



Engagement in Uncertain Times

Engaged employees are energetic and productive at work, they deliver quality, are loyal to the organization and satisfied with their job. Given these facts, organizations worldwide invest in strengthening employee engagement. Under normal circumstances, international research provides extensive insights and tools to influence employee engagement. However, due to the worldwide Covid-19 crisis, which also affects the Dutch Caribbean, organizations find themselves in a different, unknown world. This article discusses how organizations can engage employees in extraordinary and uncertain times.

The Importance of Engagement

Literature¹ describes employee engagement as the level of job satisfaction, loyalty towards the organization and the willingness to work hard to realize organizational goals. High employee engagement is an essential ingredient for a successful organization. Research by Bersin and Gallup²³ shows that high levels of engagement have a positive impact on the productivity of employees, customer satisfaction and the long-term profitability of a company.

Organizations worldwide acknowledge the importance of engaged employees. The Global Human Capital Trends Report⁴ from Deloitte shows that 8 out of 10 executives and senior managers see employee engagement as one of their top priorities. Organizations in the Dutch Caribbean are also investing more and more in aspects that contribute to high levels of employee engagement, such as meaningful work, a positive and pleasant work environment, learning opportunities and the development of inspiring leadership⁵.

Suddenly a Crisis Hits

The past couple of months, Covid-19 disrupted the lives of almost every person. Although unexpected events, new developments and the uncertainty that comes with these changes are part of life, the current pandemic can be considered a rare and unique phenomenon. Never before has public life and the economy of the Dutch Caribbean islands been hit this hard. Every single person in the community feels, to a more or lesser extent, the effect of this worldwide crisis.

Covid-19 also has an enormous impact on organizations. Companies are forced to

(further) digitalize their business operations at a fast pace and from one day to another organizations have to deal with employees that either work from home or must perform their work differently due to restrictions in the workplace. This abrupt development changed the work context drastically and quickly. International research by Willis Towers Watson⁶ shows that in the midst of these turbulent times, 84% of questioned companies were able to maintain high levels of engagement. Recent research of Gallup⁷ among organizations in the United States even suggests higher levels of engagement among employees.

A more thorough analysis of the approach by companies where the Covid-19 crisis had a positive effect on employee engagement, gives insight in some best practices. These suggest that showing genuine interest and empathy towards employees, facilitating employees in combining their work and private life and communicating a clear and inspiring message are essential to maintain high levels of employee engagement in uncertain times.



Genuine Interest and Empathy

Especially in times of abrupt change and uncertainty, it is important for organizations and their leaders to acknowledge that the circumstances cause stress among employees. Leaders who genuinely show interest in the wellbeing and safety of their people, listen to their worries and show empathy, are able to strengthen their work relationship in times of crisis. Through regular meetings, with the help of modern technology, employees can share their thoughts and emotions. By doing this, leaders also create opportunities to show their trust in employees, encourage and motivate them. This will improve the quality of the work relationship and strengthen engagement.

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¹ Kahn, William A. (1990), "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work", Academy of Management Journal, 33 (4): 692-724.

² "Simply irresistible: Engaging the 21st century workforce", Bersin by Deloitte, 2014.

³ Harter, J. (2020), "4 Factors Driving Record-High Employee Engagement in U.S.", Gallup.

⁴ Global Human Capital Trends Report, Deloitte, 2016.

⁵ "Is your organization simply irresistible? Creating an organization people will clamor to work for and hate to leave", Bersin by Deloitte, 2019.

⁶ "Survey best practice: The employee experience during COVID-19", Willis Towers Watson, 2020.

⁷ Harter, J. (2020), "Engagement Continues Historic Rise Amid Coronavirus", Gallup.

Facilitate the Combination of Work and Private Life

Covid-19 affected a lot of lives in various ways. Financial worries, uncertainty about job retention and worries about the health and safety of loved ones, but also practical issues like home-schooling and informal care, made life a lot more complex. Organizations that facilitate their people in combining work and private life, invest in employee engagement. By giving autonomy and offering flexible working conditions, they help employees fit their work in their lives. Examples are working from home, flexible working hours, reduction of working hours and the option of additional (care) leave.

Inspirational and Transparent Communication

Leaders that continue to communicate the mission of the organization and emphasize the added value of the work -for clients, stakeholders and the community-, make employees feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves. This feeling gives meaning to a job, brings people together, motivates and gives something to hold on to during difficult times. Recent research⁸ shows that the feeling of belonging strengthens when employees feel committed to their team and are able to contribute to organizational goals. It is therefore essential to emphasize togetherness and the shared mission and goals to invest in engagement in times of crisis.

The importance for leaders to be a good example for their employees increases in uncertain times. Research about emotional intelligence shows that employees unconsciously look at their managers to find clues on how to react in crisis situations and deal with changes⁹. If leaders are able to communicate a clear and consistent message, employees feel supported and motivated to accept the

challenge. It is more effective to be open and honest about things that are uncertain instead of saying nothing. Transparent communication, whether the message is positive or negative, creates more clarity than not-knowing.

It is more effective to be open and honest about things that are uncertain instead of saying nothing. Transparent communication, positive or negative, creates more clarity than ignorance.

How to strengthen employee engagement in times of crisis:

- Show genuine interest and empathy in the wellbeing and safety of employees
- Organize regular meetings and stay in touch
- Facilitate employees in the combination of their work and private life
- Emphasize shared mission, vision and goals
- Communicate a clear message, positive or negative

Never Waste a Good Crisis

The famous statement from Winston Churchill during the 40's of the former century is also applicable to the Covid-19-crisis and the current reality for most of the organizations in the Dutch Caribbean. The essence of this statement is to have an eye for opportunities that come with a crisis. During difficult and uncertain times, people tend to become more resourceful and new possibilities that are normally overlooked arise. Organizations in the Dutch Caribbean are currently facing giant challenges. Although a lot of aspects of the Covid-19 crisis are beyond the circle of influence for organizations, there are always controllable factors that provide perfect opportunities to invest in employee engagement and to emerge stronger from this crisis.

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⁸ Global Human Capital Trends 2020: The social enterprise at work, Deloitte Insights.

⁹ Brewer, J. (2020) "Anxiety Is Contagious. Here's How to Contain It", Harvard Business Review.

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