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Lead Your Employees Through the Emotional Side of COVID-19

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The COVID-19 crisis impacts employees at home and at work. Risk management leaders must act to create a psychologically safe workplace that addresses the emotional to promote a resilient workforce. Leading through the rational and irrational sides of crises requires different practices than normal.

Overview

Impacts

- Distracted by the health risks and day-to-day needs of their families, employees will struggle to integrate work requirements with those home-life concerns.
- Employees will need to negotiate the shifting demands of work, impairing decision making about how to stay viable at work.
- Employees will be fearful of the potential impact to their livelihood, given the forecast impact on businesses, and concern about loss of income, hours and opportunities.

Recommendations

Leaders involved with technology, information and resilience risk/technology guiding their employees through the COVID-19 health crisis should:

- Create mechanisms for sharing ideas on how to address family needs, acknowledging employee fears and stress, using online forums.
- Allow for work flexibility beyond remote working opportunities by accommodating different start times, work hours and general flexibility on when, where and how work gets done.
- Eradicate the pressure to be present by giving clear guidance on which and when employees should come in or stay away from the office and other large gatherings.
- Reduce individual work demands through reprioritization, as negotiated with business partners, creating slack in the system.

- Empower employees to contribute to the most critical needs of the business by clearly communicating work priorities and aligning resources with these.
- Address employee concerns about their livelihood by providing transparency around the business conditions and performance.

Analysis

Employees bring their whole selves to work, and a health crisis like COVID-19 makes the separation between work- and home-life concerns practically impossible. Employees will be worried about their families, both near and extended, and need to take care of home-life requirements in different ways than they normally do. Employees will be equally concerned about their jobs, trying to understand everything from impacts to loss of income, hours and even lost opportunities. Supporting employees through this requires leaders and all layers of management to be supportive, transparent and highly communicative. How you support your employees through this health crisis will have a material impact on employee engagement and productivity.

Impact Appraisal for Leaders	
Impacts	Top Recommendations
<p>Employees will be distracted by the health risks and day-to-day needs of their families, struggling to integrate work requirements with those home-life concerns.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create mechanisms for sharing ideas on how to address family needs, acknowledging employee fears and stress, using online forums. • Allow for work flexibility beyond remote working opportunities by accommodating different start times, work hours and general flexibility on when, where and how work gets done.
<p>Employees will struggle to negotiate the shifting demands of work, impairing decision making about how to stay viable at work while meeting their personal needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eradicate the pressure to be present by giving clear guidance on which and when employees should come in or stay away from the office and other large gatherings. • Reduce individual work demands through reprioritization as negotiated with business partners, creating slack in the system.
<p>Employees will be fearful of the potential impact to their livelihood, given the forecast impact on businesses, and concerned about loss of income, hours and opportunities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empower employees to contribute to the most-critical needs of the business by clearly communicating work priorities and aligning resources to these. • Address employee concerns about their livelihood by providing transparency around the business conditions and performance. • Acknowledge the discomforts of working remotely, both for leaders in managing their teams and for employees in doing the work in a different way.

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Figure 1. Impact Appraisal for Leaders

Emotional responses to crises rarely follow a predictable pattern. Use your best judgment about what is needed, given your organization’s impact.

Impacts and Recommendations

Employees Will Struggle to Integrate Work Requirements With Home-Life Concerns

Efforts to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 have, and will continue to have, unprecedented impacts on the home life of your employees. Impacts could be, but are not limited to:

- Schools closing for two or more weeks
- Elder parents being brought home from care facilities
- Significant others getting quarantined based on the risk of exposure
- Vacation plans derailed
- Life necessities, like medication, being difficult to attain

Your employees will be constantly reconciling how to perform their work while navigating these complexities. And you might not know all the impacts your employees experience, as circumstances can shift quickly. CIOs can help mitigate some of the stress by empowering a work community for support and by allowing work flexibility.

Recommendations:

- Increase support by creating mechanisms for employee concerns to be discussed, encouraging the sharing of ideas to address family needs. Listen generously. Empathy is an important tool in helping people deal with stress. Create a safe space for the use of technology resources (such as creating a channel in Microsoft Teams). Start team meetings with 10 minutes of updates on how employees are resolving complexities with their families. You start first to reinforce the permission space of bringing home-life challenges into the work environment. An additional advantage of measures to encourage discussion is to lessen the isolation employees can feel when they work from home.
- Allow for work flexibility beyond remote working opportunities. Accommodate different start times and different work hours, and provide general flexibility on when employees are required to be “on.” The demands of significant others, children, parents and other extended family members won’t present themselves neatly outside traditional working hours. Empower employees to decide and change when, how and where work gets done, as needed. Show the organization what to do by doing it yourself.

Employees Will Need to Negotiate the Shifting Demands of Work

Normal operations are likely to be disrupted, creating operational turmoil, as well as significant personal turmoil in peoples' personal lives. This will result in increasing employee stress and strain. It is these levels of heightened stress that leaders need to be mindful of. Stress will erode employees' abilities to focus on the job, or be effective in their decision making, due to the many competing demands. To maintain a more-resilient and psychologically healthy workplace, leaders need to be more explicit and direct in their communications and actions. And remember that newer employees do not have the experience and context to rely on for their decision making, so pay special attention to them.

IT employees are at the organizational epicenter of the enterprise's response to COVID-19, especially in providing reliable, remote access to business systems. Reconciling home-life pressures with work needs can be especially challenging.

Recommendations:

- Eradicate the pressure to be present by giving clear guidance (based on governmental and company guidelines) on which and when employees should come in or stay away from the office and other large gatherings. Be clear that coming into work when feeling ill helps no one and threatens all – there is no room for “martyrs” in this situation. IT employees need explicit direction for on-site attendance to deliver essential support services.
- Reduce individual work demands through reprioritization, as negotiated with business partners, creating slack in the system. This lessens the stress from work and creates space to deal with home-life distractions. However, be clear on what the new work priorities are. As work and roles shift rapidly, employees can easily lose track of what is important.

Employees Will Be Fearful of the Potential Impact to Their Livelihood

News and social media outlets are already rife with dire prognostications about the impact of COVID-19 on the general economy and many industries specifically. The continuity of one's livelihood is a critical element of the most basic human levels of security. ¹ Employees will have concerns about the financial and economic impact of this health crisis on them in both the near term and the future. While no organization can guarantee stable employment and income, in the absence of information, employees will by nature assume the worst. ² Combat this natural tendency by providing as much transparency as possible about immediate work priorities and about the known and forecast business impacts. The focus on work priorities directs employees on

what can be done, providing a sense of control, when it feels that the future is so uncertain. Utilize the experiences of past crises as a story to show how the organization can adapt and survive.

Recommendations:

- Clearly communicate work priorities, shifting resources to the high-need work, empowering employees to know they are contributing to the most-critical needs of the business. If your team must focus on the infrastructure to accommodate remote working, then moving many of your team members to infrastructure and operations work temporarily makes sense. Allow employees to opt into where they feel they can make the greatest impact. Encourage rotations as an opportunity to learn new skills.
- Provide transparency around the business, conditions and the principles that are used to guide decision making. In the absence of values or principles that already exist, commit to and communicate your own set of principles. Since work expectations will change, communicate that performance management expectations will shift accordingly, although be clear that you do not know all the answers just yet.
- Acknowledge the discomforts of managing and working remotely. If your organization has limited experience with remote working, then your managers don't know how to manage remote workers, and remote workers don't know how to manage themselves. Working from home can be isolating, and managers can feel a loss of control over the work when they don't have their normal ways of monitoring. See [“Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Managing the Remote Worker”](#) for advice on how to support your managers (and employees) through the discomfort.

As a leader of your organization, you play a pivotal role in taking care of the emotional health of your employees. But don't forget yourself in all of this. Take care of yourself, and in doing so, show your team how to do the same.

Evidence

¹ [“Our Hierarchy of Needs,”](#) Psychology Today.

² [“Why Do We Always Expect the Worst? \(And How to Stop Doing That!\),”](#) Brain World.

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This complimentary research is part of Gartner's ongoing coverage of the business impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19).

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