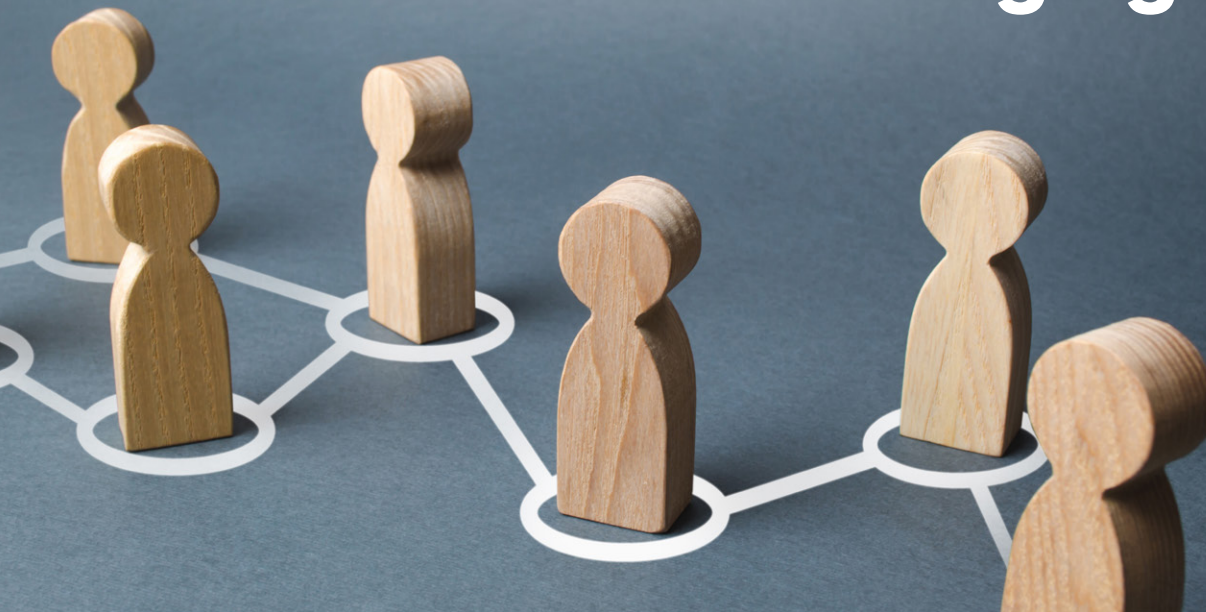


Employee Engagement in Challenging Times

Heather Han



Engagement Matters

Among the many reasons why engagement matters, the primary reason is that it drives actual business outcomes.

Organizations with highly engaged employees experience fewer operational problems and much less turnover than their industry peers. Also, they generate higher customer satisfaction, leading to higher market share and ultimately more revenue growth.

Employee engagement has long been a focus of both businesses and academia, but in this challenging time amidst the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic, it's more important than ever before.

Employee Engagement in Challenging Times

During challenging times like a major organisational change, when people in the organization are confused and doubtful about their organizations, highly engaged employees are less affected. Engaged employees work as buffers to the temporary negative impact from environmental changes and have a positive influence on others.

Disruption and the new normal continue from the global financial crisis to the current pandemic. There is no returning to the "good ol' times" of before. Rather, surviving incessant change has become everybody's mandate, and here lies the true value of engaged employees.

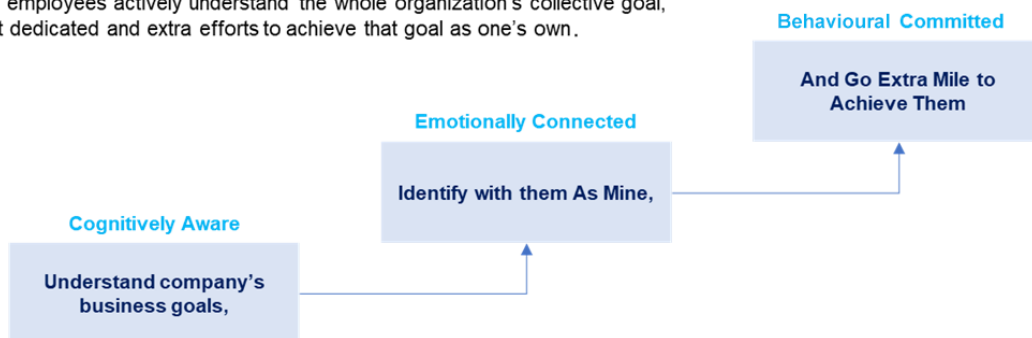
How to Keep People Engaged During a Pandemic

Engaged employees actively understand the goals of the organization they belong to [Cognitive Awareness], identify with them as one's own [Emotionally Connected], and exert dedicated and even extra efforts to achieve those goals [Behaviourally Committed].

All three facets of cognition-emotion-behaviour component should work together to lead to actual engagement. Reviewing each dimension and identifying the engagement implications to tackle pandemic negativities can be an effective strategy.

Three Dimensions of ENGAGEMENT

Engaged employees actively understand the whole organization's collective goal, and exert dedicated and extra efforts to achieve that goal as one's own.



Cognitive Sensemaking – Let People See the Future

Many industries and companies have gone through a painful struggle for survival since COVID-19 first hit the world economy. The business environment has become even more uncertain, and many companies let go of staff. Many employees lost their jobs. Job security is a lost concept, and people are anxious about their future in their organizations.

Senior leadership has a critical role to play. The first and foremost role of senior management is to envision a future that will inspire employees. Inspired and engaged employees aspire to a better future with the organization.

Note that employees can tell instantly if they hear empty promises. The good news is, even when management cannot immediately paint a pretty picture, employees still find value from how top management deals with crisis. People can be convinced to fight together if they can see the right

course of action and reliable leadership. Reliable and appropriately optimistic leadership must be present.

Emotional Connections – Let People Feel Cared For

Covid depression is one of the new terms created during the pandemic era. Frequent lockdowns and remote work leave employees feeling isolated, distant from their colleagues and many are suffering from social interaction deprivation. As always, communication is the key to get employees more connected to the organization.

Senior management messaging on shared goals and actions taken will be the first step to engender camaraderie. Contact may be limited to online-only, but the messages should be thoroughly communicated to everyone in the organization. Never forget that communication should be two-way- interactional. Employees should be given

the opportunity to participate in the ‘figuring-out’ process, which makes them feel part of the company-wide discourse and gives personal meaning. When people perceive themselves as ‘subject’ rather ‘object’ of organisational change, the negative impact on engagement will be diminished. Individual caring should be granted for daily working environment, too. Even when people feel committed to company goals, their morale can suffer from overwork, threat of infection, or negative sentiment like survivor syndrome. Leaders should carefully monitor the ever changing work environments and show sincere efforts to improve them. This can give employees the sense of being cared for as a member- a sense of being connected to ‘us’.

Behavioral Commitment – Help People Exert their Best

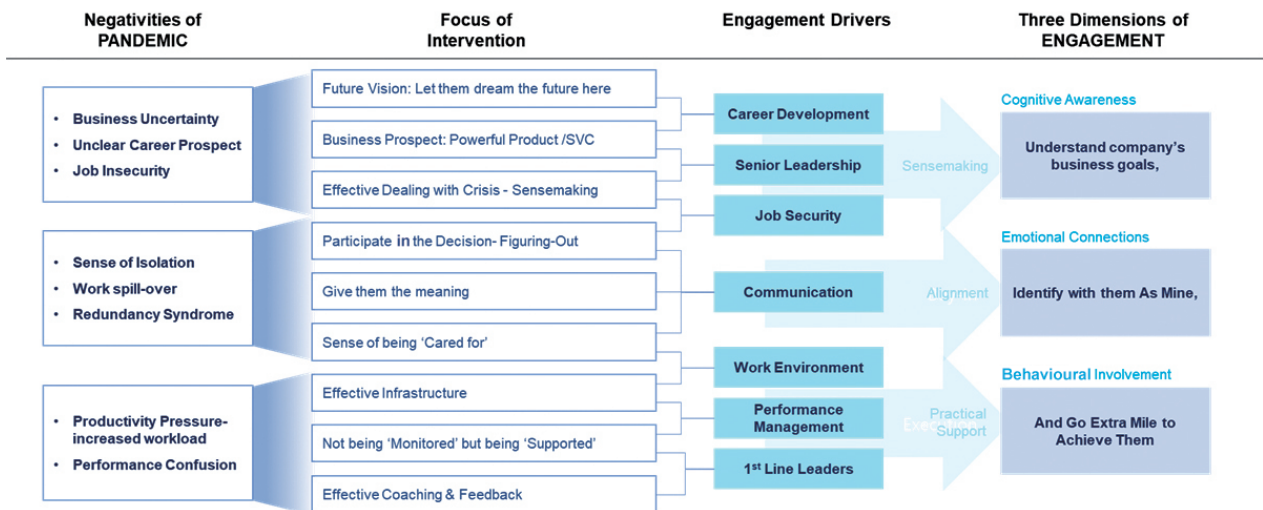
The final dimension of engagement behaviour is primarily about effective performance management during the pandemic.

First, performance targets (KPIs) should be

appropriately adjusted. As remote work, online communication, and flexible working hours have become prevalent, performance measures should focus more on ‘result indicators’ rather than ‘process indicators’, as traditional measures like ‘working hours’ do not hold up anymore.

Second, much more effort should be invested in the performance management process in the form of ‘coaching & feedback’. As face-to-face communication and interaction has been limited by work from home, constant and intentional communication is needed by first-line leaders, whose role has become more important than ever. This does not mean leaders should ‘monitor’ their employees, but to ‘be there to help’ with accurate, timely, and constructive guidance and feedback.

In addition, first-line managers should have the authority and responsibility to administer needed resources in a timely manner, and to adjust workload and priorities as well.





Closing Thoughts

With members of the MZ-generation making up most of the workforce, companies should acknowledge the employment relationship has transitioned to 'highly temporary ally'. Clever management will know that challenging times like now are the very moment to focus on employee engagement, because if not, the best people will be the first to leave.

Systematic, thorough, and regular effort is essential to understand employee engagement and its underlying causes. During the pandemic, continuous employee communication and frequent engagement are necessary, followed up with instant and effective management intervention.



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