COVID-19
Protecting Workplace Culture During a Global Pandemic
COVID-19 and Emotional Wellbeing

It’s important to understand that prior to COVID-19, the U.S. was already dealing with near epidemic levels of stress, anxiety, loneliness and depression. Almost 20% of Americans, pre-pandemic, will experience some type of mental and/or behavioral health issue this year.¹ The costs to people individually and to businesses are staggering as one thinks about the impact on productivity, absenteeism, presenteeism and healthcare expenses. Even employee engagement can be negatively affected if an employee perceives the work environment as part of what’s causing him or her stress.

Managing through sickness and ill health at work can be challenging at any time, but it is especially so during an infectious disease outbreak such as the COVID-19 virus. Employees may be anxious and fearful about contracting the virus at work, bringing it home to their families, losing pay for time off and not being able to pay their bills.

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In today’s reality, the fear associated with the unknown, compounding the already high levels of stress, anxiety and depression prevalent in society, may be an equal or more significant threat than the physical manifestation of the virus itself.

Social distancing is helpful, social disconnect is not

As COVID-19 continues to spread, social distancing is firmly in place, community closures are becoming common and organizations may ultimately need to make decisions on whether to impose “forced” work-from-home measures. While these measures can be effective at controlling and slowing down the spread of the virus, the ways in which your employees work will change. Symptom-free employees on quarantine or those forced work-from-home may first welcome the opportunity to be home as a “mini-vacation”.

This can change quickly as the reality of quarantine or isolation at home kicks in. The reality of your children being home from school and disrupting you while you’re trying to work, the reality of having your significant other needing the same home office space that you need. The reality that the support system you have developed at work, the
colleagues and friends that you interact with every day and help fuel your energy and productivity, may now be lost. This social connectedness is a building block of personal resiliency — our ability to bounce back, to withstand, recover, and grow in the face of stressors and changing demands. Lower levels of resiliency can increase the potential for burnout and loneliness, reduce employee engagement, and increase the likelihood of getting sick. Even full-time remote workers who have likely developed alternative methods for daily meaningful interactions may struggle as their usual routines change.

- **Promote Your Employee Assistance Programs (EAP).** Communicate the resources available to employees to help with stress and anxiety. Leverage the management consultations available through many EAP providers for assistance on handling different employee scenarios. There are so many services available through EAPs that employees may not be aware of. Use this opportunity to bring visibility to all the services and hopefully chip away at the stigma that is sometimes associated with the EAP.

- **Show empathy and compassion.** Showing empathy and compassion are positive emotions that are actually good for our health. Give employees several options to voice their concerns and/or fears to their manager, HR, a safety committee or through an anonymous channel for those afraid to speak up. Follow up individually (where possible) and companywide in periodic updates as appropriate. An empathetic response will help employees feel heard and promote social support.

- **Encourage physical activity.** Fitness apps, online group classes and getting outside when possible can be critical to reducing stress and promoting positive physical and emotional wellbeing. Since routines are changing, take this opportunity to develop new healthy habits with your family and virtually with your colleagues.

- **Create connectedness.** Provide intentional opportunities for employees to connect with each other, help support each other and stay connected as a team. Do not automatically cancel normally in-person meetings, instead shift to phone or online to keep connected and on top of employee perspective — keep moving forward on business objectives.
• **Be community aware.** Local municipalities may be implementing mandates that your employees need to follow, even if it is not a federal or employer mandate.

• **Be flexible and generous where possible.** Not every employee request can be honored, but relaxing some normal practices and policies may do a lot to ease nerves. If the request can’t be honored, explain why.

• **Understand that employee engagement drivers may shift.** With the recent competitive labor market, we have seen engagement drivers related to organizational purpose, mission and values become increasingly important to attracting, engaging and retaining talent. However, in the face of such economic and financial uncertainty, we may see a shift towards drivers surrounding organizational stability and leadership confidence. Employees want to know their leaders are going to support and lead them through this crisis.

**Be ready for a new reality after COVID-19**

Your organization and your employees will get through this and return to “normal,” but likely a different normal. Employers implementing “interim guidelines” related to remote work and/or leave policies will likely have to face questions from employees regarding if these guidelines can become policy. And if not, why?

How your organization responds to the COVID-19 virus will have a lasting impression on your employees and influence (positively or negatively) their commitment to your company. Leadership messaging and behavior will set the tone for how cared for employees feel during this difficult period and demonstrates the organization’s commitment to both employee and organizational wellbeing.

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Better. It’s something all companies strive for. Better outcomes from better performance. But how do you get there?

You start by building a better workplace. One that attracts, engages and retains top talent. What does that look like? It’s a workplace where people feel they belong — where there’s a sense of developing a career instead of punching a clock. And a culture of opportunity that draws new talent because it inspires employees to deliver their personal and professional best.

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As you develop and sustain this destination workplace culture, your people can thrive and perform at a higher level, optimizing your annual talent investment and mitigating organizational risk to maximize your profitability. Best of all, you gain a competitive advantage as a workplace that simply works better.

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