

How CEOs can support employee wellbeing during times of uncertainty

Victor Snyder, consultant at BossMakers and business columnist at Forbes and Entrepreneur shares his advice on how CEOs can support their employees' efforts, productivity and wellbeing during times of uncertainty brought about by the outbreak of COVID-19.

Company executives need to address mental health, help managers to support employees, and join a larger purpose. Traditionally, corporate leaders did not care that much about their workers as people. They were replaceable widgets that were used to hit quotas or growth targets.

But over the past decade, that attitude has changed. And the ripple effects of the coronavirus outbreak will require a new perspective on corporate leadership and employee mental health.

When dealing with critical issues such as the current pandemic, the companies that survive will, in part, be those that look after their employees' emotional well-being during times of uncertainty.

Here are some rules of the road for today's enlightened business leaders.

Address mental health in the workplace

According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 7% of the adult US population will suffer from a major depressive disorder in any given year. In addition, 3% have a generalized anxiety disorder. Workplace conditions often contribute to the development of those conditions. The stress over the unknown post-coronavirus economy is undoubtedly not helping.

In general, risk factors at the office can include the type of work being performed, organizational and managerial behaviours, and whether support is available for workers in their roles and at work in general. The stress that leads to depression and anxiety, for example, might come from not having enough resources to do the job, poor communication, inflexible hours, or the presence of an unsupportive or even hostile environment.

A World Health Organization (WHO) study in 2016 found that depression and anxiety cost the global economy \$1T every year in lost productivity. Furthermore, the WHO report states that every \$1 invested in treatment returns \$4 in increased productivity. That is a return of 300% – just imagine seeing that result in your next marketing campaign.

I define a healthy workplace simply as one in which managers and top executives actively promote and protect the well-being of all workers. Here is a summary of the primary methods:

Reducing work-related risk factors

Emphasizing the positive aspects of the workplace

Highlighting the strengths of each employee

Addressing mental health issues regardless of the cause

In addition, the World Economic Forum has a guide on the steps that business leaders should take. Here is a summary along with some thoughts of my own.

Evaluate your company. Every workplace is different and has its unique stressors. It might be sales teams hitting their numbers in the final week before

the end of each quarter. Certain departments might have cultures of bullying. IT teams might be burned out from being on call 24/7. But you will not know until you do the research.

Learn from what other businesses have done. Industry organizations might have this information. A Google search might turn up interesting insights. Your competitors may even offer advice.

Communicate with your staff. This is where HR and your internal communications team can play a role. Depending on the circumstances, it might be posted signs that forbid bullying and harassment. It might be brochures informing people of various company programs that can help. Regardless, the company needs to be known as one that cares.

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Help managers to support employees

This is related to the issue of mental health treatment. Not all worker problems stem from depression or anxiety conditions.

Money can be an issue – and it might become a more common problem after the coronavirus outbreak. In addition, people may have long, stressful commutes and could benefit from working from home or having flex-time. Perhaps many in middle management are struggling with both raising children and caring for elderly parents.

This year, Gallup found that millennials – who, remember, are no longer college students but are now pushing 40 – do not want bosses. They want coaches who form real relationships rather than just issue directives and judgements.

When workers have personal problems during times of uncertainty like today, what they want most is a friendly ear. The best corporate leaders will need to take this into account and revolutionize middle management. Some tips.

Get your top executives on board. Such a large undertaking will succeed only if the C-suite agrees with the goal. (Some might have old-school attitudes and be unwilling to change.) All of you will need to work together with HR.

Train your managers. Too many see their job as hitting their numbers and nothing more. But today, they will need to become coaches as well – and that entails being able to address any workplace or personal issues that might come along.

Lead the company yourself. Introduce any new initiative with an inspiring and sympathetic speech at an all-hands meeting. A sign of support from the top can work wonders. Most importantly, staff members need to know that they can go to their managers – or perhaps HR – whenever they need help.

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Join a larger brand purpose

For many workers, the most important thing is obviously the paycheck. But Gallup also found that millennials specifically want a mission and purpose as well. And CEOs cannot dismiss the wishes of people who will soon comprise the majority of middle management.

London Business School (LBS) found last year that millennials will work only for purpose-driven organizations. Corporate leaders need to incorporate that desire into their company operations.

“Maybe we will stop talking about purpose in 10 years’ time because it will just be ingrained in any organisation as a taken-for-granted – that any company that wants to be successful must pursue purpose,” LBS professor of finance Alex Edmans said in the institution’s report.

Some tips

First, do no harm. If your company harms the environment, uses child or sweatshop labour in your supply chain, or contributes to climate change, then you can forget about attracting most people in a generation that is younger than the Baby Boomers.

Focus on a single cause. Find a movement that helps society in some way that aligns with your brand. Maybe you can create your product without using any

fossil fuels. Perhaps you can donate a percentage of your revenue or profit to a cause that matters to the specific demographic that is common among your customers. Be creative.

Communicate, communicate, communicate. Highlight your cause to everyone both internally and externally – to your employees as well as your buyers and the news media. But remember one important thing: Do so in a way that is not a cynical attempt to sell more stuff. Do it in a manner that states that you are helping the cause first and foremost because it is merely the right thing to do.

In fact, having a real brand purpose at work might just make people happier and decrease depression and anxiety in this difficult time. Everyone wins.

Lead with support

Right now, everyone is unsure of what the future will hold. But by addressing mental health, helping managers to support employees, and joining a larger purpose, company leaders can help their employees feel better.

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