

Understanding Onboarding: Bringing your people back

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Introduction

2020 has been a unique, challenging and memorable year for leadership teams across the world. It is still too early to estimate the impact of Covid-19, to the economy in terms of ramifications, the likely contraction of specific sectors and associated impact on employment numbers.

We can, however, examine our environment with empathy and understanding to work with our teams to attempt to minimise the adverse effects and protect our people, our culture and commercial results.

As we write this document (early-June 2020), in both Ireland and the United Kingdom, the beginning of the process of re-opening our offices, retailers and tourism locations is commencing gradually, and the responsibility of protection from a “second wave”, moves onto you, the employer.

This paper aims to identify the issues that organisations were facing before the pandemic, what impacts any historical crises like this had on affected businesses and will propose some possible steps forward for organisational leaders in uncertain times like these.

The “New Normal”

Regardless of the health outcomes around Coronavirus in 2020, it may take years for its significance truly appreciated. In business, supply chains will be re-evaluated to test their resilience and companies will build and strengthen backup and safety plans, incorporating resilience metrics into their valuation.

The sharp decline in working hours globally due to Covid-19 means that 1.6 billion workers in the informal economy, nearly half of the global workforce and the most vulnerable, stand in immediate danger of having their livelihoods destroyed. Without

alternative income sources, the workers and their families will have no means to survive.

White-collar workers will not be exempt from change. During the pandemic, there has been a considerable shift to home working, particularly in the field of digital commerce and telemedicine, which for many will become the New Normal. No more wasted hours in slowmoving traffic or squeezing into trains, gasping for breath in carriages designed for half their current load. Instead, a leisurely breakfast followed by a few steps to the desktop, or laptop on the sofa. This will result in thousands of staff leaving giant tech hubs, such as Silicon Valley, potentially resulting in vast redundant infrastructure.

Covid-19 will accelerate high-speed digital connectivity, linking us with our schools, doctors, shops and even our gyms, changing our whole way of life. Whether or not a successful vaccine is introduced, it will take years or decades for the significance of 2020 to be fully understood. Geopolitical relationships will be re-evaluated, governments will move in a more inclusive direction, and our style of work will be transformed. This crisis is a once-in-a-generation global turning point when many of the fundamentals of our social and economic life will be remade, and a New Normal established.

What previous experiences have taught us

The following section is designed to examine how current management and leadership theory can be applied to exceptional conditions. For example, studies carried out in recent years have identified an increase of known mental health concerns in society as a whole and a significant contributor has unfortunately been the working environment. “Between 20 March and 30 March 2020,

almost half (49.6%) of people in Great Britain reported “high” (rating 6 to 10) anxiety; this was sharply elevated compared with the end of 2019 (21%), and equates to over 25 million people (out of the population aged 16 years and over)”

(Office for National Statistics, 2020).

Employee well-being in the workplace has become an increasingly popular topic in recent times, and it is fair to say there have been improvements in the fundamental understanding of what it is.

Unfortunately, simply understanding what it is, does not always result in having a process or policy in place that actively focuses on improving employee well-being. What cannot be hidden is the effect this has on people, productivity and the overall business.

“Work-related stress, depression or anxiety continues to represent a significant ill health condition in the workforce of Great Britain. Work-related stress, depression or anxiety accounts for 44% of work-related ill health and 54% of working days lost, in 2018/19. “

(HSE Ireland)

The cost of lost days, high turnover and disciplinary actions resulting from inaction can be huge, not to mention the impact on business culture and reputation damage.

Organisations were facing significant challenges pre-COVID with employees citing areas such as workload, lack of support from management, not adapting to change, uncertainty, lack of control and bullying as causes of stress, depression and anxiety.

Post-Covid there is a threat to the workplace that must be challenged. These conditions are likely to have been exasperated for those suffering prior and additionally become a challenge for those who weren't.

Challenges for leaders & culture

In the complicated conditions created by COVID-19, leaders can set themselves apart from the rest and provide their teams with the best support possible by drawing on some core skills to establish a stable foundation for their teams to develop.

1. **Create and communicate goals and priorities.** We all know that times are challenging and that there is uncertainty in the future. Your teams still need a clear and transparent vision of what they are working towards and your expectations of them. Short term, achievable victories will create momentum and maintain a positive atmosphere.
2. **There are no right or wrong answers.** At a time when your team have increased levels of uncertainty, anxiety and visibility, you must allow for flexibility and individual management, creating pragmatic solutions to issues. Consistency is essential in the ideal running of a business; however, do not fear to bend the rules in such exceptional circumstances.
3. **Empathy and compassion should be in your locker.** Developing on the previous point, ultimately you wish to be the trusted source of information for your teams and one which they will depend upon to steer your firm out of current challenges. This responsibility will also require an open and honest relationship with your team. The team must be comfortable to report back to with honesty and vulnerability, having confidence that it will be used productively to move forward.
4. **Share your team's successes.** A rising tide will lift all boats, and as such, the success of your team members will inspire others to be successful and to have greater faith in themselves and

the organisation in creating forward momentum. Take the time to document and share positive stories from within your business.

Like everyone else, leaders require support. Ongoing Leadership Development training in areas such as emotional intelligence, communication, resilience and coaching can provide awareness of potential problems and preventative strategies that can be put in place. Operating in the new normal will divert focus to various areas that need to be addressed leaving a potential gap in other critical areas. Employees can provide a huge asset or a huge problem for management. Investing early in employees can create the former and provide long term stability for everyone.

Team Not-So-Norms

In our office environments, it is straightforward to overlook certain bad habits, practices or cultures which your teams may be exhibiting. These can be explained away by results, other events; distracting our attention or making it seem awkward to go back and deal with the issue.

Increasing the level of individual and remote work, has the potential to shine a light on these undesirable traits, and we should keep a sharp eye out to ensure their damage is contained, or appropriate checks and balances are in place.

1. **Distraction vs Traction:** Personal organisation has become key to the ability of teams to work effectively remotely, be that at home, alternative offices or client facilities. Supporting staff to create the right atmosphere and using technology to communicate regularly is essential to maintain both professionalism and momentum.
2. **Work/Life balance:** Understanding and setting boundaries around working hours has become critical to

workers who's lifestyle allows longer working hours without distraction. Removing the commute has created earlier starts and later finishes at times, this must be addressed to ensure unhealthy working hours do not creep in.

3. **Abuse of human resource:** Out of sight, out of mind and without oversight, case studies are emerging of uneven and unfair workloads being mounted onto remote workers, who feel they have less support and supervision at this point and time. Leadership need to communicate clearly to ensure all staff know checks and balances are in effect in and outside of the office.
4. **The ever-moving deadline:** Discipline and project management have come to the fore as skills needed to maintain momentum in projects. Complications in scheduling meetings, engaging third-party partners and receiving documentation have caused deadlines to drift - a balance is required between understanding and professional execution.
5. **Siloing data and losing trust:** Communicating and making time to share with your team is required to ensure that team members do not sink into their own world and work in isolation. Absence of colleagues may degrade levels of trust and undermine the culture of the business - this must be avoided at all costs.

Escaping from "Mental Lockdown"

Setting aside those who have experienced illhealth directly or indirectly, COVID-19 has had a significant impact on all workforces. Social distancing itself is a new and challenging concept as we have spent our entire lives greeting people, shaking hands and even hugging!

These new behaviours are changing our core social interactions, and we have to be much more careful about our environment in terms of cleanliness. Managing risk was easy to start but more challenging to maintain over time, leading to mental tiredness.

One mental health charity, SANE, has warned that in the UK, the lockdown is storing up a mental health epidemic behind closed doors, reporting 93% of people they have spoken to since March 25th 2020, are discussing their mental health in relation to Covid19.

The isolation of social distance will impact some more than others, often this is varied on the quality of information available to them through traditional and social media, and the volume they absorb. A primary concern is an increase in stress and anxiety. At the same time, a healthy level will ensure compliance and necessary care is taken, too little will lead to unnecessary risks being taken, and too much will lead to significant ill-health.

In terms of managing this effectively, an organisation can take a few key, but impactful actions:

1. Update staff regularly with information based on reliable sources, explaining upcoming events and
2. justifying based on evidence.
3. Encourage healthy “work-at-home” practices, like setting a schedule and encouraging periods of exercise.
4. Encourage your team to use technology to maintain regular contact, not just with colleagues, but with their closest friends and family members to minimise the impacts of isolation.

After 9/11 Morgan Stanley were one of the quickest to react to the situation in the aftermath, they stated that management's decision to put the physical and emotional welfare of employees before all else during the crisis, gave the company a newfound sense of unity and purpose.

<https://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/leadershipon-9-11-morgan-stanley-s-challenge>

It remains to be seen how well organisations have handled this period. For some it will have been much of the same, allowing all the stressors that existed before to exist from a distance. Others will have stepped up and adopted to the new challenges considerably, meeting the needs of their teams.

The organisations who understand their employees will need to be supported through this unique transition period to returning to work after such a traumatic event, should first look to what support they can provide to their formal leaders. After all, managers are dealing with the same issues that employees are, but with more pressure, are expected to “have the answers” to the problems that even political leaders struggle to answer.

Conclusions

Many organisations will be looking forward to getting back to business, and in front of them they have the reality that many requirements need to be met and put in place for this to happen.

There's the physical safety that must be considered, admin and HR as well as other new arrangements which must be put in place, not to forget the frame of mind of those employees returning to work.

A recent study in China following Covid-19 showed that ‘10.8% of respondents met the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after returning to work.

“The respondents reported a low prevalence of anxiety (3.8%), depression (3.7%), stress (1.5%) and insomnia (2.3%). There were no significant differences in the severity of psychiatric symptoms between workers/technicians and executives/managers.”

(Public Health Emergency Collection)

Many staff will welcome the opportunity to return to more normal working practices after the pandemic. An equal number may be reluctant to do so due to their own state of mind, and others will face pressures and challenges from their family life. With the future of schools adapting to the changes, organisations need to be aware that parents will have additional childcare responsibilities which may be incompatible with returning to work full-time or with set hours. Others may be facing a greater burden to continue caring for elderly or vulnerable family members.

Maslow stated within his Hierarchy of Needs five levels of human motivation: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualisation.

For the longest time, the first two needs have been taken for granted, but for now, it is, in many cases, back to basics. Employers have an ongoing obligation to provide employees with a safe working environment and to preserve and enhance their physical and mental health and well-being.

The current Covid-19 Crisis has undoubtedly changed the lives of many people and the future of many businesses, but for those who move forward, the wheels of motion will hit the ground with momentum and all industries will rise again. However, how far those businesses rise will certainly depend upon the organisation's management of the clear issues that will be facing their employees. We believe this starts with a strong focus on developing their formal leaders and teaching them to embed positive reinforcement for the workforce from the start.

National statistics are already showing an upward trend of high stress and anxiety for the nation; therefore, it is totally feasible for organisations to create a culture of inclusivity and support.

As the lockdown restrictions continue to ease and glimpses of "normal" life begin to come into view for employers and employees, these actions should be taken sooner rather than

later, in order to have the best chance of being proactive rather than reactive.

Time will tell which organisations take the time to build this cultural foundation for success and those who don't.

About the Authors

JP Taggart

Having spent more than 10 years leading and developing teams within the Hospitality, Cinema and Leisure Industries, JP acquired a wealth of experience in strategic management and leadership. With a strong focus on Organisational Culture he played a key role in managing a prominent Family Entertainment Centre out of Administration, to become an industry leading business within its market in Northern Ireland.

He has acquired skilled approaches to creating a pipeline of future leaders, developing employees and finding solutions to people management issues for many businesses across multiple sectors. This has been achieved through bespoke projects, workshops and 1-21 mentoring and coaching with clients.

Having graduated with a BSc in Business Studies, JP is an avid life long learner and is also a licensed trainer for World Host through People 1st International, a member of The Chartered Management Institute and The International Coach Federation.

JP was industry recognised at The 2018 NI Institute of Hospitality Awards by winning the "General Manager of the Future" Award. He has led a business to win the "Best Employer" Award at the Eastside Awards and the same team were recognised for "Customer Service Excellence" by the NI Institute of Hospitality.

A personal vision of JP's is to positively impact as many people in the world as possible. He aims to do that through developing People, Business and Communities with a focus on Organisational Culture.

On a personal level, JP is due to be married soon, loves spending time with his family and enjoys sports and outdoor activities.

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Sean Grant

Seán is an experienced manager who spent 14 years leading and developing teams within the hospitality and leisure sector. Throughout this period he has been involved in several business development projects; leading, mentoring and coaching senior management teams. He has played a central role in leading a large Family Entertainment Centre from administration to becoming a thriving, viable business. His skills utilised within organisations have included working with financial aspects of the businesses, project planning, service excellence and delivering sustainable and effective, positive team cultures.

Throughout his career he has generated results in development of both people and businesses, winning business awards in the process, such as Customer Service Excellence and Employer of the Year. He is enthusiastic and passionate about working with and developing people, which has been evidenced throughout each project that he has undertaken.

Continuous improvement is always at the forefront of his plans and in recent years he has been accredited as a Chartered Manager through the Chartered Management Institute, a WorldHost trainer with People 1st, and a Coaching Practitioner and member of the International Coaching Federation.

On a personal level he is a father of three young children, avid football fan and occasional marathon runner.

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For more than a decade, Declan has worked in partnership with government agencies such as Invest Northern Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and the US Commerce Service to provide realworld results for companies eager to sell in export markets and infiltrate significant supply chains. Declan has worked in markets as diverse as technology, financial services, medical devices and aerospace among others.

Declan can directly attribute his work to significant export sales for Irish companies as well as promoting new jobs from the Foreign Director Investment marketplace, introducing new and exciting companies to the Irish market including Allen & Overy, Siemens, Volvo and Convergys amongst others.

Since graduating with a BSc in Marketing, Declan has maintained a steady focus on learning and personal development adding ILM coaching and mentoring qualifications as well as an MSc in Executive Leadership. He is currently a full member of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, the Institute of Export & Institute of Directors.

While maintaining a low profile professionally, Declan has received a global leadership award from Boston College, USA, studied strategic negotiation at University of Michigan and was listed in the Independent News Paper '40 under 40' lists for Ireland, as well as being a finalist for Young Leader of the Year, Northern Ireland in 2017.

On a personal level, Declan is a married, father of two children who enjoys travelling during personal time, with a healthy interest in sport and photography whenever possible.

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