The People Side of COVID-19: The Ultimate Test of Operational Resilience?

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By any measure, the COVID-19 crisis is an extraordinary set of circumstances. By all measures, it could represent the ultimate test of resiliency. How well companies are able to pivot in and through this environment will tell a compelling story about them that will be long remembered.

Some have referred to this global pandemic as a black swan. But it really isn't.

The World Economic Forum has included infectious diseases in its annual 10-year-outlook risk assessment for many years. Although this particular strain has only recently emerged as a new human disease, coronaviruses have been known to the medical profession for a very long time. Many of us recall the 2003 SARS epidemic and, yes, that was a coronavirus. Even the common cold is caused by a coronavirus strain.

The point is that the threat of a pandemic is certainly not new and novel. COVID-19 is more like a grey rhino that has been charging us for a long time and, like all long-term threats, rears its ugly head eventually.

So here we are, feet to the fire. The way we live and work is changing right before our eyes, seemingly by the hour. Cancellations of sports – national, regional and local. Social distancing. Shutdowns of large groups congregating at schools, churches, conferences, concerts and special events. Cancellations at schools and childcare facilities are affecting employees' availability and testing the limits of paid-time-off policies. Even with clear protocols on how to handle various situations (office impacts of employee exposures), hysteria sets in and forces the more extreme responses even when not technically necessary. The point is, finding an organization that hasn't been affected by the crisis is virtually impossible.

We all know of the devastating economic impact, so there is no need to cover that part of the waterfront. Our focus here is on people and the workplace. For example, at this time, companies are doing various things to deal with the current realities:

- Companies have restricted non-essential business travel as well as suspended travel to restricted areas, giving heed to guidance from public health authorities and agencies and national government mandates.

- Many are giving their employees the option to work remotely, if they have the capability to work from home and feel uncomfortable commuting to and being physically in the office.

- Others have run drills requiring people with laptops to work from home to see how it works.

- Still others have run rotations, say half of the corporate staff working from home one week and the other half the following week, with some designated to commute to the office on an as-needed basis until further notice.

- Some have pulled the trigger to have everyone work at home or are feeling pressure to do so.

Now that countries, provinces, states and/or cities are instituting lockdowns, shelter-in-place directives or similar requirements to limit the spread of this highly contagious virus, an important question arises. How should companies manage the transition of their organizations and workforces to an environment where their managers and employees may be working remotely on a long-term basis? More importantly, what are the change management implications on corporate culture of transitioning the organization to a distributed workplace?

As companies follow the direction of the authorities, apply pandemic protocols and put their response plans into action, we offer the following suggestions to consider.

Foster an environment for new leaders to emerge in these extraordinary times

As employees are battle tested in this unique environment, some will flourish and provide leadership as everyone strives to adapt and support one another using the collaboration tools the company has available.

The good news: The lessons of history teach us that a new generation of leaders is often steeled by extraordinary events. Watch for the leaders who emerge in this environment as it is tantamount to "improvisation in the field" at the highest level. These individuals are the ones to keep an eye on when the sun finally rises. If your company was not prepared for this crisis, someone should be taking notes to capture the lessons learned. Given the lessons learned, company plans and procedures for business disruptions,

including a global pandemic, should be updated. And the employees who took the initiative to lead should be noted.

Take advantage of the opportunity to learn about working remotely

Whether deployed selectively or mandated outright, it's nonetheless an opportunity to learn how to make it work effectively and efficiently. As trends to work remotely continue to evolve, resulting in improvements to employee quality of life (who is a fan of commuting two hours a day?), this situation can be viewed as a laboratory of sorts on improving employee satisfaction, reducing unscheduled absences, fostering flexibility and trust, eliminating unnecessary meetings, leveraging and/or acquiring appropriate technologies to improve communication and collaboration (see below), increasing efficiency, and optimizing employee performance. Engage everyone, ask for feedback, learn as an organization and emphasize sufficient virtual facetime among colleagues and team leaders.

The good news: Remote workplaces are not new. Most every organization today manages across distance and time zones worldwide. Workplace flexibility has emerged as a standard accommodation in the HR playbook. For those companies making the transition as a result of the crisis, the change is not permanent. But in the meantime, they should take advantage of the opportunity to learn from this experience.

Focus on and connect with customers

What are our customers' safety protocols and do ours mirror theirs? How have they implemented their respective pandemic response plans? Can we sustain ongoing collaborations and communications with them, while ensuring the safety of their employees as well as ours? Can we maintain continuity of service and deliver product, either during a lockdown or immediately once it is lifted? Have we worked with our customers, on a case-by-case basis, to identify those aspects of our relationship that may not be addressed through remote work arrangements during the crisis and, in such instances, have we ascertained available alternatives both during and following the crisis to achieve the best possible outcome? Such alternatives might include changing priorities in real time, leveraging technology and collaboration tools, and reworking delivery schedules and project plans.

The good news: Now is a time to differentiate by demonstrating the kind of flexibility and agility with customers that they will appreciate and admire. Bottom line, there is a big opportunity here to build deeper relationships.

Make sure you have the tools to play

A virtual, mobile workforce must be equipped with, and trained on, the technology tools needed to work remotely and address the void left by the lack of physical face-to-face contact. Does everyone have the necessary equipment (chargers, accessories, etc.) to work away from the office? Do employees have the necessary network bandwidth at home? For highly mobile organizations, this transition is relatively seamless. But for organizations that are more anchored to offices, this can be a big change. Guidelines and toolkits should be prepared to support remote work and work-from-home scenarios.

> *The good news*: There are many proven platforms from which to choose to support communications, project management, document sharing and workflow, while also automating mundane tasks so employees can focus on the work that really matters.

Make it a priority to regroup periodically

The COVID-19 crisis presents unique stresses, pressures and concerns for managers and employees alike. One of the biggest challenges with working remotely is the lack of actual contact or face-to-face interaction with co-workers. The importance of face-to-face meetings cannot be overemphasized. Everyone knows the value of nonverbal cues and body language.

This is where collaboration tools and consistent touchpoints come in. Keeping everyone on the same page in a remote environment requires special attention. Whether as a group, a team or even through one-on-one interactions, remote workers should meet at least weekly to stay in touch and ensure everyone is on the same page with respect to project deliverables and timelines. Don't underestimate the importance of people seeing each other. Related to this, in a remote environment, expectations must be set and managed and employees encouraged to establish the necessary discipline to separate themselves in the home from distractions. But at the same time, management should trust employees to manage their projects, deadlines and overall responsibilities, even if they need to deviate (slightly or otherwise) from a traditional 8-5 schedule to accommodate personal obligations during these extraordinary times. This is a new game for managers and employees alike, in terms of making things happen, and everyone must learn it together with a focus on continuous improvement and in an environment of shared values and mutual trust.

> *The good news*: In any work environment, trust is key. Managing to expectations with a focus on deliverables and deadlines is vital in any environment but even more so when working remote. A workplace founded on trust can be a powerful motivating force. It is also an opportunity for leaders to celebrate achievements through electronic tools

creating awareness of success, building motivation and developing social involvement. In uncertain times, it is good for employees to experience positive actions being recognized and a strong focus on the future from their leaders.

Keep employees informed constantly

Communications are vital during any crisis. They need to convey empathy to employees and should be forward-looking to give everyone an idea as to what to expect in terms of the duration of the crisis and what's happening around the company. There may be instances where some employees have specific needs. For example, employees traveling abroad may face challenges returning home. Communications may be necessary to update employees who are on leave, address countries' paid-time-off policies to address the needs of people who become ill as well as apprise everyone regarding office hours and operating requirements. Companies should support employee social interactions through communications on internal social platforms. They should empower employees to help each other address problems.

Company leaders should also be comfortable expressing the needs of the company. Any fear employees may be experiencing over the future state of the company and how it will impact their financial well-being can be devasting to morale. Letting them know how they can make a difference can give them a way to proactively take part in the outcome and make an impactful contribution. Offering something other than the constant negativity of the virus to focus on can be valuable in these difficult times.

> *The good news*: Ask yourself: When this crisis passes, will our people be more loyal to the organization or less based on how we managed through it? It's crunch time, an opportunity to strengthen the culture and let employees know that the company cares. Communication is the glue that binds the organization together. That is why organizations should focus on establishing an appropriate cadence of communications from various leaders so that employees know when to expect messages as opposed to feeling that no one is telling them anything.

In Closing

The COVID-19 crisis presents a test of leadership and resiliency. We continue to hear references to the word "triage" in the context of what will happen if healthcare institutions are overwhelmed. Absolutely no one wants to see that happen. But aside from the healthcare

context, triaging in terms of prioritizing and reprioritizing tasks and activities is going to be a necessary art for most organizations over the next several weeks. Keeping teams focused on the greatest issues and risks when so many things present an opportunity for distraction is the name of the game.

To say that life is an adventure is an understatement. It is our earnest hope that everyone remains safe and healthy through this global pandemic. The good news is we'll get through this. We're learning a lot about this kind of event and what can be done better at both the macro and micro levels the next time it occurs. But now is the time to keep everyone safe so the company can emerge from the crisis as strong as possible and be prepared to pivot back to business as usual.

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