

Is COVID-19 Shining a Light on Leadership?

Mallikarjuna N.L.^{1,*}, Apeksha Gupte²

Abstract

As the world wades through the aftermath of pandemic, with months of lockdowns and social distancing, the disruption is making way for new dynamics. This study outlines how learning and development teams in the various organizations can help employees and leaders react and respond to the crisis. There are different strategies in which the business leaders help and lead through business disruptions caused by COVID-19. In the need of the hour, the organizations have set protocols for remote operations so that it does not affect the productivity of employees. The leaders in the organizations have introduced a list of best practices that enables the different companies to create an employee-centric policies that also ensure smooth business operations. Amid the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreaks across India, firms have begun to operate on a work-from-home (WFH) basis. Due to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, the Indian government has urged employers to implement work-from-home models across all industries. The Central Government has also advocated for remote working and also issued an advisory for the working of the private sector. However, India has yet to make any significant revisions to its current labour regulations to accommodate changes in employment conditions brought on by COVID-19. Getting a handle on the work-from-home paradigm, especially for companies with no prior experience with remote operations. Therefore, this study depicts how it is very important that the management along with the legal and HR departments, create a set of standards for their staff to follow, in order to help the transition from being physically in the office to remote collaboration go more smoothly. These recommendations will guarantee that Indian enterprises have access to best practices, ensure uninterrupted business operations and well-being of the employees for operating remotely.

Keywords: Pandemic, COVID-19, disruptions, Work from Home (WFH), amendments

INTRODUCTION

For business leaders, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated unprecedented change. More than ever, the health of businesses is inextricably related to the health of employees, the health of society, and the health of the environment. Changes in our everyday lives that were previously unfathomable are forcing businesses to adapt rapidly and find innovative, unconventional methods to operate and survive. Leaders are discovering new ports in this global storm as global uncertainty makes it increasingly difficult for them to establish their footing. Those who prefer to operate from a place of clarity are exploring new ports in this global storm.

*Author for Correspondence
Mallikarjuna N.L.
E-mail: mallikswt@gmail.com

¹Dean & Chairman, Department of Business Management, Karnataka State Akkamahadevi Women's University, Vijayapura, Karnataka, India

²Research Scholar and Lecturer, Department of Business Management, Karnataka State Akkamahadevi Women's University, Vijayapura, Karnataka, India

Received Date: November 11, 2021
Accepted Date: November 20, 2021
Published Date: December 27, 2021

Citation: Mallikarjuna N.L., Apeksha Gupte. Is COVID-19 Shining a Light on Leadership? NOLEGEIN Journal of Leadership and Strategic Management. 2021; 4(2): 22–27p.

For leaders all throughout the world, the current scenario is a huge challenge. The 'leadership challenge' is made even more difficult by the ambiguity that exists in this situation. Today's leaders are confronted with a plethora of 'leadership

issues' and competing demands, the majority of which do not have a simple binary solution. It is critical to consider competing viewpoints, especially when both perspectives appear to be rational; it is almost like a game that cannot be won. In short, the expectations on leadership are unparalleled. Some people believe that a crisis brings out the best in people. They put aside little grudges, banded together for a common goal, and focused on assisting others. Fear, anxiety, and tiredness lurk beneath the strategic decisions and real caring. Leaders must redistribute damaged supply lines, enable a remote workforce, and deliver bad news to employees while also maintaining their own vitality to continue to inspire and motivate others [1].

The worldwide coronavirus has put the leaders to the test, and many had to adapt rapidly to protect their teams and organization. The paradigm shift in working methods has been compared to earlier crises such as World War II, and much as that conflict sparked social and economic upheaval, the influence of coronavirus will be far-reaching, potentially changing the way we work forever. With that in mind, here are five skills good leaders have encountered the threat of coronavirus to their businesses and crucially, to help it thrive again once the crisis moves on:

Remote Management

A no-brainer right now, leaders have been able to manage and develop a dispersed workforce, despite their remote locations, and keep teams aligned managing a remote team is considerably different than managing a house staff. More delegation, trust, and transparency are required, as well as more effort to obtain face-to-face time with each member (through the right video conferencing software). Managers who do not adapt to remote working will have a harder time maintaining productivity and morale during this difficult period. Even once the crisis has gone, more and more workers will demand working-from-home as a standard because of their recent experiences. Managing remotely must be a string to the bow if you want to succeed as a leader in the future. As a result, remote management will be a leadership problem in the near future [2].

Well-being Management

Isolation from others is, well, isolating. Humans are social animals, and long periods of continuous remote work will have an effect on the employee's mental health. Employee motivation and productivity will suffer at best, and their health may suffer at worst. In the current scenario, the leaders have ensured that their employees' well-being comes first, and that they will have support they need to keep themselves happy and healthy while working remote working. Some businesses have developed a handbook to aid in the management of the team's well-being, as well as a suite of complimentary training programmes to help boost employee morale in the coming months. Even when the crisis has passed, these tools will be useful in ensuring that the organization's well-being is always a top priority.

Agility and Adaptability

Being able to adopt quickly to new and unforeseen challenges is a useful skillset at the best of times, but is absolutely vital in a post-coronavirus world. During periods of uncertainty, it is quickly decisive action which gets team and organization through. By being highly reactive to new developments and agile enough to adopt new solution, a leader can help his team survive and thrive. Adapting quickly to remote working, establishing new systems to allow for working from home is an excellent example of agility and adapting, but more agile decisions will be required before the crisis is over.

Skill Strategy and Talent Pipeline Management

To succeed in times of crisis, a leader requires more than just agility. It is also crucial to have a strategy in place, especially when it comes to workforce requirements. Business does not stop just because workers work from home, and if the recovery is to be delayed, executives must have a sound strategy in place for acquiring new talent with new skill sets in the remote working world. The working world will have to adapt to the new normal ways, including interviewing, recruiting and onboarding staff remotely. To help this, the leaders have created a guide to onboarding remotely, with insights into

how one can manage staffing and continue to hire during the crisis. This skill set will allow employers to hire people only on the basis of their skills rather than their location in the future. From your home office, a leader might be able to oversee an international team of professionals [3].

Team Development and Upskilling

With the future unknown and fears about the workforce frequent, the best thing a leader can do is keep the workforce and put them first, even if it means furloughing them temporarily. During this time, leaders should assess their team's abilities and strive to figure out how they may be improved for the future. The ability to work from a distance is essential. But coding, design, data analysis are skills that can be picked up online and developed remotely. A leader, by offering the team a chance to develop their skills, whether furloughed or not will demonstrate your dedication to their development, as well securing a strong, skilled workforce ready for new challenges and opportunities once we emerge from the coronavirus and move forward for the next challenge.

“DIFFERENT WAYS IN WHICH COVID-19 IS SHINING A LIGHT ON LEADERSHIP”

Many employees have been forced to work from home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemics, and the magnitude of the move to remote work is startling. This quick shift has brought to light issues with remote work that may have gone unnoticed when the practice was more limited. Two surveys were done to better understand these issues. A total of 441 worldwide HR leaders were polled during the first half of the month, with questions concerning the most important difficulties they were encountering during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as what steps they had done and what had worked effectively in the organisation. One-fifth of HR leaders cited the overall difficulty of migrating from onsite to remote work, while others cited specific problems, such as keeping remote staff engaged (17%), productive (7%), and connected (7%).[4]. In the second study, over 400 HR leaders and other employees indicated the most important activities their firms are taking to encourage remote work. The respondents worked in a wide range of businesses, from startups to huge corporations, spanning 19 industries, but virtually all (93%) worked in companies where a significant number of employees worked from home as a result of COVID-19. A natural language processing engine that classifies text into hundreds of granular subjects and actions leaders may do, such as “share best practises on remote work” and “organize virtual social activities”, was used to discover relevant patterns in their comments. As a result, these themes encapsulated the majority of the suggestions about how firms may assist employees in making the shift to remote work.

It may appear that providing the necessary hardware, internet access, and communication tools to enable remote work is simple blocking and tackling. When asked how company-provided or subsidized technology, such as hardware, communication platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, high-bandwidth home Wi-Fi, or office furniture, 45% of all respondents said it helped them move to remote work. Providing a stipend to purchase new home-office equipment or sending employees a work-from-home kit is a one-time expense that businesses should avoid. Most epidemiologists expect COVID-19 outbreaks to repeat and recommend term quarantines until a vaccine is generally accessible. Many employees will continue to work from home after herd immunity is achieved, and some may transition to permanent remote models [5].

THE PRINCIPLES THAT HELP LEADERS TO MANAGE MORE EFFECTIVELY DURING COVID-19

Maintain Frequent, Transparent and Consistent Communication

Employees who work from home may feel isolated from their employers, and over half of those polled (47%) said that efficient communication was critical in their transition to remote work. Using natural language processing to uncover major themes in responses, we observed that the most effective communication has five qualities: it is frequent, honest, a two-way discussion, easy to navigate, and consistent. These are general communication principles, but they are critical when a company's staff is dispersed.

Frequent

More than one-tenth of all respondents said their firm helped them adjust to remote work by providing frequent communication. To increase the frequency of communication, many companies have introduced daily or weekly updates from the CEO and made them widely accessible to all employees in real time. When it comes to the type of information employees want on a regular basis, video updates and webinars were scored higher than emails.

Transparent

Employees admired leaders who explained their actions and provided justifications for their decisions. When determining what worked best, the second-best response emphasised “frequent and total transparency in communication regarding business impact, decision-making, board remarks, and leadership mind set”. Another HR executive stated, “Being honest about the financial damage (COVID-19) is causing the company and together seeking alternatives for keeping everyone instead of laying people off” [6].

Easy to Navigate

On topics like remote work and COVID-19, several responders mentioned centralised information hubs. Top-rated resources included frequently asked questions (FAQs), virtual training tools on developing themes (such as managing virtual teams and leading online meetings), archival video messages from CEOs, and remote-work success stories from colleagues. They also emphasised the need of clearly conveying HR policies, such as sick days, time off, and expected work hours, which were especially essential during COVID-19.

Consistent

Conflicting messages from various parts of the company were regarded as the most common barrier to successful communication. All stakeholders, including front-line employees, remote workers, vendors, subcontractors, consultants, and customers, should receive a unified message from various functions such as HR, finance, legal, and operations.

Middle managers and front-line team lead need to confirm that their communication is consistent with the top teams.

Provide Support for Physical and Mental Health

It is not unexpected that 15% of responders cited company-sponsored COVID-19 tests, masks, and flu vaccines as beneficial measures in the middle of a global epidemic. Their organisations had taken steps to ensure that their employees’ physical well-being was protected. Employees were nearly twice as likely (29%) to laud actions to promote mental wellness and assist them combat social isolation, which is surprising. Although social isolation among remote employees is not a new issue (in fact, 6 out of 10 remote workers reported feeling lonely before to COVID-19), the pandemic has helped to bring the issue to light. Regular check-ins by managers to see how their employees are doing personally and professionally, according to the poll, is the most effective way to combat isolation. This technique was cited by one out of every ten respondents who completed the COVID-19 Pulse of HR survey. When over 2,000 visitors to the platform ranked a list of responses, those that included staff check-ins received the highest scores. Employee check-ins were noted 21% of the time in top-quartile responses (based on favourable votes received), compared to 7% of bottom-quartile responses.

Lunch and learns, coffee breaks, online workout classes, and happy hours were all listed as approaches for firms to help employees overcome social isolation. These activities were not as popular with voters as personal check-ins, and they were equally likely to be listed in bottom-quartile and top-quartile responses. Online happy hours and yoga sessions are great ways to foster social bonding, but they cannot replace leaders physically checking in with their teams.

Employees, in general, valued emotional assistance, particularly from senior leaders. For example, one CEO called every employee who tested positive for COVID-19, while another sent delicious cookies and a handwritten note to everyone. A retailer's senior executives formed a fund to assist employees in need, and they personally contributed considerable sums. Employees also praised company activities that were specifically meant to assist them in managing stress and maintaining mental health. Starting an online mental health discussion board, providing mental wellness resources, launching anonymous telemedicine counselling services, and coaching managers on how to tackle stress and mental wellness with their staff were some of the specific initiatives.

Help Distributed Employees Stay Productive and Engage

Remote work can increase productivity, especially for tasks that need little coordination with co-workers. Allowing employees to work from home increases productivity by 4% for patent examiners and 13% for call centre staff, for example. Working from home, on the other hand, may reduce productivity when employees need to collaborate with other teams. According to the poll results, one useful short-term step is for leaders to acknowledge that productivity may suffer during the lockdown and to inform staff that this is normal.

Longer term, however, organizations will need to evaluate the performance of remote workers. Most employers have not yet cracked that code. The same study that indicated that remote call centre employees were more productive also found that they were less likely to be promoted than on-site employees. According to an analysis of over 1.4 million Culture 500 employee reviews from more than 500 of the largest employers in the United States, employees who enjoyed remote work were more likely to speak negatively about how well their organisation recognised and rewarded performance, their chances for promotion, and the clarity of job expectations. As more work is done remotely, organisations must rethink performance reviews to ensure that productive employees are not penalised due to a lack of face time in the office.

Productivity can be boosted by holding frequent, short meetings. In normal circumstances, employees may complain about meetings, but many COVID-19 Pulse of HR respondents reported that daily team huddles helped them stay focused and engaged when working remotely. Structured procedures for sharing remote work best practises and recommendations were also popular. Executives and board members at one business used their twice-weekly all-hands meetings to share instances of what was working (and what was not) while working remotely, while another company gathered and shared employee success stories on its intranet.

Manage the Paradox of Remote Work-Life Balance

When it comes to work-life balance, remote work creates a contradiction. On the one hand, working from home decreases commuting time and allows employees to adjust their schedules to spend more time with their family. Employees were willing to accept an 8% wage cut if they could work from home rather than in an office, according to a 2017 survey. The popularity of remote work may explain why, in the decade leading up to the COVID-19 outbreak, the number of US firms offering a work-from-home option more than doubled.

Remote work, on the other hand, can make employees feel obligated to be available 24 h a day, 7 days a week, and blur the line between their professional and personal life. Remote workers consistently clock more hours than their onsite counterparts, according to research. A Gallup poll performed before the COVID-19 epidemic found that when working remotely, US employees worked an extra hour per day, but a NordVPN study found that remote workers were logged on for 2 to 3 h more every day during the quarantine than they were before the shutdown. It is, of course, far more difficult to preserve the line between work and professional life when distant employment is required and children's schools and day care facilities are closed.

Allowing employees to change their schedules was the most popular strategy to assist them manage work-life balance, according to 10% of respondents was making allowances for them to adjust their schedules to accommodate personal obligations. There are some lists of the most highly ranked ways that organizations helped their employees maintain work-life balance while working remotely. Other popular policies included adjusting employees' workloads to accommodate family responsibilities and making it easier for employees to take paid time off.

Do not Lose Sight of Your Strategic Priorities

More than 70% of Selling and Production 500 firms disclosed strategic priorities prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, which are forward-looking objectives that focus an organization's attention on the few choices that matter most likely to be successful in the future. Common strategic aims include improving products and services, developing innovation, improving operations, cultivating people, and implementing a digital transformation.

CONCLUSION

It is reasonable that an once-in-a-lifetime disaster would divert attention away from current concerns, but it is also a mistake. Strategic objectives defined before to COVID-19 will, in many circumstances, remain as relevant or even more so in the future. The change to remote labour, on the other hand, introduces significant obstacles to accomplishing these goals. Gaining market share is difficult in the best of times, let alone when demand is dwindling. When the majority of workers work from home, leaders must find out how to create and maintain a strong corporate culture.

The change to remote labour, on the other hand, opens up opportunity to make faster progress on strategic goals. Remote learning possibilities were identified by nearly 10% of respondents as one of the most successful initiatives their organisation had taken to improve their abilities during the quarantine. The abrupt transition to remote work allows businesses to rethink existing processes in order to improve efficiency and speed their digital revolutions.

Remote work will continue to grow in popularity, bringing with it new obstacles and opportunities. To manage the transition to a more remote workforce, organisations all around the world are experimenting with novel management methods. We are still in the early stages, and it is unclear which of these techniques will stand the test of time. Leaders can no longer afford to wait for conclusive outcomes; they must act immediately to assist their people and organisations in making the transition to remote work. This study, which summarises preliminary findings, will aid leaders in navigating an uncertain future.

REFERENCES

1. The survey results, including the most popular best practices, are available at www.covidhrpulse.com.
2. Begley S. (2020 May 1) Three Potential Futures for COVID-19: Recurring Small Outbreaks, a Monster Wave, or Persistent Crisis. [Online]. Stat. www.statnews.com.
3. Gartner CFO Survey. (2020 Apr 3) Reveals 74% Intend to Shift Some Employees to Remote Work Permanently. [Online]. Gartner. www.gartner.com.
4. Gallup Poll Data. (2013 Jul 12). Remote Workers Log More Hours and Are Slightly More Engaged. Gallup. [Online]. <https://news.gallup.com>. Data from VPN provider NordVPN during COVID-19: Davis MF, Green J. (2020 Apr 23). Three Hours Longer, the Pandemic Workday Has Obliterated Work-Life Balance. Bloomberg. [Online]. www.bloomberg.com. Noonan and Glass. The Hard Truth. Found that working remotely increases the odds that employees will work overtime compared with similar employees who only work onsite. 38–45.
5. Sull D, Turconi S, Sull C, et al. Turning Strategy Into Results. MIT Sloan Management Review. 2018 Spring; 59(3): 9–20.
6. Sull D, Turconi S. How to Recognize a Strategic Priority When You See One. MIT Sloan Management Review. 2017 Sep 28. <https://sloanreview.mit.edu>.