

The Leadership Imperative in Managing the Employee Experience of COVID-19



The rapidly unfolding COVID-19 crisis has already had significant emotional, social and economic impact. The outbreak is a prime example of a 'VUCA' (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) event that leaders need to navigate. Although we have seen some situations like this before, with varying levels of severity – from SARS to the Great Recession to 9/11 – the final outcome is unknown. At the time of writing, the number of COVID-19 cases in China seems to be plateauing, while cases around the globe continue to rise. We have seen significant market reactions as well – the Dow Jones Industrial Average, S&P 500, and FTSE 100 are all down over 20% as of mid-March 2020, from February highs.

A random pulse of Chinese workers that Kincentric conducted in March 2020 showed that although average employee engagement levels remain intact, the emotional employee experience is 10 percentage points lower in the Hubei Province, while blue collar workers are 13 percentage points lower than white collar workers. Further, this study showed that [Engaging Leadership](#) was the number one need above other typical engagement drivers.

The unfolding events are clearly having an impact on employees' productivity and mindset. We know 'moments that matter' in the [employee experience](#) typically involve ups, downs and change. The spread of COVID-19 qualifies as a significant employee experience that will be remembered, and leaders have significant control over *how* this moment will be remembered. We also know that positive moments that matter are ones that inspire, elevate, connect and remove friction; leaders have an opportunity to intervene, with employee well-being at the front and center.

Effective leadership has a crucial part to play in managing employee experience in this crisis.

Firstly, leaders should recognize that the impact on this employee experience comes from:

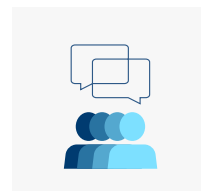
1. The event itself:

COVID-19 can create anxiety about one's health and the impact on business. In addition, some employees may experience isolation if working remotely for too long.

2. How leaders handle the crisis:

Leader behaviors, reactions, communication and policies can either improve, neutralize or exacerbate employee reactions to the event.

Secondly, leaders must quickly and assertively manage these events in an [agile](#) way; co-creating with their audiences in mind, collaborating and constantly evolving practices, such as employee communications and policies.



Engaging Leadership required

Leaders' stance should be one of an [Engaging Leader](#) in the current crisis. Above program and policy responses, our research shows that human

connection becomes paramount when [managing employee engagement during times of change](#). Positivity, tolerance for ambiguity, initiative, learning agility, emotional sensitivity, awareness, empowerment, authenticity and trust are Engaging Leadership muscles that will all be exercised in the current situation.

Here is some practical advice on how leaders can navigate unfolding crises like COVID-19

1. Connect and stabilize:

During times of change, the ability to *connect and stabilize* is the most important leadership behavior. Co-workers must also find ways to connect and collaborate, for their well-being and to support business continuity – [Engaging Leaders](#) are the driving force behind this. Other relevant behaviors include the ability to energize; keeping people focused on the long-term mission and objective with positivity; and communicating with candor and authenticity.

2. Understand the ecosystem:

Collecting as much information on unfolding developments and how various interconnected stakeholders might be impacted is critical. Customers, suppliers, employees and families are all impacted – and all interrelated. How you handle one stakeholder impacts another. Connect the customer experience with the employee experience; having an understanding, compassionate approach to customers should have employee enablement behind it. Understand that school closures and changes at a spouse's work will also impact your employees. Employees' concerns are as much about their own health and safety as they are about how to continue to serve customers and general business continuity.

3. Communicate and act with clarity, confidence and transparency:

Many companies have already curtailed travel and events, and are encouraging employees to work from home to varying degrees. Put employees at the center of your communications: What is known? What is unknown? What is being monitored and will continue to be monitored? What is the policy (and underlying people philosophy) behind travel restrictions or virtual work? How do you respond if an employee(s) becomes infected? Ensure that people have access to the best, most credible information (e.g. [World Health Organization](#)). Communications will likely need to evolve as COVID-19 events unfold, so allow some flexibility and speed over perfection, and above all, be clear, confident and compassionate when it comes to your employees' health. Ensure their interests are at the forefront as you work to stabilize perceptions of wellness and the business.

4. Check-in and listen:

Understanding how your employees are feeling, what their perceptions are, and how they are reacting will determine your next move. Pulse surveys with open text comments about the virus and virtual work arrangements can help you understand how people are talking about COVID-19, how they are feeling and what their concerns are, so that they can be addressed by the company. Ongoing engagement surveys, targeted pulses, open text information and technologies like natural language processing can help surface themes, sentiment, unknown risks, and suggestions for addressing unmet needs.

5. Leverage digital (with trust):

In times like these, virtual working technology is a great enabler. Many companies already have virtual work technologies, and we are finding more and more creative uses of these. We already have many examples of leadership coaching, engagement action strategies and other previously planned live meetings going digital. Video conferencing, which gives you the connection and empathy of eye contact and facial expressions, is proving to be particularly engaging. However, many organizations are accelerating unplanned virtual work for the first time, requiring leaders to trust that employees will continue to get work done with the best judgment, to the best of their ability, and without immediate management oversight.

6. Balance:

With so many sources of advice, over or underreaction in these moments can be risky, and changes will need to be managed carefully. Leaders must strike a balance between:

- Virtual work vs the developing feelings of isolation, if left unchecked
- Postponing activities vs your employees' need for progress and business continuity
- Overreaction vs underreaction with regard to communication
- Agility/speed vs the need for careful planning, to ensure quality outcomes
- Transparency on unknowns vs the need to build confidence that leadership has clear direction and control
- Empowering people to use their best judgment vs the need to prescribe unambiguous guidance when people themselves are unclear what to do.



The opportunity to have lasting leadership impact on employee experience, culture, digitalization and agility

Many organizations dream of an employee experience that brings a culture of caring to life, or of creating an agile culture marked by greater digitalization. COVID-19 is a force majeure event, bringing these ideas to reality. And leadership must play a key role. Crisis presents a great opportunity to make a lasting impact on culture, the employee experience and how leaders manage this is key. COVID-19 is a rare and significant event that is impacting the employee experience – employees must be at the center of how leaders respond.

Leaders demonstrating deep empathy, listening, well-being, trust, transparency and agile responsiveness can create a unique employee experience and cultural foundation of personal connection, which will in turn build strong, lasting relationships for the future. To overcome COVID-19, leadership is imperative.

By Ken Oehler

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