top engagement drivers for employees. Employees who feel confident about the importance of their job to the success of the organization feel less anxious
about their job security. This is especially helpful for employees in support functions with less direct impact on the revenue of the organization.

A direct link between their individual performance and the achievement of business goals can boost employees’ confidence in the importance of their job even in a challenging business environment. Even though the full impact of the COVID-19 outbreak is yet to be determined, clear objectives and regular updates on the possible changes will help ensure employees maintain focus, energy and a sense of purpose, rather than feeling as though they are simply treading water. Managers do not need to pretend they know what’s going to happen but rather they need to reassert the link between employees’ work and organizational success during this difficult time. HR leaders can help managers gain visibility into leadership and organizational goals, stay informed of any changes in them due to the impact of the current situation, and translate the organization’s vision into their employees’ context.

Model the Right Behaviors to Reduce the Likelihood of Misconduct

To give employees the confidence and security they need to work productively, organizations need to send a consistent and strong message reiterating the organizational values. Work well-being has the greatest impact on feelings of psychological safety—an unpleasant employee experience can negatively impact psychological safety by up to 35% [5]. To make matters worse, employee misconduct rises during times of disruption and turmoil [6]. Many organizations have already reported cases of discrimination against employees of specific origin or ethnicity [7].

Apart from modeling the right behaviors, managers can also deter misconduct by encouraging whistleblowers to call out unethical behaviors, reminding staff of the channels for reporting misconduct, and highlighting punitive measures for non-compliance. HR leaders play a key role in ensuring the right processes are in place for managers to reinforce desired behaviors. HR leaders also need to remind managers about the need to communicate to employees the organizational values and code of conduct for a safe and inclusive working environment.

Tailor Recognition to Acknowledge Employee Efforts Under Challenging Circumstances

As COVID-19 creates significant disruption and drag on engagement, managers need to redouble their recognition efforts. Unfortunately, few managers are effective at providing recognition to deserving members of their teams [4]. Effective recognition not only motivates the recipient but can serve as a strong signal to other employees of behaviors they should emulate. Recognition can take many forms other than monetary rewards, including public acknowledgment, tokens of appreciation, development opportunities and low-cost perks. Some employees may be working longer hours than usual to cover the responsibilities of their colleagues who may have fallen ill or are quarantined. Managers can pen notes of appreciation to acknowledge the extra effort from these employees. For organizations facing a slowdown in business, managers can take this opportunity to provide development opportunities to employees who normally do not have
capacity. This reinforces the organization’s commitment to the long-term success of the employee, even when the organization struggles to provide substantial monetary rewards.

**Encourage Innovation to Drive Engagement**

Managers can create an environment for employee innovation and risk-taking. While managers and employees may understandably become more risk-averse in this uncertain environment, it’s precisely during these times of change and disruption that innovation and risk-taking become even more important for employee engagement and organizational success. The disengaging effect of constraints on innovation and risk-taking are particularly severe for high-potential (HIPO) employees who tend to have a stronger desire for these types of opportunities [8]. Even when the organization has constraints on new investments, managers can emphasize the need and provide opportunities for incremental innovation or process improvements especially to tackle with the challenge the team or organization is facing in terms of process disruptions or business impact.

**Conclusion**

While organizations prioritize their pandemic response plans to ensure business continuity, it is critical for heads of HR to also address employees’ emotions during this period. To ensure employees maintain focus through continued uncertainty and disruption, managers can play a key leadership role in ensuring fast, informed, and empathetic decision-making. HR should help managers at all levels to ensure employees get the requisite support to tackle their emotional response.

Most managers are not equipped to recognize or address these emotional challenges on their own. Heads of HR can help managers look for signs of distress, help employees to navigate those emotions, and redirect their attention to broader goals, innovation, and long-term successes.

**Recommended by the Authors**

**Pandemic Planning: Responding to Coronavirus and Other Emerging Risks**

Pandemics aren’t your usual business disruption. Unfolding over months, these events require an extra set of activities that include consultations with epidemiologists, critical role identification and third-party evaluations. CHROs should use these tips and checklists to plan out a response.

**The Coronavirus Outbreak: Assessing Talent Impact and Driving Remote Working Success**

HR leaders are trying to assess and manage the impact of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak on their workforce and organization. In this webinar replay, we discuss the impact on talent and driving effectiveness of remote workers with our expert panel, Dr. Richard Claydon and Aaron McEwan.

**Endnotes**

Recommended For You

Employee Concerns About the Impact of the COVID-19 Outbreak

Building Employee Engagement Through Effective Communication During COVID-19

Leading the Return-to-the-Workplace Employee Experience

Communicating the Death of an Employee due to COVID-19

Improving the Return-to-the-Workplace Employee Experience: Ideas for HR