



Navigating uncertainty in the workplace

How do you empower your team to fight through these challenges times, rather than freeze or flee?

As the world battles the COVID-19 pandemic, the simple reality is that there is no roadmap from where we are now to where we would rather be. We have neither experience nor clear predictive indicators of the future upon which to draw and make decisions with confidence. For most communities and businesses, life has dramatically changed and its very unclear when, if ever, things will return to "normal".

The key to any organisation's ability to successfully adapt and survive these times, is an engaged and confident team who are willing to give new things a go and strive to succeed. While there may be little you can do to provide your team with greater certainty there are steps you can take to support each individual to maintain mental health and achieve the standards of performance you need from them.

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF UNCERTAINTY

The simple truth is none of us are

in a position to know with absolute certainty what will happen in the future. Irrespective of whether we are battling a global pandemic or not, life is always uncertain and yet most of us struggle in unpredictable circumstances with fear of the unknown.

Research shows that uncertainty is a major cause of stress in life including at work. Most people prefer a degree of predictability, so when the future is unknown, worry begins to set in and take a toll. On the most fundamental level our fears are designed to keep us safe. Therefore, unconscious reactions when people are faced with threat can be to fight, freeze, or flee.

To feel safe and comfortable about our future, most of us will think about, if not plan for, what might eventuate down the track. We draw on our past experiences and make decisions about what we will do today to influence the tomorrow we want. When we have no experience or facts to pin our hopes on, however, it can be overwhelmingly stressful for some people.



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As Associate Professor Kate Hoy, the Head of Interventional Neuropsychology at Monash University and Deputy Director of the Epworth Centre for Innovation in Mental Health said, this COVID-19 pandemic is an, "unprecedented international medical and social emergency with widespread consequences on all groups of society".

UNDERSTAND YOUR TEAM

Trust, earned in part through understanding and empathy, will have a big impact on your ability to influence how people are thinking, feeling and behaving. Start by understanding who

your people are and what they are personally dealing with. For example, it may be that their partner has been laid off and now they're facing extreme financial pressures. Or perhaps isolation and social distancing rules are keeping them apart from loved ones.

Threats to physical, psychological, and financial security are likely to be the most common fears people hold. Through one to one conversations and team discussions, identify specifically what your team are worried about and why. Acknowledge the discomfort people are feeling and commit through words and actions to keep them informed as the future becomes clearer to you.

PURPOSE, PRIORITIES, AND PROGRESS

Create a clear and consistent picture of what your primary objectives are. For example, do you need to be innovative and come up with new ways of working to maintain relevance or market position? Do you need to cut costs to be financially viable until revenue lifts again?

When people know exactly what the most important goals are, they are more likely to understand how they can contribute to shoring up the future. The sense of purpose and power this can give people makes a very big difference to how energised and, in turn, motivated they feel.

Set and maintain clear priorities through regular interactions with individuals and the whole team. Be sure also to maintain visibility of the progress you are making toward achieving set goals. Feeling hopeful and successful are important energisers of the human spirit. Look for big and small wins to help

your team focus on what is working well.

BE OPEN AND AUTHENTIC

When you don't have the answers that your team are looking for, the best you can do is tell them what you do know. Avoid the all too common leadership mistake of withholding information because you're not yet in a position to make a decision or provide all of the insights people are asking for. Recognise also if you are hesitating to speak the truth because you assume people don't want to hear it.

Take, for example, the likelihood of job redundancies becoming necessary. Most reasonable human beings would rather be told the truth, delivered with respect and sensitivity, than be blindsided by a reality they were in no way prepared for.

People are entirely more likely to trust, respect and work hard for a leader who is willing to tell them exactly how things are, over one who holds their cards close to their chest and avoids honest conversations. So, if you don't know what your current circumstances mean for job security, be upfront about that and help your team to understand the steps you are taking to avoid having to let people go.

THINK LONG TERM

It can be tempting to jump to short-term solutions to fix your immediate challenges, but never underestimate the impact the decisions you reach now will have on the engagement of your team

over time. If people perceive that the decisions you are making lack fairness or integrity, the engagement and cultural ramifications are likely to be severe.

For example, the leader who unexpectedly let 40 per cent of his sales team go, stating the need to "right size to survive", all while proceeding with the purchase of an expensive new car, is likely to struggle to inspire the rest of his team to give their best. While it may be more challenging to find a new job right now, when things start to improve, unfair or disrespectful leaders will struggle to keep people on board.

While many people will be able to "bounce back" from the stress or

hardships they have experienced through these times, others will continue to struggle. As The Black Dog Institute point out, as restrictions begin to ease, while many of us will be able to move

on reasonably quickly, "there will be a significant minority who will be affected by long-term anxiety as a result".

The most important thing you can do to navigate your team through times of uncertainty is to step firmly into a coaching role. Guide each person on your team to recognise the steps they can take to manage stress, keep fears of the unknown in check and be a part of creating both your new normal and a successful future. Working as a coach you're also more likely to recognise mental illness and offer the support people need to recover. ■

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