



Employee Engagement in Unprecedented Times— Key Concepts to Consider

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The COVID-19 virus has changed much of what we knew as familiar in our work lives. Many are working remote, causing a change in environment and, perhaps, a shift in how they view work. Being home, interacting with family, spouses, and children along with a heightened awareness of a serious physical threat to their wellbeing has shifted the perspective of many. The current state isn't causing just a simple shift in geography. If it were simply "working from home," much of what we would be doing would be the status quo. However, with the stress of health preservation and the mirror of mortality being displayed so prominently in the media today, it most certainly is causing a change of priorities for many. How could it not?

Construction work on our jobsites is considered to be "essential" and our folks must brave infection in order to service the public's needs. They join doctors, nurses, first responders, grocery store workers, etc. in this classification. We applaud and respect them for their sacrifices. Their efforts are nothing short of Herculean. How has the added stress shifted their perspective and, more importantly, their priorities?

As business leaders, it would be wise to consider that the lens of our staff may be shifting. As some have spent more time at home, reconnecting with those dearest to them, there is a good possibility that this is ground that they might not wish to entirely give up. Or, at least not right away. For industries such as construction that are behind others when it comes to workplace flexibility, it is understood that this strategy was pushed to the forefront by the virus. However, it would be prudent to begin preparing for the idea that this type of working environment, or some semblance of it, may become more of the norm. People are realizing how convenient it is not to have a commute, how great it is to connect around the dinner table again, and how to have more than a few hours' worth

of interaction with their loved ones per day. Additionally, today's younger workforce works in order to have a life. They do not live to work. This is truly a key distinction that has been downplayed in the past, but we will not have the luxury of ignoring it moving forward.

For those still working on jobsites, there is tremendous burden knowing there is a physical threat to their wellbeing, and that their exposure could affect the health and wellbeing of loved ones, family, and friends. How is that shifting their lens? Having owners and contractors placing moratoriums and/or devices on workers to ensure no one gets within six feet of one another keeps the reality of the situation front and center in everyone's minds, and keeps the worry of physical jeopardy in the forefront as well.

So, what is your strategy? How do you transition from the period of lockdown to a newer normal? What steps must be taken so that the choices you make as a leader are the right ones? There are many items to consider. Your employees are watching and looking to you for guidance, for confidence, and for caring. It should be weighing heavily on you what you are going to deliver to them, as it is more important than ever. Here are some tips to consider.

BECOME AS EDUCATED AS POSSIBLE. It is your responsibility to look objectively at data and recommendations from reliable sources to discover solutions to keeping exposure contained as much as possible. Look to your construction associations for guidelines and webinars. Identify and follow credible health organizations, and review their updates daily. Seek out advice from medical professionals you trust. This is absolutely critical. Half truths and outright lies are being published as fact. Ensure that you take the opportunity to increase your leadership credibility by immersing yourself with knowledge from the right sources. Start compiling data and information, along with their reference

origins, in order to share this with your staff. Start a reference library on your company intranet with these sources and links. Gain knowledge that is so critical in facilitating fact-based conversations. Become the best educated leader on the team, in order to increase your effectiveness as a solutions provider.

TALK WITH YOUR EMPLOYEES! Especially in uncertain times, a major differentiator between successful or unsuccessful employee engagement depends heavily on how much your employees feel that they are heard. For your office staff that have worked from home, partially or entirely, a conversation needs to be held surrounding what their fears and desires are moving forward.

Have the conversation regarding these three scenarios.

1. Are we doing the right things right now?
2. What should we do if the restrictions begin to lift?
3. What should we do to prepare ourselves should the shelter in place orders be extended, tightened, or a resurgence of exposure occurs?

So many construction firms are stuck in the model of having most, if not all, of their office staff in offices on the premises every day. Though it caused tremendous discomfort for many, it was forced upon the industry to shift this model to allow work to happen remote. When the lockdown orders are lifted, to simply dictate to your staff that it should automatically be business as usual, and that those people need to report back to their offices 5 days per week may be a shortsighted and uninformed move. Without discussing the needs and desires of your staff, you do not have the information you need to make those decisions. Could it be 3 days in the office and 2 days remote for one person and 5 days in the office for others? Quite possibly. Be open, and listen to understand, not listen to respond. Remove

your lens and listen until you understand their perspectives from their points of view. If that does not occur, you have not yet listened well enough.

Let's consider those who work in the trade side of our business. What discussions have taken place to ensure that they feel safe, protected, and, frankly, cared for? Again, the solution comes with discussion, not dictatorship. While it is leadership's role to eventually institute solutions that make sense, the right solutions cannot be determined without open and honest discussions with those who live it daily. It would be important to know what culture they are currently experiencing, which could differ greatly project by project. What pressures are they feeling? What is their level of stress regarding exposure to, and the possibility of passing on, the Coronavirus? What do THEY believe needs to be done? Do they believe their current level of PPE is adequate? Has the information and training they have received been adequate? Do they feel comfortable with social distancing on the jobsite? Are the current restrictions causing issues and, if so, what? Are the leaders on the jobsite supportive of the safety culture and concerns about the pandemic or are they pushing dangerous work habits in an effort to "get things done?" What changes need to occur from their boots on the ground perspectives? Have the same discussion with your field personnel regarding the three scenarios outlined above.

PLAN. Begin with global solutions for your organization. Know what options are available to you, and plan for the 3 scenarios outlined above. Scenario 1: Identify what to change now in order to address the immediate items you have gathered. Scenarios 2 and 3: Know what quantifiable factors would influence you in making a change to the current, and a realistic the timing associated with it. Stay in tune with information regarding questions such as: Will the pandemic restrictions be lifted? How soon? Will it be staged? If so, how will this affect us? Will we see a resurgence? If so, what will we do? Make a long list of these types of questions, then work with a team of people within the organization, perhaps even

better to retain outside assistance, and create the action steps necessary for the different scenarios.

For individual performance management, only by listening to your employees can you begin crafting the right solutions. Determine, by job title, what the expectations of performance are. This should be a coordinated effort between leadership and key employees who employ those positions on how to best accomplish their duties. Best case you already have a role and responsibilities matrix with performance metrics. Worst case, your employees don't have complete clarity behind your expectations. Some of the questions that must be answered are:

- Are their deliverables clearly understood?
- Are there defined systems and processes for the key performance aspects of their job?
- Is additional definition or training needed?
- Is moving back into the office full time the right answer?
- Should workplace flexibility be an option?
- Do we need different or better technology solutions?
- Does a culture or trust shift need to take place by some or all of your organization in order to best move these plans forward? If so, how?
- Do we possess the right level of transparency to facilitate remote work?
- Do policy revisions need to be written?
- How is success in this position defined?
- How should success in this position be measured?
- How do we best implement these changes to ensure success?

CONCLUSION. Remember that your employees have opinions. They have perceptions. They have well-founded concerns and fears. They have needs. Understand that their perceptions are, in fact, THEIR reality, regardless if their perceptions are correct or not. The influence that you have as a leader upon their perceptions is great and, by inference, your influence on their level of engagement

is as well. This is a golden opportunity to create much needed changes in your organization that mean the most to your employees. Prepare yourself for the open dialog needed to effectively lead through the seemingly daily changes we are experiencing. Retain coaching or external assistance if you believe this will be a challenge for you. Be sensitive to the fact that your employees may come back different, with needs that have changed. Migration back to "normal" may take time, or need to be redefined entirely. And, realize that this is ok. It's a great opportunity, albeit forced upon you, to take a strong look at the current environment, collaborate, and find the common ground. It is your opportunity to not only allow for change, but to encourage it. Give yourself the chance to have more open and honest conversations with those who do the work. An organization's success moving forward and eventually coming out of this shut down will rest entirely on the leadership to make the right, informed decisions. The level of employee engagement will be a product of these discussions and the alignment created from them. It is far better to be proactively considering this, given the unknown term of shutdown we currently face. These are powerful conversations to have, and could lead to even greater loyalty and engagement if managed correctly. They are watching you lead. Make sure to give them exactly what they truly need from you.

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