

Worker worries during lockdown: What keeps employees awake at night?

by

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Workers have a lot of worries during the lockdown. From worrying about whether they and their family members will be infected by the Covid-19 virus, to worrying about their jobs, to worries about paying their bills, to worries of being harassed by the police and defence force, to worries about the state of the economy. While essential workers are at a greater risk, non-essential employees returning to work will also be very worried whether they will be exposed to be infected by the virus. The reality is that the current increased levels of uncertainty makes it difficult for employees to relax and simply do their best as expected from employers. According to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group, in a recent survey 55% of employees experienced some form of anxiety during the lockdown. Clearly employees experienced increased levels of uncertainty, stress, anxiety and panic during this period of lockdown.

For decades management journals, analysts, the media and other interested parties have been fixated with the question of what keeps CEOs awake at night. Top consulting firm PwC releases an annual CEO survey to provide a more structured approach to the perspectives and opinions of CEOs. Interestingly, most of these “What keeps CEOs awake at night” articles have highlighted that CEOs are concerned about whether they have the right talent to achieve their business objectives. While these papers indeed provide an interesting narrative about what CEOs worry about as the top leaders in organisations and the business community at large, no or little effort has been made to establish what keeps employees awake at night. Or perhaps it was just assumed that only CEOs have sleepless nights while employees are fast asleep with no worries whatsoever.

Having visited hundreds of companies and communities in Africa, Europe, Asia and America over a period of 26 years, I made a point of interacting with employees at all levels of organisations. What fascinates me about these personal conversations is that people are really open and honest about their true feelings, while they still care deeply about the future success and survival of their organisations. They would openly share their challenges and frustrations, but also their hopes, aspirations, dreams and achievements. Having read dozens of “what keeps CEOs awake at night” articles and interview transcripts, I decided to turn this conversation on its head by presenting the other side of the story – what keeps EMPLOYEES awake at night, in other words, what are those issues that employees or ordinary staff members are really concerned about. In addition to the worries expressed by employees during the coronavirus crisis indicated above, I consolidated my notes over two decades into some key items of feedback from employees themselves:

- Most employees are very concerned about the lack of leadership they observe in all spheres of society (private, public and non-profit sectors);
- Employees worry whether they will be able to meet the performance expectations of their managers;

- Some employees work for ineffective, aggressive and rude managers, and they fear abusive behaviour and exploitation by their managers;
- Power relations in the workplace put employees in a subordinate position to managers, making them natural victims for different forms of abuse such as bullying, discrimination, exploitation, favouritism, and sexual harassment;
- Poor management, specifically poor planning, communication and organising leads to ineffective workplaces characterised by inefficiencies, in fact, employees often deal with problems caused by managers, yet they are not empowered to find and implement solutions themselves (Deming said 85% of problems are caused by management);
- Employees are worried about the increased cost of living;
- Given the downturn in the economy and our demise into junk status, times are tough and employees worry whether they will be able to make ends meet (in particular meeting their family and financial obligations);
- While dual career couples have become the norm today, very often your spouse or partner is also stressed financially, thereby exacerbating financial stress, let alone a significant increase in single parent families;
- Every family has a dysfunctional and/or struggling family member, such as an unemployed family member, alcoholic, cancer patient, under-performing child at school, or even one engaged in criminal or other anti-social behaviour putting strain on those who need to care for them;
- The poor education system affects most children of employees, and worrying about children makes it difficult for employees to concentrate on their work, especially if the children are sick or emotionally affected;
- Employee stress is at an all-time high, in worst case scenarios leading to employee burnout;
- Most workplaces have some toxic employees who engage in negative behaviour such as gossip, bullying, jealousy, office politics, undermining colleagues and management, or simply not pulling their full weight, and this results in unnecessary stress for their co-workers; who often have to work harder to achieve team goals;
- Sometimes employees are aware of unethical and/or inappropriate conduct by co-workers and managers, and this causes additional stress on employees, especially in cases where disclosure could be career limiting;
- In the spirit of doing more with less, it has become the norm that when an employee resigns that his or her job is not filled, but the work is simply distributed to remaining employees who have to bear the brunt of the additional work, over and above their current work (over) load;
- While most employees prefer clear task roles, the new world of work is characterised by uncertainty and volatility and this requires faster work and new skills in which workers have not been trained;
- Some organisations have a negative or toxic organisation culture with destructive conflict making it unpleasant for employees to deliver their best, and when management does not care about them, these feelings of worthlessness are exacerbated;
- Significant cost-cutting exercises have resulted in many workplaces being under-resourced, therefore making it difficult for employees doing their work without resources;
- In a world of instant gratification and radically improved technology, customers have become more demanding and expect immediate answers and service in a much faster turnaround time than previously possible;
- Given the current high level of unemployment (29%) expected to rise to 50% because of the lockdown, and overall lack of job security, the biggest fear among South African employees is that they will lose their jobs.

What is important to realise is that all the above problems existed before the lockdown, but they are now amplified that they can no longer be ignored or downplayed. The additional stress caused by the lockdown just make things worse. We now need a serious focus on good leadership driving organisation-wide employee wellness programmes to address these issues in an integrated and sustainable way. Caring employers are needed to look after their employees during these times of hopelessness, despair and uncertainty. But caring should also happen in good times because all people want respect and dignity in the workplace. I also want to predict that many employers will become like politicians blaming the lockdown for all their problems, while these problems areas or under-performance were prevalent months or even years before the lockdown.

Thus, it is clear from this article that there are many worries or things also keeping employees awake at night. If both managers and employees are awake at night, it does not bode well for a productive working day and a sustainable organisation. Utilising the science and practice of organisation development, managers should create burning platforms and other means of getting employees to express their feelings and frustrations and then find ways of getting employees relaxed, confident and focused on their work. This requires authentic leadership and a people-centred workplace with an explicit employee experience strategy as the foundation of all people practices.

Considering and addressing employee concerns that management have control over, will not only enhance trust, but also assist employees in dealing more effectively with these challenges so that they will sleep better at night and be ready for a new day in which they will be fresh and ready to give their best to their employers and customers. Employers should look after their employees and remove any obstacles to their performance and wellbeing. Also, we are all part of the same economic downturn and recession, and the recent downgrade to junk status by the rating agencies will leave all of us – management and employees - more stressed and with less money in the pocket. The short-term focus should be on first of all caring for your people, and then uniting all employees in rebuilding the organisation after the devastating effect of the lockdown.

While employees have read articles about what keeps CEOs awake at night, now CEOs and other executive managers can also read about what keeps employees awake at night, especially during this difficult time of lockdown. Employees have many worries, and management must attend to these worries. The lockdown presents a critical time in history, a moment of realising that people should be at the centre of business success. Caring for your people during this difficult time and thereafter should be the top priority of leadership. Perhaps CEOs and employees can really start to work together so well by alleviating each other's stresses that both parties will have a good night's sleep and be ready to collaborate in embarking on a new journey of recovery and renewal of the organisation and the economy at large.

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