Maintaining employee engagement during COVID-19

The swift spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) around the world and the resulting responses to keep employees safe has seen many organisations implementing rapid changes to their operations. Organisations in Australia have adapted quickly, adjusting the work environment to allow for social distancing, and supporting their employees to establish workspaces at home to enable remote working.

But now the dust is starting to settle at work. The pace of change is slowing down and adrenaline levels are decreasing. Employees are reflecting on what has changed and what has been lost, and have begun questioning if things might return to normal. It is not surprising that after this rapid period of workplace change, in addition to disruptions to other aspects of day-to-day life, many employees are now starting to report feeling stressed, tired, frustrated, disconnected and demotivated.

This has left many leaders wondering, "what can I do to build morale and maintain employee engagement during this crisis?" Understanding, measuring, boosting and maintaining engagement continue to be a primary concern for organisations right now.

What is employee engagement?

Employee engagement is understood in different ways. In the field of organisational psychology, a popular approach has been to see work engagement as a 'state of mind' characterised by three key factors:

1. **Vigour** – which refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience, and a willingness to invest effort in one's work.

2. **Dedication** – intense involvement in work tasks that one experiences as significant and meaningful.

3. **Absorption** – the state of being focused and positively engrossed in one's work, to the extent that time seems to pass quickly.

Others have characterised work engagement as feeling energetic, enthusiastic, alert and feeling pride towards their work outcomes. Engagement feels good and has a range of positive outcomes for psychological wellbeing.

On the flip side, we start to notice the signs of disengagement when employees lack energy and motivation, only put in enough effort to do the bare minimum, do not appear to be committed to the task at hand and lack focus. From this perspective, employees effectively decide how much they will engage with their work and expend effort based on the support and resources provided by the organisation.

Research shows that engagement is related to a range of outcomes, including job performance, satisfaction, commitment, turnover intentions, stress, burnout and organisational citizenship behaviours. Engaged employees are much more likely to provide a high level of service, less likely to make mistakes and will experience greater levels of subjective wellbeing.

Boosting employee engagement

Many aspects of the workplace can negatively impact engagement, such as administrative hassles, conflict, organisational politics, a lack of resources, role conflict and excessive workloads. While important to watch out for these, there are also many factors we can focus on to drive engagement, particularly increasing employee resources and promoting wellbeing.

Strategies to help maintain employee engagement during COVID-19

1. Continue to invest in your leaders

Many organisations have put their leadership development programs on hold, because they are too costly, perceived as difficult to run, or because it is assumed that leaders are currently too busy responding to change to make time for development. Research shows that leadership directly impacts on engagement, particularly through building trust, ensuring support and building psychological safety.

We are asking a lot of leaders at the moment, requiring them to adapt to managing and leading in a very different environment, while also leading and supporting staff through change. It is more important than ever that we support leaders and build their capability to navigate through these challenges. Not only will this ensure they lead others effectively, but it will also enhance their own engagement levels. Leadership development does not have to occur face-to-face. *Consider development activities like one-on-one or group coaching, rather than formal learning.*

2. Ensure leaders regularly check in with employees

Leadership positively impacts engagement, particularly through the provision of support and feedback. Regular contact between employees and leaders is important to ensure employees are receiving sufficient support. Now more than ever, it is important that leaders take the time to find out how their employees are going, provide direction, help them with any challenges or barriers they may be experiencing, determine what support they require, ensure sufficient resources are available, set and review work goals and tasks, and give meaningful feedback and positive reinforcement. *Consider empowering leaders throughout your organisation to informally check-in with their teams through relevant multimedia/communication platforms.*

3. Show appreciation and acknowledge effort

Recognising employee efforts and achievements has been shown to increase engagement, motivation and job performance. Acknowledging employees and showing appreciation, through simple gestures such as feedback and expressions of gratitude, results in many positive outcomes. In its most simple form, recognition provides positive reinforcement, leads employees to feel valued, provides important feedback that they are doing well, builds confidence, increases loyalty and commitment, and reduces the risk of burnout.

In our current state of disruption and uncertainty, recognition is one of the simplest and easiest strategies to continue with, as it requires little effort and doesn't cost anything. Now is a good time to remind leaders and employees of the value of saying thanks, and letting employees know that their effort to persist with their jobs despite current adversities is appreciated and valued. *Consider informal ways you can recognise and reward the work of your team members during this time.*

4. Encourage recovery time

Research shows that employees will experience higher levels of engagement when they commence the workday after a significant period of recovery. This means that employees start their day feeling energised and with the capacity to cope with the day-to-day challenges of their work. Other organisational resources provided throughout the workday will also assist.

During a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to evaluate the typical employee's work situation and to encourage time away from work, ensuring sufficient recovery time. Employees working from home are likely to spend a lot more time in front of a computer. This, along with the stress and anxiety of recent changes, may make them more prone to exhaustion.

Encouraging employees to take plenty of breaks throughout the day, to regularly step-out for fresh air and natural light, and to engage in activities to 'switch off' and transition from the workday to their personal life activities, will help in aiding recovery and increasing energy. *Consider ways you can send clear messages to your employees about the delineation of work and home lives during this time (e.g., no emails after COB each day).*

5. Enable teamwork and collaboration

Teamwork is a core driver of engagement. Being part of a group and working with others to achieve common goals increases our sense of belonging, purpose and meaning, positively impacting on engagement and wellbeing.

For teams working virtually, and even for those that are in a temporary standdown, connecting with colleagues is more challenging than usual. Make technology available to enable connection and encourage its use. Provide your staff with opportunities to talk to colleagues, develop personal relationships, discuss opinions, share ideas and collectively problem-solve. This will increase social support and opportunities to influence decision-making, thus enhancing engagement and wellbeing. *Consider mechanisms through which you can encourage team work via shared decision-making, group collaboration or team communication.*

6. Ensure work continues to be meaningful, challenging and interesting

Job design is an important consideration in maintaining engagement. Recent workplace changes, such as moving to remote work arrangements, may have resulted in unintended changes to jobs. For example, some employees may now have fewer tasks to complete, more mundane and less stimulating tasks, or may not find their work as meaningful due to diminished impact and less interpersonal interactions. This is important as research shows that task variety and task significance positively impact engagement.

Consider where the nature of work may have significantly shifted for people and ensure there are sufficient opportunities for employees to use their skills and personal strengths to engage with a range of tasks, and to derive meaning from their work. If employees have capacity, find out their interests and allocate project work or special activities to help offset the more routine and administrative tasks. *Consider seeking feedback from your employees on how they are feeling towards their work, and explore opportunities – where relevant – to build more meaningful work or projects that foster creativity or lateral thinking.*

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians in managing their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak.

Visit psychology.org.au for more.