Managing disruption, having difficult conversations

by Bobby Chatterjee

The global COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis had a sudden and unprecedented impact on organisations and their people. Enforced closures, lockdowns and social distancing restrictions significantly changed the way organisations operated almost overnight. For the most part, they responded effectively and adapted quickly, but tough times remain ahead.

Agile and change-ready organisations were on the front foot to quickly develop the necessary HR policies and implement a series of near-term tactical interventions. For those that were significantly impacted by lockdown and social distancing measures, the focus has been on reducing headcount costs to ensure the financial survival of the organisation whilst revenue streams have all but evaporated. For those organisations that were still able to operate, the focus has been on creating a productive virtual and remote working environment, supporting the health and wellbeing of their people, and enabling their leaders to lead through uncertainty.

The last few months have presented endless and unprecedented challenges for organisations, their leaders and their employees – at both a personal and professional level. Whilst there are glimmers of positive news in relation to lower infection rates and the development of a vaccine, imposed restrictions and the risk of a second wave are preventing organisations from 'returning to normal'. The road ahead will remain challenging and undulating.

Their pre-COVID ways of working are no longer fit-for-purpose and the interim changes they made to see them through lockdown cannot be sustained over the longer-term. For the foreseeable future, organisations and their leaders will need to get more comfortable in managing and operating through periods of significant disruption and uncertainty.

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As lockdown restrictions continue to ease and government-backed support reduces over the coming months, organisations now find themselves at a COVID-crossroad. Organisations should seize the opportunity to forge their own path through the COVID-19 crisis rather than be forced down a path by factors outside of their control.

Reboarding

As the economy restarts post-lockdown, organisations will need to consider how they re-engage and re-board their workforce. They will need to reconfigure their working environment to ensure it's safe and COVID-secure. The key decision for organisations to consider is whether they should be reboarding their people into the existing working environment when, in fact, their workforce is largely working effectively and productively in a virtual environment.

Restructuring

For organisations that have been significantly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, a restructuring of their business will be an absolute necessity. Without knowing what their future holds, organisations will be forced into taking some difficult people-related decisions to ensure their near-term economic survival. These organisations will continue to operate on life support until consumer behaviour returns to pre-crisis levels.

Reshaping

If they can afford to, before rushing into knee-jerk and irreversible decisions, organisations should review the state and relevance of their markets, customers and workforce, and consider adapting their business strategy and operating model. To remain relevant in the post-pandemic environment, they will need to resize and reshape their future-state business model to reflect societal and economic changes as well as shifts in consumer and investor behaviour. As the road ahead remains the great unknown, they will likely have to iterate their way to their new normal.

Redundancy

Whilst scientists remain concerned about a second wave of the coronavirus, organisations should also prepare themselves for a second wave of employee redundancies. It is becoming increasingly obvious that government-backed support schemes are disguising the true people impact of COVID-19 and an immediate return to pre-crisis normality appears unlikely. Whilst organisations may have hoped they were through the worst, another series of difficult people-related decisions may still lay ahead.

Regardless of the path that organisations choose or are forced to choose, there will inevitably be difficult decisions and difficult conversations for leaders as they personally and professionally navigate the disruption and uncertainty of the COVID-19 crisis whilst being supportive and empathetic to their employees.

Managing redundancies ranks among the hardest and most unwanted tasks a manager has to undertake. Although feeling stressed and vulnerable themselves, managers need to be at their very best to conduct these difficult conversations with empathy, skill and clarity. This is a huge ask. But the impact on the employees involved and on those remaining – and on the reputation of the organisation – can be profoundly affected by the way managers conduct themselves as they engage with their people.

Here are some critical success factors for organisations to consider:

- Recognise that conducting these conversations will have a profound psychological impact on you – and that you may well feel a rollercoaster of emotions including fear, anger, frustration and guilt

- Don't try to deny or bury those emotions. Accept them and legitimise them – they are a natural response to a demanding and stressful situation

- Get yourself in shape by moving to a parasympathetic state – where you feel your emotions are under control and that your cognitive faculty is operating

- Achieve that state by taking time to recognise what the fight, flight or freeze response is doing to you, by breathing deeply and by having self-affirming and self-supporting inner dialogues

- Get to your place of integrity where you feel you are acting in accordance with your values and beliefs. You are a professional manager, committed to doing their best in a difficult moment

- Practice conscious empathy. Put yourself into the shoes of the staff member you are talking to. Remind yourself of their career in your organisation – their length of service, their achievements, the contribution they have made

- Vision the outcome. What do you want this person to think and feel about the conversation you are about to have? What do you want them to say to their colleagues afterwards?

- Slow down. When the conversation begins, take your time, don't rush or try to force the pace

- Give them the time they need to express their thoughts – and to show their feelings. Recognise and acknowledge the strength of the emotions thy express

- Summarise and reflect back. Don't rush to 'solutions' – when you feel they have said what they need to say, get their permission to talk about next steps, the support they can access, the help your organisation will give

- To close the conversation, thank them again for the contribution they have made and offer your personal support and help

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