

Foundational Leadership Skills that Promote Employee Wellbeing

Philip Hunter

Although it's uncomfortable to admit, many organizations and leaders have done little more than pay lip service to employee wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic has put an end to that.

According to many experts, we're in the midst of a mental health crisis—one that is expected to far outlast the pandemic itself. [A recent CDC study](#) found that 40% of US adults have experienced at least one mental or behavioural health problem related to the pandemic, and over 26% revealed symptoms of trauma- or stressor-related disorders, such as anxiety or depression (30.9%), substance use (13.3%) and even suicidal thoughts (10.7%).

This means, in the new COVID-19 workplace, a poorly-performing employee could be a bad egg—or they could be a top-performer who's grappling with serious mental health issues resulting from burnout or isolation. In the same vein, the path to re-energizing a disengaged workforce could start with some small but important policy changes—or may require leaders to take serious steps to rebuild the employer/employee relationship.

Choosing the right tactic, or offering the right support services to struggling employees, could enhance productivity, reduce turnover and even help make your organization more agile and resilient. The challenge is knowing which path forward is the best one.

There are many steps that go into building a wellness-focused leadership team, but a foundational one is to help your leaders develop the capacity to connect with employees in new and sometimes innovative ways by mastering skills such as empathy, flexibility and communication.

Empathy 101

In the not-so-distant past, the employer/employee relationship seemed a straightforward one. Workers worked, managers managed—and there wasn't a whole lot of time spent fostering the human connection. Home lives were kept, for the large part, at home and mental health issues weren't discussed. Ever.

In this type of environment, command-and-control managers were commonplace, as were practices like micromanagement and verbal beratement. While these practices were going out of style before COVID-19 hit, the pandemic unquestionably accelerated the process. It's extremely difficult (and inefficient) to micromanage

someone when they're working remotely, and the high-stress levels of the pandemic has pushed leadership styles based on low trust and micromanagement further into obsolescence.

Shifting away from command-and-control

For some, it took a crisis to learn that empathy can go much further with employees than pressuring them. Leaders who are adept at taking a genuine interest in how an employee is doing, and comfortable enough at digging below the surface to find the real answer, are those that are needed most—not only during this unique moment in history, but in the future as well.

This skillset is difficult to master and, like other competencies, requires training and guidance. For example, uncovering an employee's genuine concerns without overstepping their personal boundaries is an incredibly delicate balance. It's also a practice with which many leaders still feel uncomfortable.

To overcome this hurdle, it might make sense for leaders to approach empathy like they would any underutilized muscle and work to strengthen it over time. The ultimate goal should be to forge a more personal connection with the people on your team which, admittedly, is particularly difficult in today's virtual work environment. Because today's leaders can't engage in physical one-to-one conversations—or read an employee's body cues in person, day-in, day-out—creating such a connection is challenging, but not impossible.

Strengthening the empathy muscle

One way to speed up the process is for leaders to learn how to show vulnerability themselves. If you're having a bad day—if you're feeling “off” or not yourself—it's important to share it, rather than hide behind a professional front. Similarly, leaders should model clear work/life boundaries. These simple actions send cues to your team that it's okay for them to admit when they're struggling, and that balancing work with one's family or personal obligations is a sign of health.

Beyond setting the tone for team behaviour, it's important for leaders to find new ways to connect with their team in a virtual or hybrid environment. This can involve something as simple as occasionally opening Zoom calls a little earlier to leave room for informal conversations, or scheduling regular one-to-one check-ins with team members. These actions can help leaders learn more about their team—who's living alone, for instance, or who's juggling homeschooling on top of their workload—as well as offer a safe space to discuss difficult topics.

When leaders know more about their employees, they can better understand their potential mental health risks and spot red flags early. For instance, if someone's habitual behaviours are shifting—say, they've started sending emails at 3 am when they didn't before, or someone who was previously high-energy now seems less-responsive—that's a sign they may need further support.

Flexibility support

Even the most rigid workplaces have been challenged to think creatively and embed greater flexibility into their practices. For example, the days of in-office employees needing to be at their desks precisely at 9 am are giving way to allowing employees to establish their own personal time management practices, aligned with their peers and leaders.

The key with flexibility is to not confuse it with a lack of clarity. While it may sound paradoxical, leaders who set clear expectations and provide high-quality feedback on a regular basis contribute to a work environment and culture where flexibility can be better leveraged. Being clear on goals and roles allows for both leaders and their teams to determine which policies and procedures can be adjusted or flexed in the pursuit of those goals.

Likewise, organizations have to up their communication game. If people leaders are to better engage their teams in an unprecedented working environment, these leaders must understand what is expected of them up front. What are your people leaders accountable for, and what processes have you implemented to help them in their efforts?

Additionally, because our “new normal” is so new, organizations may have to outline granular details, such as how they expect leaders to make decisions when they don’t see their team face-to-face, or how to identify and reach out to team members who have dropped off their radar. In a virtual or hybrid environment, people leaders may also need to relearn how to navigate the organization efficiently to get things done—and how to access information, influence decisions and play a part in defining the organization’s agenda.

The best route forward will unquestionably be unique to your organization and team. As such, it might be helpful to spend time talking to your employees to learn more about their needs related to flexibility and clarity.

A renewed approach to communication

The ability to communicate—and communicate well—has always been a coveted leadership skill, but has, at times, been overlooked if a leader was exceptionally strong in other areas. Leaders lacking in communication skills are finding that leading virtually seems almost infinitely harder than it was “at the office”. Organizations are now being reminded of the importance of effective communication, and of their role in supporting the development of leadership communication skills, from informal chats through to more formal team meetings.

While transitioning in-person meetings to an online format may seem seamless in theory, many leaders have found this isn’t the case. In the past, leaders often had the benefit of informal, in-person check-ins. Employees could pop by their office to make sure they were on the right track, or a leader could easily clarify something by walking just a few steps. Similarly, they had opportunities to meet face-to-face with other colleagues and share concerns, or speak to other members of the organization to find out who they needed to talk to in order to address a specific issue. With some or all employees working remotely, however, this type of impromptu collaboration is much more challenging.

We believe there are opportunities for leaders to rethink how meetings are conducted, not only during the pandemic, but after, as many organizations are already planning for a hybrid work environment future, where team members will split their work time between the office and elsewhere. Perhaps it means differentiating between meeting types and design—reserving status update meetings solely for status updates, say—and then having separate (less-frequent) meetings to collaborate on strategy, where virtual breakout rooms can be leveraged. Or maybe it involves finding new ways to create space for the informal exchange of ideas, such as through tools like Slack.

Forward thinking

COVID-19 has changed a lot of things in the workplace, including how we lead. It's forcing organizations to push employee wellness to the forefront and embrace innovative ways to motivate and connect with their people. None of which is a bad thing.

Getting ahead of this trend—and making sure leaders have the support they need to prioritize empathy, flexibility and strong communication—is a sure-fire way to set your employees, and your business, up for success. These practices will not only allow your leaders to comfortably navigate difficult conversations around mental health, but they will also empower them to master the art of virtual leadership so they know how to build trust, rather than erode it.

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