



Focusing on Good EX in Times of Calamity

Introduction

With the COVID-19 pandemic front and centre on everyone's' mind these days, companies are having to walk a fine line between taking care to communicate necessary and important information while also preventing widespread panic amongst their customers. Further than just the *necessary* customer communication, organisations need to maintain a relationship with their employees while focusing, now more than ever, on employee engagement (EE) and the overall employee experience (EX).

Organisations are being required to scramble suddenly for ways to maintain business continuity in the face of such a life-threatening crisis. However, these are also testing times for everyone on how quickly we adapt, how differently we can think and plan which will determine how strongly we emerge from this adversity. Between remote work shifts, social distancing mandates, school closures, and anxiety over when the pandemic will be contained, your workforce will surely be on edge.

With the majority of organisations in South Africa being forced to close their doors and take up remote offices in their homes- having to invoke emergency 'work-from-home' policies, staying connected with your entire organisation and managing teams remotely is a new challenge within itself. For many companies, having the entire workforce working remotely is unprecedented, while there are a number of organisations wherein remote work is fairly common practice. As with customers, when it comes to your employees, having the right tech-tools in place is essential, however, you do also need to have a strategy in place to keep all employees engaged and focused on their work (Fallon, 2020).

Managing employee experience and further measuring employee engagement is crucial during these trying times. With a remote form of management being in place so suddenly, having a resilient management team will make all the difference. We will take further look at these constructs as well as talent management, the increased focus on the well-being of your workforce, and the 3R approach to adapting during challenging times.

Managing employee experience (EX) in times of crisis while maintaining business continuity

In times of organisational crisis and change, the company looks to their HR leaders for guidance and reassurance (Granger, 2020). This is especially the case, now, given the disruptions associated with COVID-19 and the related economic crisis (Granger, 2020).

When it comes to the 'heroes' of the Covid-19 pandemic, managers may not immediately spring to mind – except, of course, for those leading teams of key workers on the front lines (Hardy, 2020).

However, managers from across a wide range of industries have a hugely important role to play in the weeks and months ahead. While perhaps not heroes in the traditional sense of the word, managers are uniquely positioned to help steer organisations through this crisis – and out the other side (Hardy, 2020).

For even the most experienced of managers, this crisis will prove to be a steep learning curve, as the virus ravages global economies and touches every corner of our personal and professional lives. It is most likely that the majority will not have encountered anything like it before in their lifetimes (Hardy, 2020).

So, how can managers, HR, and employee experience (EX) leaders help their organisations appropriately manage employees' experiences during these trying times?

Bruce Temkin (2020), suggests the same way that *all* experience management (XM) professionals can, "by enhancing the capability to *continuously learn* how people are thinking and feeling, *propagate insights* into the hands of people who can take action, and *rapidly adapt* in this dynamic environment,".

Thus, in most cases, this means adjusting the EX Management program.

5 principles for making changes to your Experience Management (XM) program (Granger, 2020)

As organisations consider changes to their EX management programs, it is important to anchor on foundational XM principles that apply to *all* XM professionals during times of crisis:

1. **Show humanity.** As you ask employees for feedback, you must be *particularly* sensitive to their existing circumstances and concerns and be sure to be clear about how the collection of their feedback can help *them*. In times of crisis, employees' concerns shift to the most fundamental of needs such as their health and safety and whether they will have a job tomorrow.
2. **Take a hiatus on metrics.** Major organisational disruptions can have a dramatic impact on employee survey responses and scores. For example, many organisations observe drops in survey scores shortly after mergers and acquisitions. At times like this, you should still ask employees for feedback, but your focus should be on what's most important to employees right now, not on metrics and historical comparisons.

3. **Ask less, listen more.** As you adjust your existing employee listening strategy, shift your measurement approach to include more questions that are more closely related to the current context and are less anchored on what questions have been asked in the past. Past questions may still be relevant but they should be reviewed critically to ensure suitability.
4. **Build up your immediate response skill.** Following up with employees on their feedback is *always* important, but it is even more critical in times of crisis. One of the core competencies within the XM operating framework is “RESPOND”. This is all about how **organisations respond to and act on feedback**. During these times, take greater care to ask about what you can act on, get feedback to the people who can do something with it, and *communicate, communicate, communicate* with your employees.
5. **Accelerate your feedback cycles.** Building on principles 3 and 4 presented above, it is critical that you collect, manage, and respond to feedback as quickly as possible. For most organisations, this likely means introducing new or different types of listening mechanisms, such as always-on feedback to digital employee experiences.

Is Your Employee Engagement in a Recession, Too?

Since there is no doubt that employee engagement will take a hit under the current conditions, that does not mean you are powerless. In fact, you can—and must—take action to protect engagement and productivity.

How to measure engagement during a crisis

Firstly, it is okay if you are measuring engagement data reactively vs. proactively—everyone is doing that right now. The point is that you do it. One of the keys to surviving a downturn is gauging how your workforce is feeling emotionally (Marks, 2020).

Measuring employee engagement is a different practice during any recessionary period, let alone one as life-altering as this one (Dube, 2020). An organisation that practices talent optimisation has a framework from which to start.

To diagnose staff sentiment during a crisis, studies suggest that you should (Dube, 2020 & Marks, 2020):

- Determine the most efficient way to collect people data.
- Determine where culture might be fraying.
- Pinpoint where engagement may be most heavily impacted.
- Find out which teams are feeling the most pressure.

On average, senior leaders spend 61% of their time solving people problems (Marks, 2020). However, for obvious reasons, these are not average times, and that might

not be a realistic allocation given how 'time-poor' many executives are right now. A streamlined strategy for measuring engagement might go as follows:

Determine the most efficient way to collect people data.

Engagement data needs to be measured extra carefully—and maybe differently—given the delicate nature of the current pandemic and its socioeconomic wake (Marks, 2020). That, therefore, would mean gauging how people are feeling more frequently, and/or with more targeted questions.

Whereas you might normally measure engagement annually, you will now want to adjust that frequency to three-month intervals or even more often, if you have the capacity. This will help you determine whether your talent will come out of the downturn energised, disengaged, or somewhere in between (Marks, 2020).

There is much uncertainty with regard to how long the social distancing (and remote work) mandates related to COVID-19 will last, nor the true economic impacts. What we *do* know, however, is that engaged employees are emotionally committed to your organisation's success—and that will augment your ability to move forward (Marks, 2020). Studies (Marks, 2020) suggest that some personalities and work styles may allow for some to adapt somewhat more readily than others. This adjustment can manifest in many ways, including a subconscious pressure to be "always on" that can lead to a whole new series of concerns (factors such as a lack of balance, and/or eventual burnout).

Thus, it becomes a matter of taking frequent 'temperature checks' and protecting productivity—initiatives more easily tackled if a healthy culture is already in place.

Determine where culture might be fraying.

Most businesses monitor a lot of the same data: sales figures, qualified leads, NPS, CSAT and more. While these may remain sound barometers of business health, they exist largely apart from the people who drive them (Dube, 2020). Now more than ever, complementing these business metrics with people metrics—namely employee engagement data—is essential to maintaining an established culture.

By asking open-ended questions about your culture you can get real insights into whether your culture is eroding, and further insights as to where (Dube, 2020). Collecting and acting on engagement data will not change the macroeconomic factors at play, and employee uncertainty may still linger, but you are better off addressing people problems quickly and showing employees you care, rather than allowing them to build up and fester. This is the best way to protect your culture right now.

Pinpoint where engagement may be most heavily impacted.

Not every organisation is fully remote, but everyone is experiencing some form of culture shock (Marks, 2020). That will weigh more heavily on some corners of the

business than others. To pinpoint where engagement may be most heavily impacted, start by asking yourselves questions like:

- What is causing the initial friction?
- Did leadership trust take a big hit because of a decision?
- Are employees feeling like they do not have the resources they need?
- Are managers pressing too hard?
- Are people turning on each other?

Find out which teams are feeling the most pressure.

If you have restructured the company, managers are adjusting to new direct reports, and employees are adjusting to new managers and teammates. Some teams will be more stressed than others. That is why your next step is to examine engagement data after employees complete the survey through the following lens (Dube, 2020):

- **Magnitude:** Who is under the most pressure? Who has experienced the most change?
- **Relevance:** What are our morale priorities? What do employees need *right now*?
- **Breadth:** Do the business decisions we have made require further explanation?

On the point of breadth, assess whether the attention you are paying employees reflects the gravity of the changes you have made (Dube, 2020). If you have taken drastic action that results in significant restructuring, spend adequate time talking about those changes with the impacted personnel. Not addressing such a significant shock to the employee system is essentially like letting the elephant set up shop in the room (Dube, 2020).

Managing Talent

Effectively managing talent in the best of times is challenging. Managing it in a period of turmoil or crisis adds a new dimension to the job at hand (Lipman, 2020). In addition to the normal technical aspects of the role, a good manager may have to be part therapist, part coach, and part fireman to deal flexibly and thoughtfully with the realities and emotions that are understandably sure to be changing on an almost daily basis.

What are some of the implications for day-to-day management? What sorts of managerial attributes may be especially helpful in trying circumstances? Here are three (Lipman, 2020):

1. "Being present" for your employees

A key element of mindfulness is "being present," or focused on the moment without judgment. If there were ever a time that employees might appreciate support and consistent thoughtful leadership, this is it. Who knows what issues they may be wrestling with, or what their circumstances are? To the extent management can try

to make time for employees, listen to them, and constructively understand and respond to their concerns, that will be a positive thing.

2. Recognising, of course, this is not business as usual

This may be about as unusual and unpredictable an environment as any of us have seen in our lifetimes, which puts real pressure on everyone. Managers who are able to stay calm and make good decisions in periods of high stress (easier said than done) will be at an advantage. Furthermore, they will be appreciated by their employees, and better able to continually deliver results for their organisation.

3. Remaining flexible in a rapidly changing environment

For several years now we've heard about the virtues of agile management—becoming comfortable with factors such as change, discomfort, remoteness, etc. Well, this is the time for managerial agility on steroids. The more comfortable a manager is with change, the better equipped they will be to deal with the multitude of uncertainties that will be dominating our work world in the months ahead.

Voice of the Employerr

Continuous Listening to Help Support Remote Working

Technology is a fantastic enabler of remote working. No question. But, as can be expected, there are pitfalls to never seeing your teams face-to-face (Hardy, 2020). When we suddenly rely entirely on calls, videos, and messaging, we are more likely to encounter miscommunication, misunderstandings and missed opportunities.

Given the current level of uncertainty, it has been said that there is no such thing as too much communication. Managers are being encouraged to increase the points of contact they have with their teams – holding regular one-to-one calls where feasible, alongside virtual team meetings (Hardy, 2020).

Furthermore, managers should also engage in what may be referred to as 'continuous listening' through frequent, anonymous employee feedback surveys. This will help managers understand how their employees are really feeling, and how they can best support them – especially as anonymous surveys often encourage more honest responses than one-to-one interactions (Hardy, 2020).

If the past few weeks have shown us anything, it is that so much can change in just a few short days. Studies (Hardy, 2020) suggests that in March 2020, when the virus started to take hold in the West, there was a sudden and sharp rise in employee surveys where employee comments were focused on Covid-19 from parts of Europe and the US. The most prevalent terms included: *Virus, situation, office, manage, response, crisis, impact, health, communication, work from home, family, hand gel, and travel* (Hardy, 2020).

The uptick in Covid-related comments is evidence of workers looking to their leaders for support, while the most-used terms reveal the things they are most concerned about (Hardy, 2020). Real-time, anonymous employee responses, such as the above, equip team leaders with clear insights into what their employees require from them at any one time.

A Fresh Focus on Employee Wellbeing

As COVID-19 spreads, individuals worldwide will face new challenges in their personal lives. Self-isolation is triggering a rise in loneliness. Juggling work and children is causing some parents to feel guilty and torn. Job losses or reduced hours is resulting in unforeseen financial strain for many families and individuals. Many others will also be dealing with personal illness and even grief (Hardy, 2020). The situation is therefore – perhaps unsurprisingly – shining a light on employee health and wellbeing.

Managers have an opportunity to make a huge difference to their teams here, and if successful, they will produce immense loyalty among their teams – helping to support their organisation's long-term retention. They will also contribute to ongoing employee engagement, which has been proven to boost overall company performance (Hardy, 2020).

Managers will therefore find that continuous listening, as discussed above, will give them a fuller understanding of how their teams are being personally affected by COVID-19, as well as the necessary actions required to support their wellbeing (Hardy, 2020). With up-to-date employee insights in their arsenals, they can exercise agility to ensure everyone is suitably supported.

Some of the initiatives that teams are already employing include: Online group activities, like digital pub quizzes or team lunches to help ease loneliness, flexibility on deadlines to help reassure struggling parents, and new tools and resources to help employees get their jobs done from home (Hardy, 2020).

Manager effectiveness in an enforced remote environment is critical, but it can take some getting used to. Here are some tips for managing remote teams (Hardy, 2020):

- **Video calls:** Set guidelines and appoint a meeting leader who will direct the discussion and make sure everyone has an opportunity to speak.
- **Flexibility for all:** Where possible, allow and trust employees to choose how and when to work – especially those taking care of children or those in need.
- **Mute notifications:** Encourage everyone to turn off notifications for email and other communication tools e.g. slack or Skype during breaks and when focussing on tasks. This can help them avoid the feeling of being 'always on'.
- **Clear communication:** With increased written communications, there is a higher risk of misinterpretation. Summarise the most important messages and

tasks in a daily email so nothing slips through the net. Be vigilant about the language you use too.

The 3R Approach

Reset

To 'Reset' means pressing the reboot button on how our people were used to working before this crisis. It is a completely new world with newer interfaces and the intent here is to create novel ways of working which will help them not just during the crisis but also in the post-COVID-19 world. This could potentially involve the utilisation of cloud technology platforms that can help to create a quick efficient virtual connectivity with the employees (Chakraborty, 2020).

Relearn

Every adversity brings with itself a hidden opportunity. As we know, the COVID-19 lockdown has caused business to shut down physical offices and people are home-bound with some time in hand. Organisations should tap this situation in their people's favour by making available a plethora of learning avenues. Thus, in 'Relearning', an organisation can commit itself to create a space to transform the current work-from-home scenarios into high engaging 'Learn-from-Home (LFH)' scenarios. This can be made possible by conducting some of the following activities (Chakraborty, 2020):

- Consistent Knowledge Sharing session between inter/intra teams
- *Bite-size* Lockdown learning sessions on a wide variety of topics related to personal and professional enhancements
- Industry expert sessions
- Need-based e-learning modules

Rejuvenate

By Resetting and Relearning, organisations can mitigate professional risks that staffs undergo, while HR places emphasis on mitigating the personal risk faced by each one of us. This is where the need to 'Rejuvenate' comes to play. By rejuvenate we are balancing the need of the body, mind, and soul to unite, revitalise, and feel at ease during this crisis (Chakraborty, 2020).

Companies could introduce a wide range of programs to facilitate this very need by including not only the employees but their beloved family members as well and encourage the staff to showcase their hidden talents and share with the organisation. As a result, employees move an inch closer to each other and can relate with their team members on a whole new level (Chakraborty, 2020).

Another idea would be to introduce daily morning wellness sessions that may include Yoga or Pilates, Home Strength Training, and High-Intensity Training. These sessions can be conducted by fellow employees. Certain activities can be scheduled on a

particular day of the week, preferably a less stressful day like Friday. Casual engagements like cooking classes, cocktail making workshops, and musical evenings can be hosted by select employees to continue the momentum of employee engagement (Chakraborty, 2020).

Staff members who feel distressed can also be provided with a (virtual) counselling service with the help of an appointed expert in the field who can help them cope with stresses that these times induce.

There are hard times for each of us but a little harder for those struggling to make ends meet. Organisations can ideate and launch their CSR initiatives in collaboration with renowned NGOs. For instance, the initiative can consider providing daily use and essential items to the daily wage earners across various areas as an effort to support the hardest-hit communities during this pandemic (Chakraborty, 2020).

With all these efforts, HR teams can foster an attitude of resilience and build an anti-fragile organisation. As Nassim Nicholas Taleb said: "Antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better." (Chakraborty, 2020)

Conclusions

In these uncertain times, many things are unclear. But one thing that remains clear is that, in any environment, optimising talent and staying closely attuned to the human side of the business will always help an organisation.

In the last major crisis (the Global Financial Crisis (GFC)) it had been noted (Chakraborty, 2020), that the entire world faced between 2007-09, most of the organisations turned to corporate finance for survival but the COVID-19 pandemic is a human crisis that brings the need for Human Capital (HC) to be at the forefront of ensuring success in sailing through the crisis. Thus, HR needs to redefine employee engagement in such challenging times (Chakraborty, 2020).

Given the current rate of change, staying on the pulse like this is arguably more important now than ever. A regular stream of feedback will ensure that every worker has a voice during this difficult time and will enable managers to stay in tune with their teams' fast-changing needs and expectations (Hardy, 2020). This will empower managers to make rapid but well-informed decisions that evolving situations such as this call for.

Managers, HR, and EX Leaders clearly have a vital role to play in supporting employees and organisations through this crisis. Where they succeed, organisations will be better equipped to weather this storm, and be in sound shape to hit the ground running once it is all over (Hardy, 2020).



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