

4 ways to keep employees engaged in the face of a national crisis

By Adrian Gostick & Chester Elton

In the midst of the last global crisis, in 2008, WD-40 Company chief executive Garry Ridge recalls that fear was beginning to consume his employees. Ridge told us, “I decided, let’s not waste a good crisis. Everywhere else our people would go they’d hear about the horror; when they came to work with us, they were going to hear about hope.”

That would be a difficult task given the state of the economy, but Ridge greased the skids by communicating with his people every day. He put in place a policy of “No lying, no faking, no hiding conversations.” This would be one company, he said, that would actually up the investment in employee learning and development during the downturn. Ridge also instructed his managers on how to lead with gratitude by showing them the benefits of regularly expressing sincere appreciation to their “tribe,” helping keep morale high and his people focused on the right behaviors.

The result: By 2010, WD-40 company had reported its best financials in its fifty-seven-year history. And the success has kept rolling. Over the next decade the company’s market cap grew nearly 300 percent. Employee engagement and loyalty is also off the charts, with 99 percent of tribe members saying they love to work there.

It’s in the worst of times that great leaders are made. If you consider a few of your favorite leaders from history—whether Ghandi, Abraham Lincoln, or Martin Luther King, Jr.—chances are they all shared one thing in common: They worked their magic in the hardest of times.

We have devoted decades to teaching executives around the world how to be more effective, and we have found that every leader will have to navigate a crisis or two in their careers. What follows are just a few ideas that might help keep team members a little more engaged, a little more focused during this latest crisis.

Keep People Connected: Pretty soon you may have a lot more people working remotely, and it’s your job as a leader to help them feel connected. Invest in high-quality headsets for every team member and insist that each person find a room with a door they can close during online meetings. Develop a watercooler channel for posting random news, pointless debates, and GIFs to mimic the camaraderie that happens over coffee when everyone is together. And, as a manager, turn your focus more to goals and outcomes than hours clocked. Hold a weekly one-on-one with each employee to get an update about his/her accomplishments during the week and what they will be focused on the following week. Keep working with each person on goals aligned with their personal motivators to help them stretch.

Share Everything. A lack of openness and honesty is going to lead to more fear. Create a practice to send regular updates to your people (daily if you can), even if there's not much new to share. And be more open with your team about what you are up to in your meetings and other activities. Employee distrust can grow during a crisis and can be the result of misunderstanding the intentions of others—especially leaders. When employees aren't sure what's happening around them, it's easy to become suspicious. In an environment where information is withheld or not communicated properly, rumors take the place of facts.

Look for Small Wins. Let employees know they are making a difference in their work every day. When former CEO Alan Mulally took over Ford Motor Company in 2006, his company was expected to lose \$17 billion. He explained to us that rewarding small wins in such tough times shows that a leader knows what's going on and is appreciative of every step forward. In his weekly business plan review, each member of his team was expected to present a color-coded update of progress toward meeting key goals. Projects that were on track were green, yellow indicated the initiative had issues, and red signaled a program that was behind schedule. "The whole thing is really based on gratitude," he said. "When someone shows a red, we say 'thank you for that visibility.' When we work a red to a yellow, we thank everybody. Celebrations for each step forward show the team that it's expected to make progress. People are feeling 'Wow. I'm needed. I'm supported.'"

Stay Optimistic. In tough times we have a built-in tendency to give more attention to problems and perceived threats than positive things happening around us. How can managers afford not to spend more time on the lookout for and attending to problems than looking for opportunities to be grateful? Fair enough. But this is not a zero-sum issue. Scanning the savannah for potential predatory problems in no way precludes a leader from paying sufficient attention to the contributions of one's team. On the contrary, in times of challenge, keeping people motivated and optimistic is more vital than ever. By withholding our gratitude in tough times, we end up shooting ourselves in the foot, said Mark Tercek, president and CEO of The Nature Conservancy. "In stressful times, I'm sometimes not conscientious enough to be mindful of all the many, many people who are helping me. We need to jolt ourselves out of our self-centeredness. When I am more mindful, more aware, more thankful, everybody's more engaged, focused, and productive."

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