



LEADING THROUGH CHALLENGING TIMES

Leadership Considerations During a Pandemic

How have leaders adapted throughout the pandemic? How can we be better prepared for challenges in the future?

Rewind the clock, a year or so to January 2020 and consider how you managed your team. You probably knew where they were physically located and when they'd be there, whether that was in the next room, down a hallway, on a different floor or working remotely.

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You also most likely knew the most effective way to communicate with them. At that time you might have had the luxury of a face-to-face conversation on a regular basis. Your ability to effectively communicate with your team was also partly because the world in which you operated didn't fundamentally change from one week to the next. The pandemic changed that.

The ability to see your team regularly, via video chats or in the hallway, enabled you to tell if something was amiss, gauge their mood and know what not to say. Body language was just one of many visual cues you had in your armory.

Now, back to present day, and the situation couldn't be more different. We may not know a team member's

specific location on any given day. We no longer see them start their day, know if they are working late, or even if they remember to take their lunch break. We also don't have all the answers anymore. COVID-19 has created shades of gray in almost every aspect of our lives. Due to this, we can no longer gauge the mood of an office simply through casual interactions.

Judging the mood of a department and doing what we can to improve it (if it needs adjusting) is one of the signs of a good leader. The best leaders have learned to adapt to this new environment in which many tools they had before are no longer available in an almost entirely virtual environment. “When it comes to encouraging new behaviors in their teams, many leaders have taken a cheerleader approach,” explains Laura Soto, Head of Global Wellbeing Products, Cigna.

“This approach attempts to replace the energy that has been lost from the lack of in-person interaction,” continues Soto.

“Ultimately we are all going to have to evolve and adapt to strengthen the relationships we have with each other since many of the daily options we had in the office – such as going for a coffee, engaging in a face-to-face conversation – are gone. We must now find new ways to build those relationships.” »





Honesty is the best policy

The first step should be honesty. Never before have we collectively desired answers to the same questions, but have been unable to find answers. Whether we like it or not, the idea that, as a leader, you should have answers is now part of the past. We are now dealing with an incident that exceeds the confines of our companies and even our own sector. This reinforces the need for leaders to be transparent with their teams and explain that we know as much as they know at the moment. This kind of honesty might seem unsettling, but it creates a level of trust so the team understands that you will share information with them as you receive it. Sunil Setlur, Chief People Officer, Go-Jek, explained on a recent webinar jointly hosted by Cigna and *The Economist* that

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Sunil Setlur, Chief People Officer, Go-Jek

honesty is the best policy. “One of the amazing things all our CEOs are doing is a monthly download, where they answer every single question submitted by employees,” he explained. “Some questions are very hard and unfiltered, with questions ranging from company strategy and direction to macroeconomics, tactical processes and requests to do certain aspects of our day-to-day differently.”

Honesty from the top-down has been reflected across the board, with information being key to ensure employees are as happy as possible. Sunil also pointed out that they’ve had to share messages across multiple channels to ensure everyone is informed.

“The content game has gone up, as people are at different levels of understanding. We’ve also quadrupled the size of our internal communications team. I would say we’ve over communicated as we’ve tried to find different ways of being heard,” said Sunil.

Even without access to an internal communications department, being honest with your employees will help your relationship. By putting yourself on a level playing field with them, there’s more chance they will share how they’re feeling about the situation. In these times, the ability to have open and honest communication with your team is the most essential tool a leader can have.

Flexibility is key

The rigidity of the working day is no longer applicable in today’s world. Every leader now has to understand that an employee is not only an employee, but also a parent, a care-giver, a partner – they have other functions and responsibilities. We may even have witnessed this with the various guest appearances of relatives and pets on virtual meetings. Dawn Soo, Regional Medical Officer, Asia-Pacific, Cigna International Markets explains, “Employers will have to respect that we all have different roles in life – there’s a new level of trust with employees and we have to accept that, moving forward, schedules will have to be flexible.”





Employees are currently working harder than ever before with 59% of people reporting they're working more hours now than before the pandemic and 79% recording a feeling of being on all the time! This isn't always positive and highlights the importance of listening to ensure employees' needs are being met, socially, physically and mentally.

"As time went by and the realization this [pandemic] could go on much longer than originally anticipated, with no definitive end date, our approach changed," explained Sunil, when discussing how Go-Jek met employees' needs. "We had three areas of focus."

"We wanted to listen more. I think we polled our employees more during the pandemic than ever before. We did a number of surveys and outreaches to

"We have to empower people to take on new projects and be their own leader."

understand how they're feeling, what they are wanting to do and what we can do to make them more effective."

"The second aspect we focused on was maintaining community and social bonds. We wanted to do it in a way that was meaningful because adding another Zoom meeting after a week of back-to-back Zoom meetings would not have been the best way to achieve the feeling of community we were looking to create.

"The other area of focus was a fundamental shift in the way we manage," he continued. "We've gone from managing time which is what you do when you get people into an office, to managing people's energy."

This meant Go-Jek had to manage the 'effectiveness

of outcomes' rather than specifically count time spent in hours and days.

Listening paid plenty of dividends for both parties. Part of its effectiveness was realizing not everyone had a suitable at-home set-up. So they developed a loan program for office furniture and ergonomic equipment. Once they realized the pandemic was going to last longer than originally anticipated, they launched a home allowance with 'no strings attached' so people could be comfortable in their work-at-home space.

Another big change was centered around energy. "The fact is we're exhausted; we don't have the energy," explained Sunil. "Sitting in front of a screen drains you."

Realizing this led us to launch new initiatives such as the second Friday of every month becoming a no-meeting day, and the last Friday becoming a company holiday. Both concepts, said Sunil, made "people feel like they have the time and space to manage energy, especially when people were putting the hours they would usually spend commuting back into their work."

Flexible thinking on every front led to successful outcomes across the board.

Empowering employees

Employees need to be equipped with the right tools in order for them to successfully do their jobs. In the most literal sense this can mean the right technology, equipment or even an ergonomically correct office chair. It means giving people the right support to meet their whole health needs. This covers every aspect of their life, from the physical and mental to the social and even the financial. Leaders have to be aware of the many factors that can impact their employees' total well-being, often going above and beyond the usual. "Leaders are going to have to become more empathetic and more personal in order to keep that human element," explains Soto. »



“They will have to be more creative in building energy and a vision for the future. We’re staring down a tunnel of days that all feel very similar.

“We have to empower our employees to take on new projects and be their own leader,” continued Soto.

This can be done both formally and informally through career development courses. “Many companies are giving their employees a lot of opportunities to develop their skills,” said Sumit Tandon, Regional HR Director, Boeing International. “You don’t have to attend meetings, there are lots of digital technologies out there that you can use at your own pace. Learning is a great way to stay positive and give yourself a sense of accomplishment during the this stressful time.”

Being a leader doesn’t exclude you from learning new skills either. “One of the steps I’ve taken,” explains Tony Jasper, Global Employer Services Leader, Greater China, Deloitte, “has been to take a leadership coaching course to improve my working style.”

Even without embarking on additional learning, just the simple act of empowering people can lead to positive outcomes.

“We’ve seen many stories of employees helping each other without being prompted. We place extra emphasis

on empowering our employees to help their colleagues,” explained Sunil. “One program we are testing out is called ‘Lean on Me’ where employees can partner up with a colleague and share their feelings.

“Big company-wide recognition tactics are less effective now, so what can we do to create a culture of gratitude and give people the opportunity to say ‘thanks’ during this challenging time?”

“Look at the neuroscience of a crisis. Logic tells you that in a crisis people look after themselves, but in my experience, science shows that when a crisis happens, people really look after their tribe. So, how do we give people the opportunity to look after each other? It doesn’t have to be a grand gesture of ‘let’s go help a marginalized part of society.’ It can just be something simple. For example, someone at work recently started a cat channel on Slack, asking ‘what are you doing to keep your cats entertained and off your keyboard?’ It’s now a 400-person community.

“Sometimes it’s a case of getting out of the way, and sharing these opportunities with your employees and then letting them make the connections.”

References:

1. Cigna COVID-19 Global Impact Study, April 2020.

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