

## How to keep your staff motivated during (and after) the lockdown

by

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I have received numerous requests from people, mostly managers and other specialists throughout the country asking me how they can motivate their staff during the lockdown, in particular those working from home in non-essential services. Initially I declined, because my immediate answer was: If you could not motivate people before the lockdown, how can you motivate them during the lockdown, and how will you ever be able to motivate them after the lockdown? I then followed my question up by asking them whether their organisation has an employee experience strategy. They could not answer me. Some of them responded by saying that they do apply the practice of employee engagement. I then asked them to show me their employee engagement strategy. They could not. It is important to realise that any intervention on employee motivation is a leadership intervention requiring the science and practice of modern organisation development methodology.

We need listening leaders to motivate people, or rather to create an environment in which people can be motivated themselves. And it is indeed possible to be directive in terms of showing a very clear direction, while also being motivational in listening and connecting with people. Our Minister of Health Dr Zweli Mkhize has been an excellent leader in this regard. He shows direction in telling us in no uncertain terms what the real situation is and what needs to happen. But more importantly, he has displayed excellent listening skills and then answered all questions to the best of his ability while being very patient with the media and listeners asking the same questions over and over again. Likewise, Minister in the Presidency, Minister Jackson Mthembu was been an excellent chairperson of public meetings. He has a clear leadership presence in showing direction, summarising points, being calm, consistent and patient, balancing seriousness and humour, staying in control, and referring and answering questions in appropriate ways and concluding meetings on a high note by reminding us of our focus and principles and behaviour during this difficult time.

Top companies that are employers of choice have transcended outdated and traditional employee engagement theory. It is all about employee experience today. Employee experience is very simple: Ask employees what they want to experience and you then provide it. If you can't provide it, they will be demotivated and eventually leave the organisation. If you are willing to provide what they want, you are embarking on the first step to become an employer of choice with an explicit employment value proposition (EVP). Too many companies are embarking on employer of choice strategies without understanding what it means and how their culture needs to change. Unfortunately, these shortcomings also show up during times of crisis such as the lockdown, in fact, they are amplified and will require major organisation development interventions in turning the situation around after the lockdown. Thus, there is no quick fix for employee motivation during the lockdown.

Notwithstanding the above dichotomy, the reality is that some managers have done some excellent work in inspiring their people. Simply sending a kind message to your staff, or reaching out to an employee just to hear how they feel are all very basic, but very important ways of putting people first during the lockdown. We are facing a global pandemic of unprecedented proportions and it will be

extremely difficult to weather the storm and turn organisations and the economy around after the lockdown. Therefore, employee experience should be a top priority for all leaders of people.

With ten days to go before the end of the lockdown, employers and employees are planning their next two weeks of work. Most employees are anxious and they have experienced a difficult three weeks. Managers should attempt to fully understand the pressure under which employees are under. Some of them encountered the following difficult and even traumatic experiences:

- Being isolated from their colleagues and customers;
- High levels of stress, anxiety, confusion, panic and paranoia;
- Not being able to meet with their friends and family members;
- Not being able to celebrate birthdays with friends and family members;
- Not being allowed to participate in their favourite activities such as parties, hiking, running, sport and church;
- Weddings being postponed;
- Not being allowed to attend funerals;
- Struggling to balance work and family commitment, in particular those with small children;
- Isolating themselves from their neighbours;
- The stress when experiencing flu symptoms;
- Worrying about family members in other countries in which thousands of people have died already;
- Being in difficult home environments, unhealthy relationships and domestic violence;
- The stress of a relative, friend or neighbour testing positive for Covid-19;
- The stress of worrying about a friend or family member risking their lives as essential workers;
- The stress of fearing that they may be infected by the virus when going to the shops;
- Running out of essential items such as airtime, electricity and food;
- The financial pressure employees experience, specifically looking after their families;
- Working without the necessary resources and infrastructure;
- The neglect and trivialising of other illnesses and diseases such as cancer, TB and HIV/AIDS;
- Struggling to follow-up with team members and clients who are also on lockdown;
- And many other unusual and abnormal situations.

Of course, managers should understand these issues very well, because managers themselves were not exempted from these challenges. When engaging with staff, think about the above issues first. These are abnormal times, and “normal” management (sic), or rather traditional management in attempting to manage and motivate people will not work anymore. And returning to traditional management is very unlikely, in fact, it will be impossible.

It was evident that some CEOs have used public relations experts to write all their official notices to staff, customers and suppliers. While they must be commended for their commitment to professional public relations (PR), the lockdown and the crisis we are facing was not the time for a PR exercise. Yes, it is important to communicate contingency planning with purpose and clarity, but we must never lose the human touch. Some CEOs write weekly personal emails to staff, they speak from the heart and they show that they really care for their staff and the future of the business. Such personal messages with a strong human touch have good motivational value and will be remembered long after the lockdown has been lifted. Look at President Ramaphosa’s Monday morning messages, they have the same motivational value. These messages always show explicit purpose and direction, inspire confidence, acknowledge the challenges, show the way forward, but also demonstrate a very clear human touch.

In essence, despite the occasional email or online meeting, most staff members have been isolated from their workplace when working and staying at home. But here are some practical ideas for managers to consider. While some of them are intended for the next ten days, it may also help to build and work on them after the lockdown:

- Google the South African Leadership Standard, it clearly spells it out how to be a leader and how to motivate your team.
- Google employee experience and learn from the fantastic sources available in helping you to embark on the journey to make the mind-set shift to employee experience if you want to be an employer of choice.
- Google on how to manage during times of uncertainty and read the book by Kathy Bennett “Leading and Living Through Uncertainty” published by KR Publishing.
- Focus on your company’s people strategy, values and employee experience plan to guide you on how to be a good leader as a company proclaiming to be an employer of choice.
- Attempt to provide a sense of hope, rather than putting too much pressure on yourself to provide all the answers.
- Reach out to employees on a regular basis and always start all communications checking-in and showing that you care about the difficulties they are facing. Each employee has unique circumstances, ranging from having small children to worrying about sick and old parents at their own houses or old age homes.
- Show that you are human and demonstrate your own vulnerability and share the challenges you are facing.
- Become more visible on social media so that staff and the public can follow you. Demonstrate visible leadership and balance professional, motivational and personal messages.
- Use an executive coach or leadership expert to assist you during this crisis period. You cannot look after other people if you don’t look after yourself. Follow the work of modern and dynamic leadership experts who are providing valuable advice during this period such as local expert Adriaan Groenewald from Leadership Platform and global leadership experts such as Lolly Doskal and Gordon Tredgold. They are good sources of guiding leaders through this difficult period.
- Remind yourself of the organisation’s values and write down at least three actions per value that you will practise as a leader. Ask your coach or team for feedback on these actions.
- Use the competency matrix you have for all your staff and utilise their strengths during this time. Staff are vulnerable and anxious and any focus on their weaknesses during this time will not be well received and result in counter productive work behaviour. Using a strengths-based approach will build their confidence, sense of purpose and meaning in their lives and demonstrate their value to you as a leader.
- Motivate each individual staff member according to what motivates him or her. If you don’t know the answer for some employees, ask them.
- Make 100% sure that staff have all the support and resources they need to continue with their work.
- Do a weekly motivational message or podcast for all staff, but keep it realistic and always acknowledge the impact of the crisis.
- Arrange a weekly online Zoom or Microsoft Teams session, but keep it short and focused.
- Reach out to each employee personally by phone, WhatsApp or SMS, emphasise that you care for this individual personally and that you are available for support.
- Encourage staff to write their goals for the day down and then let them manage themselves accordingly. Also send reminders of key dates and milestones to be achieved.
- Have a clear communication plan on how you will communicate effectively with staff.

- While you can ask staff to meet their performance targets, be sensitive to the fact that this is not a period of performance during normal times. Renegotiate targets if necessary. These are abnormal times. Most sales people will not meet their sales targets, and the same applies to other staff members. When staff members are anxious or frustrated and worry about their future, their health or even death, they don't worry about deadlines.
- Ask staff to evaluate your working from home policy and strategy, and if you don't have one, lead the process of developing one with their inputs.
- Prioritise the mental health of staff, show that you care and reach out to people who struggle to cope with the situation.
- Be careful of not over communicating by email, most staff members' inboxes are full of messages already, so only communicate essential information via email.
- Don't overload staff with unnecessary work. Park issues or work that can really wait for the post-lockdown period, unless if you are aware of a staff member suffering from boredom or a lack of work. Ensure that work is fairly distributed to staff. It is unfair if one staff member works ten hours a day and another one two hours a day while both of them receive the same salary.
- Show appreciation for good performance during this period and share it with the whole team, including with customers on social media. This is a good time for public recognition of staff achievements. Profile your staff on your website and social media platforms. If you don't know how to do it, follow Ooba on Instagram.
- Be calm, kind, supportive and encouraging, but be careful of being over positive during these difficult times. Being over positive will be seen as being out of touch with reality by employees. Remember that employees are in a crisis and this difficult time requires a sensitive and balanced approach to assist employees cope with the crisis.
- Make a list of all your employees and identify five things that make each one of them unique and valuable to the organisation. Send it to them.
- Ask your employees to share their favourite home photos or videos with the team and share it with your whole team.
- Balance humour with the seriousness of the situation. Despite the lockdown, it is still important for people to laugh and experience joy and happiness.
- Accelerate all your e-learning efforts, let staff enrol on online learning to achieve their personal development plans.
- Create fun activities such as running a competition for the staff member who stayed home for the most number of days and award a prize to this individual for his or her commitment to the lockdown regulations.
- Write down the names of your staff members' spouses and children and next time ask them about how their children or other family members are. Get to know your people.
- Focus on your listening skills to listen carefully what staff members are saying.
- Make sure that you follow-up on all issues raised by staff.
- Start asking staff for their inputs on how the organisation can improve on their hygiene and employee wellness after the lockdown. Now that the awareness levels of staff have been raised significantly, they will have some good ideas. Document these suggestions and write two motivations, one for the Head of HR, and one for the Head of Occupational Health and Safety. This will show staff that you care for them as people and that you want to create an environment in which the wellness, health and safety of people is prioritised.
- Tell staff that you want to create an environment in which people can thrive in the future of work and ask for their inputs on how to create the future of work, including flexible work practices and working from home.
- Ask staff for ideas on how to improve the culture of the organisation and send it to the CEO.

- Should you become aware of an employee or their family members being infected with the Covid-19 virus, provide additional support to such a staff member.
- Reflect on your own leadership before the lockdown period and identify opportunities of improving your leadership.
- Do a daily reflection on your leadership at the end of every day. Ask yourself three questions: What did I do well today as a leader of my people? What could I have done better? How can I do better tomorrow?

In essence, it is indeed challenging to create an environment for motivation during this difficult time. This period of lockdown has tested our leadership skills and challenged our thinking and behaviour. Motivation is not a short-term intervention, but part of a long term employee experience strategy linked to the people strategy of your company. Acknowledge that you are vulnerable as a leader. Similarly, employees are vulnerable as ordinary human beings. A lockdown is a real test for leadership to see whether leaders have the ability to step up and inspire their staff. However, even if you stepped up as a leader during the lockdown, bear in mind that people will expect you to continue with this after the lockdown. You are not two different people during and after the lockdown. You cannot care for people for 35 days only and then return to an uncaring attitude. Also bear in mind that whether you care or not is your own subjective opinion. Of course you think you care. Your employees must make that call. If you really want to find out whether you care, ask employees directly. Most of them will give you honest answers if they trust you. Moreover, you may have some pre-lockdown unfinished business, problems with customers or suppliers or other unresolved issues such as outstanding projects or reports. Start thinking and planning on how you are going to tackle these issues when you return.

But if you think leadership and motivation was difficult during the lockdown, it is even going to be more difficult after the lockdown. You are returning to a business without money. You now need your employees more than ever before to turn the organisation around. Additionally, you are likely to be faced with a new pressure and that is dealing with retrenchment in reducing the size of the workforce for the business to survive. We are going to see the biggest job losses in the history of the modern world, and leaders and employees will face immense pressure during this time. A new economy will be needed and we will start from scratch to rebuild our economy and country. Thus, the rules of the game will change and they will change significantly.

The most important aspect of leadership is to be authentic, to have integrity and to build a trusting environment for open communication with a comprehensive employee experience strategy to motivate your people. While an explicit employee experience strategy is the current best practice in organisations that should be driven from a corporate perspective, each leader is responsible for his or her own team. Commit to provide the best employee experience possible for your staff. Connect with your inner self, and your staff at a personal and human level like never before. Practise new skills and behaviour such as kindness, caring, compassion and love.

The lockdown provided us with a reality check about the importance of people in and outside organisations. Your people are not your most important resource only. People are your business. Keep them motivated by providing for their needs with a comprehensive employee experience strategy as part of your overall business strategy. We now need to transform ourselves into creating a new workplace, and a new people-centred way of doing business. In fact, we may even enter a new wellness economy. Let us kill the Covid-19 virus, upskill and empower our people and our leaders and make people survive, grow and thrive during these difficult times. We are on a new journey of discovery and learning in creating caring companies and caring societies - a world that will never be the same again.

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