



Developing your Organisation Archive

Question

Will “management” mean something different after the pandemic?

Answer

It’s already different.

According to numerous reports, managerial practices have already evolved throughout this pandemic. Managers have adapted their behaviour in ways that have increased trust in their teams. Employees are reporting managers demonstrating more empathy than before. Managers are engaged in more regular communication with their teams, with an increased focus on the personal challenges employees are facing. Managers have shifted in many cases from micromanaging their employees’ time to managing outcomes instead. There’s almost no part of the manager’s responsibilities that has escaped the need to adapt.

Crisis fuels change

Previously when a crisis happened the timeframe was usually short. Managers needed to react, to rally their team, to weigh the options and take decisive action. This usually ended in the manager issuing directive instructions to get the team through the crisis so they could get back to normal. This crisis is so much longer and can’t be addressed in the usual way. Instead, Managers have had to become far more inclusive, drawing ideas and energy from their teams and preparing for a long period of upheaval. This has produced a more lasting change and has involved teams in ways that many have never experienced. We’re not likely to return to how things were before so the involvement and engagement of the team are crucially important. This also means the changes



that have been adopted and implemented have a better chance of being sustained in the future.

Managers have had to reset goals for their employees to suit the short-term and unknowable time horizon for performance during the Pandemic, the setting of more short-term, more fluid goals is something they can expect to continue doing from here.

Clarifying expectations has proved to be critically important during this crisis, even though we have already known for some time that employees are generally not clear what's expected of them. In conversations with employees, usually over video calls, managers have explored not just if their employees are clear about the work to be done, but also whether their working at home environment will allow them to do the work. Reviewing performance has also improved and managers are now engaging in regular formal and informal discussions about performance.

Managers have improved their supporting behaviours too with many employees noticing improved listening on calls, with many managers making good use of their coaching skills. Recognising the effort of employees is much more difficult in these conditions so managers have had to work extra hard to understand who's doing what and who's going above and beyond what's expected. The manager can't do this alone and this has helped managers to develop a more complete picture of performance by involving the team in talking about each other's work and outputs.

Switching to team meetings via video chat is not as simple as it sounds, and many managers found that keeping the team together and engaged took a lot of work. Some employees are inclined to become detached and distant when working remotely, so managers have had to become adept at noticing which employees are showing signs of disengagement or reduced motivation.



It has not been possible for many teams to conjure extra resources at a time like this, so managers and teams have worked to uncover previously hidden talent and capability in the team. Discovering someone in the team knows how to get the best out of Zoom, or someone knows how to create an automated process using Microsoft Office 365 – the discovery of hidden expertise has proved to be very valuable indeed during the constraints of a pandemic.

Finally, managers have realised the dramatic and vital importance of communication between them and their team members. Previously a manager could assume that silence means no problems. Now silence may mean something entirely different, so managers have been working hard to stay alert to potential problems and issues. The team wants to know how things are going and what's coming next, so the manager's ability to communicate effectively and empathically has grown in importance and impact.

Is this the future?

In the first few weeks of March as the impact of COVID-19 was becoming evident, many managers wisely resisted the temptation to speculate about the future, what would happen, or even how long this upheaval would last. As we contemplate when we might progress to the next stage of this experience, nobody can be sure what will happen or when things will change again, so all we can do is step into the future, one week at a time. In the meantime, try to remain agile in your ways of working. Regularly assess with your team what's working well and what's not working. Be open to changing things quickly to lock in learning and improvements. Recognise that the changes you have already adapted to as a team have taught you important lessons you should lean on when the next change arrives.



Question

The COVID-19 pandemic is the largest change my organisation has ever faced. Our focus was initially on the safety of employees and the shift to remote working. Are there other things we should be focusing on now to help the organisation get through this huge challenge?

Answer

The early view – a challenge of connectivity

You're right that initially, the focus of most businesses was to follow the Government guidance and instruct employees to work from home where possible. Many companies were not ready for this sudden shift to remote working, and many were faced with an initial connectivity challenge. I heard examples of companies placing orders for laptops, desks and all sorts of materials to help staff to switch to remote working. Likewise, people in parts of the country without high-speed internet suddenly rushed to get connected. This was only the first of a series of challenges.

The second wave – the HR challenge

While most managers would never admit it, a great many managers still like to keep their employees close so they can closely monitor what's being done and how it's being done. The micromanager is very much still with us. The micromanager is not given to easily trusting staff so to suddenly find your team are gone, dispersed around the country to work remotely, and you have no choice but to trust – well this is a seismic personal challenge to managers not inclined to trust easily.



The challenge of the sudden change to remote working also puts pressure on managers to establish and sustain connections with all team members. These connections need to take into account that the individual living circumstances of team members may be quite different. Some team members may be available all the time, while others are sharing a single computer with several family members with some perhaps attending virtual classes as part of their school work during the normal working day.

Managers are called to individualise their remote relationships and to find out what each person's best new working routine looks like and agree norms for communicating, meeting, interrupting, response times and so forth. This takes a lot of time and will put pressure on managers of large teams.

Then there's the question of productivity. Naturally, managers will need to redefine priorities and objectives for their teams, reset expectations about working hours, how decisions should be made and who needs to be informed or consulted with, and so on. Many employees working remotely tend to feel they should be more productive and can fall into the trap of spending much longer in front of the computer than they would if they were in the office. The manager has an important job here too, managing expectations about the working day and switching their managerial focus to managing outcomes rather than monitoring hours spent by remote employees in front of their computers.

The third wave – the cultural challenge



Assuming managers reach out early to their team members to establish regular connections, communications between the employee and their manager, and between employees should work well. It's not the same as being in the room together, of course, but it's a good alternative at these times. We don't want to create a situation where everything needs to flow through the manager like a hub. We want to create collaboration, sharing, and working together as best we can engender.

Each organisation has its own culture, and the question at this stage is how do we make that culture start to re-emerge. What would we do when we're at our best in the face to face setting? How can we start to make that happen now in small ways between some or all of us, or in the interactions between us and our customers or other outside parties? Jump-starting your culture has a profound effect on engagement in the team and the wider business. It also builds trust, and this is crucial to the long term culture, since trust built in times like these endures. People remember what it was like in a crisis, who stepped up for who, who went the extra mile and so on. How well the manager, and by extension, the business cared for the team will be crucial. Did the team feel safe, valued, appreciated? Was there a genuine focus on the human in all of this change and did the organisation connect with the team on a human level?

The answers to these questions will resonate for a long time when this crisis has passed. Finally, when we think about how the leadership communicated with the employees, we'll ask was it honest, was it consistent, did we get information at regular enough intervals, and did it make us feel safe and hopeful? As managers we can shape the answers to these questions through our actions today and in the coming weeks, and our actions will have a profound effect on the culture we need and want when this pandemic is finally over.



The fourth wave – the inevitable return

That brings us to the fourth wave, the challenge of the inevitable return. What we'll return to at this stage nobody can be sure. It seems like we won't simply pick up where we left off before COVID-19. It seems certain we'll be forced to look at many things with new eyes as a result of our experiences of working remotely and being constrained at home.

There is significant new learning here and the most critical thing is surely not to squander it or race past it in a desire to 'get back to normal'. Time devoted to capturing the main insights will be time well spent. It's also a simplification to assume that everyone now wants to work remotely, or that everyone wants to get back to the office. How we handle this rebalancing will be important. In their 2019 Digital worker survey, Analysts Gartner found only 10% of respondents said they liked to work exclusively from home, with the vast majority preferring a mix of home and office-based work. We need to carefully bring people back to the office and assess what mix works best from a productivity and engagement point of view.

This sudden change of circumstances has upended the routines of workers all over the planet and been replaced with new routines. How will we manage the fact that some people have created routines that work well or better than what they had before? We need to think about how we have this conversation and steer well clear of mandating change when we might be able to get a better overall result with some dialogue.

Many of us have quickly learned new ways of working together, using tools like video chat, and collaborative workspaces. In many cases, our IT colleagues have been trying to tell us about these tools for some time but we did not



listen. We now see the value of these tools and we should find a way to keep using whatever works.

Finally, it will be easy and understandable to move on from COVID-19 as soon as possible but we should recognise one sobering truth about our readiness. While many organisations had well-honed disaster recovery plans, knew what they would do if a fire broke out, or how they would cope with a heavy fall of snow or winter storm, most had no plans made for this kind of scenario. We can and must do better. We must capture the learning from this pandemic because it could happen again and we should have a comprehensive plan in place for that scenario.

Question

In a recent podcast I heard the contributors speak about the importance of stories when leaders are communicating. Where can I find stories that I can use when I'm communicating with my team?

Answer

Stories are one of the most powerful communication supports available to a leader, especially in today's workplace where employees are bombarded with information. A well-chosen and well-presented story transcends mere information by engaging the head and the heart, creating a lasting impression in memory as a result. If you've ever heard the old adage "people will forget what you say but they will never forget how you made them feel" you can glimpse some of the power of stories. I may forget some of the finer details but I remember the impact of what you said.



If you're not in the habit of using stories to enhance your messages to your employees, the first question you may have is where to find appropriate stories. This is not as difficult as it may appear. Leaders who use stories to great effect are always on the lookout for new stories. They can be seemingly-trivial observations in everyday situations that contain a nugget of wisdom about human behaviour. Or they may be observations over time about the shifting dynamic in a group going through a difficult experience. The most important point is to be on the lookout, and to pay attention to what's happening and what it is teaching us as participants or as observers. Observation alone is not enough though. Taking a few moments to reflect on what happened and why is crucial to finding the teachable moment in the story. Without this reflection it's likely you'll miss the essential value and will quickly forget what you observed.

Leaders who master the use of stories look for stories everywhere, not just in their own direct experience and interaction with others. Great stories can be found in newspapers, books, podcasts, videos and most other forms of recorded behaviour. The key is to distil the precise point you want to make from the story. For example, Steve Sasson, the 24 year-old inventor of the world's first digital camera prototype at Kodak in 1975 recalls management's reaction at the time as "That's cute. Don't tell anyone about it". The story of the invention of the digital camera is packed with learning but you need to decide what the point you want to reinforce is. Do you want to stress how great ideas can sometimes be blocked? Or perhaps you want to emphasise how established companies might not comprehend the full value of a new idea if it threatens an existing business line? Or you might want to show how we can downplay the value of ideas from younger staff members. What this illustrates is that knowing the point you want make will help you to choose an appropriate story.

The final point is about detail. The use of stories is a skill you need to practice. You know instinctively that a story that is too long will bore or confuse people. A story that has too much detail will also do that, but a story that's lacking any detail at all just makes you sound unprepared. Equally sharing a story that



reveals private information or that was shared with you in confidence will cause discomfort and distress in your audience.

My advice would be to start by paying attention to how others use stories in their communication. What do you notice about the kinds of stories they use, how long the stories are, and what kind of detail is included? Did you understand and remember the main point they were trying to make? Watch the reaction of others to the stories and start thinking about how stories could help you enhance your communication and leave people with a lasting memory about an important point you want to make.

Question

What's the best way to measure success of the OD in my organisation? How can I report the return on investment within the organisation?

Answer

When I think of organisations that are focused on improving their structures, systems, processes or people, one challenge that regularly crops up is how to tell if these efforts are producing results. How can we measure if there is any success at all? Often the question about measuring success or impact comes very late in the process and it's very difficult to show that the organisation is getting value from these development efforts. Here are some practical steps to consider when trying to measure the success of your OD efforts.

First, start in one area. If you have been focusing on making improvements in multiple areas, say your people and your processes, for example, pick one of these, to begin with. I'm not saying you can't focus on both, you just shouldn't. Pick one and make that your initial focus. In this way you won't be distracted, your attention won't be split between two or more data sets, and if you make a few mistakes you'll only do it in one area. These mistakes will make you even stronger when it's time to measure something else.

Next, ask yourself what's really important to measure. Avoid lists of things that you'd like to measure and instead try to draw out what would be a really solid



indicator that something valuable has happened. For example, in a recent client engagement, the organisation simply wanted line managers to spend more time interacting with their direct reports. The thing that mattered most was the amount of time each week that managers were available to their staff. Find one or two things that are really critical and focus on measuring them.

Next, keep the measurement approach simple. It might be tempting to dive in and start using a 360-degree feedback instrument, or to start building a complicated online survey tool, but you should ask yourself if this is really necessary. If it's too complicated to gather the data, chances are you will give up trying. Find a simple way to get access to the data you need, no matter how old fashioned or simplistic it may seem. Think about how often you need to gather data and commit to this measurement interval. Don't overcomplicate the data-gathering effort. Decide what you'll do and persist with your simple approach.

You might find that as you begin your measurement effort you learn some interesting things. People respond well to one approach but don't appreciate being asked to provide data at the frequency that you desire. Pay attention to what's working and what needs a tweak, and adjust as you go. You can't gather all the results in one go nor can you acquire all the experience about measuring success in one go. Be patient, be observant and be flexible.

As you start collecting data be mindful that you will interpret what the data means as it arrives. Humans have a tendency to reach for the first seemingly obvious explanation, but often we are wrong. Consider asking others to explain what they think the data means, not least those that provided it. Try to build a real understanding of the context and make sure that when you look at the data you keep an open mind and remain curious about all the things the data might mean.

Finally, a recent tweet by business innovator and author Nilofer Merchant caught my eye. She said: "When a tree no longer grows, don't look at the leaves but check the soil. When an organisation slows its innovation rate, check the toxic culture that makes it unsafe to bring newness".

Perhaps there's a lesson here too when we think about measuring success. It's tempting to view success as healthy green leaves above ground but that's



really only part of the story. It seems to me that we L&D professionals must provide a balanced picture of success so that we can confidently say we're not only growing well, but the underlying conditions bode well for much more of that success into the future.

Question

My CEO has told me that she thinks our staff need to be “tougher” and by that she means they should be more resilient. How do I go about making them tougher?

Answer

That’s a great question and one that is becoming increasingly prevalent as workloads increase but organisations are slow to recruit. There are lots of great models out there that define resilience and mental toughness, many of which come from the world of sport but a more interesting question before you consider how to develop resilience across your organisation is what does your CEO mean by toughness? Steve Bull, who writes extensively on this topic has identified four different types of toughness:

Recovering from Setbacks

Sustaining high performance

Delivering in high pressure situations

The courage to change

Each of these performance requirements is slightly different and requires a slightly different but complimentary set of skills. It would be worth exploring with your CEO the situations/behaviours that she has observed that have caused her request. As with any developmental intervention, while there are ways to develop the capability of your people to be tougher or more resilient under each of these circumstances, it is also worth considering the extent to



which organisational factors such as feedback, workload or process failure are contributing to the need for “tougher” people.

Question

We are thinking of reintroducing a graduate training programme for the first time since 2008. Any pointers?

Answer

You are not alone in reintroducing a graduate training programme. Many organisations put their graduate programmes on ice during the crisis and are now taking tentative steps to reintroduce them. However in the intervening period, on-campus recruitment has now changed significantly and it is worth bearing a few things in mind.

Graduates now have an incredible array of choices and you need to consider how your organisation will appeal to them and how you would like to represent your employer brand. This is critical as graduates are far choosier than they were in the past and may make a decision not to employ before you even have a chance to engage with them. Your brand will be represented by traditional methods such as posters and brochures but will also include your website, application process, selection process and even the venue you use for your final interviews.

If possible, you need to manage your reputation on-campus using peer support. The concept of on-campus ambassadors has gained increasing traction in the last few years and many organisations are now utilising students to spread their message on-campus, get people to attend presentations and deliver traditional marketing such as putting up posters etc.

Whatever your employer brand, you need to be sure that you deliver on your promises internally. Part of the latest thinking on employee engagement is that it is primarily a function of people’s expectations. In the context of a graduate programme, this means being clear with graduates about the



experience you can deliver and then ensuring that you manage their time in your organisation so that those promises are delivered.

Finally you need to consider the development that you will provide them over the course of the programme. This can include training but should also include consideration of the experience that they get, the feedback that they get, whether or not you provide them with additional exposure via project work and whether you provide them with additional exposure to senior management. Crucial to all of your developmental considerations is whether the development that you provide them with, positions them for future success across the organisation.

Question

I'm considering rolling out 360 assessment across my organisation. Any suggestions on what tool is best?

Answer

360 assessments are an area rich in research and there is a significant amount of verified data dealing with when and how best to use them.

I am going to leave aside the issue of using 360 assessment for performance reviews and simply focus on using the for developmental purposes. In terms of whether there is one "best" tool for 360 assessment, the simple answer is that there is not. There are many well-validated tools out there, many of them are based on the same underlying principles and developed using the same methodology. The decision is based less on which is best and more on which suits you best. Some tools provide international benchmarks, some may be more closely aligned to your competency framework, some will differentiate to a greater or lesser extent the capabilities required to operate at an executive level rather than a managerial level.

What the research does tell us quite clearly is the following;

It is critical that feedback from a 360 tool is not simply presented to the individual without explanation or context. Feedback should always be



presented by a trained coach.

Individuals should be allowed to select their own raters as they are much more likely to accept that the feedback is valid.

Once the feedback has been provided, it is critical that the individual commits to new behaviours and begins the process of behavioural change (ideally supported by means of internal or external coaching). Without this commitment and follow through, 360 feedback is no more effective than any other leadership intervention.

Question

I'm redesigning our company's performance management process and one of the issues the CEO has asked me to address is whether or not we should introduce forced rankings. Any thoughts?

Answer

The issue of forced ranking or weighting of performance scores is one that is hotly debated at the moment. In fact, much of the debate has now moved on to whether or not any form of score should be included in a performance review but we can deal with that at another time.

Forced rankings were popularised during the mid to late 1990's as a way to drive performance. By forcing managers to rank or weight a fixed percentage of their team as below average, average and above average (or a variation of this using 1-5), companies felt that performance would improve. In some organisations, appearing in the bottom rating for a consecutive number of performance cycles was a trigger for a conversation regarding an individual's future within that organisation. Some companies saw improvements as under-performers would either exit the organisation (voluntarily or otherwise) or improve their performance to such an extent that they would not be included in the bottom tier of performance. Either way, the organisation appeared to



improve as the gap between the top performers and the bottom tier diminished. The size of this gap has been proven to be negatively correlated to the performance of an organisation or team. The greater the gap between top and bottom, the poorer the overall performance.

Forced rankings also have the benefit of ensuring that managers move away from rating everybody as “meets performance” or 3/5. This forces managers to be more discerning and to consider the constituent elements of performance in greater detail than they might ordinarily.

There are however a number of issues with forced rankings and I will deal with three of them here. Firstly, despite the evidence that high performing teams have a smaller gap between the top and bottom performers, there is no evidence to suggest that team performance is distributed evenly across an organisation. If you will allow me a sporting analogy, should a team that performs like Bayern Munich receive the same allocation of performance scores as one that performs like Peterborough United (apologies to any fans of Peterborough United). Depending on the size of your organisation, there may be similar discrepancies across teams and functions and forced rankings are not sufficiently nimble or sophisticated to take account of this.

Secondly, forced rankings are less likely to foster a culture of engagement and creativity as employees focus on staying out of trouble and ensuring that they don't appear in the bottom ranking. As organisations become leaner and the requirement for them to become more agile increases, the need for engaged, creative employees has never been more pressing. It is arguable whether a culture underpinned by forced rankings will truly drive engagement.

Finally, forced rankings result in a performance management discussion that concentrates almost exclusively on the score and not on the performance. Your people are unlikely to hear the feedback they require and deserve if they are concentrating on their rating. In addition, some managers can believe that the feedback is irrelevant provided that their people get their score. If you wish your revised performance management process to simply provide you with performance scores, then forced rankings can be fine. If however, you would like your performance management process to do what it is supposed to, drive performance, then I would argue that you should not introduce forced



rankings. Indeed, I would argue that you should consider abandoning scores altogether but that is an answer to a different question.

In summary, my recommendation is that you do not incorporate forced ranking of performance in your revised performance management process. The quality of the relationship between managers and their teams, the quality of the conversations that they engage in, the honesty of the feedback that they provide to each other and the openness of managers and their teams to provide that feedback on an individual and collective level will all play a significant role in driving the performance of your organisation. When redesigning your performance management process, try to ensure that it encourages rather than discourages these behaviours.