

## Re-energising teams in tough times

by

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It is a reality that companies are struggling to keep staff focused and motivated during these tough times of economic hardship and dealing with the Covid-19 epidemic increasing the level of stress and anxiety. Staff members experience stress and uncertainty and they become demotivated when the demand for company products and services is down. Many of them also fear that they will lose their jobs. Sadly, many companies have also cut their training budgets, and therefore invest less in their most valuable asset – their staff. You can sell your assets, but not your people. Teams need to be re-energised after they have lost some energy working remotely during the lockdown.

Retaining and engaging key staff is critical during a recession and global pandemic, although retrenchments are inevitable in many sectors. While there are indeed more cost-effective ways of managing people, neglecting your staff during these difficult times will most certainly backfire, and may even contribute to further skills shortages once economic activity resumes. It is important for management teams to really work on building trust and hope at the same time.

Here are some practical ideas for you to utilise staff, and in particular re-energising your team members more effectively during the lockdown:

- Rather than taking unilateral decisions about cost-cutting, form action teams to generate ideas about not only cost-cutting, but also to create innovative ideas around alternative forms of income-generation or improved efficiencies and effectiveness. Most companies waste money on unnecessary items. If you don't believe me, calculate the amount of money you have saved on printing, catering and traveling since 26 March!
- Think of creative ways to energise your teams. Some team members will feel frustrated if they are stagnating in small houses and may struggle to juggle work and family commitments.
- Keep lines of communication open, but don't over-communicate. Keep emails short and focused, typically not exceeding ten lines, and not outside of traditional office hours. People are stressed and while the line between work and life is even more blurred, boundaries must be respected.
- While Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Skype are useful team platforms for meetings, only schedule meetings when they are really necessary and keep these meetings short, focused and positive. People must feel inspired during and after these meetings.
- Provide a good employee experience for all your team members. Remember that the science and practice of employee experience is all about a personalised experience.

- Let each team member write down how the economic downturn affects him or her personally. Collect this information, summarise, report back and create an adapted, but realistic short-term vision of working with and through these feelings, including a clear picture of reality.
- Be careful of not being overly optimistic if the business results clearly show otherwise. Be honest about the real situation, disclose financial figures, but remain positive, yet realistic about what can and should be done to address the reality.
- Collect feedback from customers about how they experience your contingency plans. Any good feedback received will be very motivational for the whole team, and gaps provide further opportunities for rethinking and further project teamwork.
- Spend more time and use stronger efforts to engage staff in projects while they work from home. By involving and engaging them as much as possible, their commitment and focus will be retained and reinforced. However, be careful of not overloading staff with online meetings and unnecessary work.
- Do a dynamic, short, focused and very action-focused online team building session, without wasting too much time. Focus on what matters, and cut out unnecessary side (and slide!) shows. People need a clear adapted short-term vision during the crisis period, and will remain motivated if their energy is positively challenged into the right direction.
- Be more transparent in communicating information. Staff who feel isolated will be willing to spend time reading quarterly reports and other key company documentation that they would normally not read.
- Connect people who normally don't work together in smaller project teams so that they can collaborate on specific tasks.
- Be more sensitive about deadlines. While it is still important to drive outputs, the reality is that staff are stressed and they do experience competing demands. Always bear in mind that they are not working from home in normal circumstances. The whole world is in some form of lockdown or curfew. Expecting staff to do "normal" work against "normal" standards will be insensitive and will only show that you are uncaring, insensitive and removed from reality. We live in abnormal circumstances requiring total different ways of managing people.
- Also bear in mind that team members are different. Some team members require constant feedback and engagement, while others prefer to be left alone.
- Review the effectiveness of your teamwork and recognise any good achievements. Any major achievements during this extremely difficult period for all employees should be regarded as extraordinary accomplishments and rewarded accordingly.

It is a challenge to energise teams in tough times. In fact, it is often difficult to energise teams in good times. These are difficult times requiring new and creative ways of energising teams. Some of the above guidelines are therefore also relevant during times of stability, but good team leadership requires a refocus and adaptation to keep team members energised during the lockdown period. This requires leaders to reflect on their team leadership and to plan more carefully on how to energise their teams during these tough times.

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