

How to boost morale in uncertain times

The only certainty in life is that there will be uncertainty - having a clear plan on how to keep employees engaged and connected can help mitigate these times.



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Most businesses are no strangers to challenges. However, the current global crisis has created several new challenges for businesses and employees alike. Among these new difficulties that need to be dealt with are persistent pressures that erode morale over time. Unhappy, stressed employees are less likely to perform efficiently, and it is every company's responsibility to ensure their employees' mental and emotional well-being is taken care of during this stressful time.

Lyndy van den Barselaar, managing director at ManpowerGroup South Africa, says: "Employees rely on their employers to guide and direct them in times of crisis. As millions around the world try to adapt to working remotely and disrupted work environments, it is critical that companies lead the way."

Here are some ways that businesses can help improve morale when it is needed most in times of uncertainty and crisis:

1. Create mentorship networks

Social connection is especially important when workers are scattered across locations. Encourage your team to connect both for personal and professional reasons - a positive step toward supporting mental health. At the same time, it can also provide long-term opportunities, learning pathways and help people think beyond the crisis of the moment.

A mentor can help younger employees identify areas for growth and development, and provide a low-stress opportunity to have career conversations. Don't overlook reverse mentorships, whereby junior employees (often younger in age) help more senior ones learn and adapt to new technology. At some point, times of uncertainty will shift back to stability, and at that time, having existing mentor relationships to build on will become even more valuable.

"We all have a great deal to learn from each other, and now is as good a time as any to build and develop relationships that encourage knowledge-sharing," says van den Barselaar.

2. Encourage moments of light-heartedness

In times of great crisis, leaders might feel it's hard or even inappropriate to be anything other than serious, but everyone needs moments of positivity and light-heartedness from time to time. It's one of the most important factors of job satisfaction, but one of the hardest to get right, and key to creating an employee-centric work environment. This could be in the shape of virtual after-work mixers, a business development day, or simply opening up communication channels and encouraging staff to share their news on your intranet or group chat. When staff get along, they are far more likely to boost one another's morale.

"South Africans are incredibly social people, and the lockdown is severely impacting our interpersonal communication. Loneliness is a real problem for those who are used to being in an office environment, and are now home-bound. Lifting the mood with non-work-related gatherings is important to giving back that sense of community that people are missing," adds van den Barselaar.

3. Model and promote kindness

Kindness has always been an important leadership trait, but it's even more business critical in uncertain times that require empathy and understanding. In a survey of 51,836 leaders, a tiny percentage - just one in every 2,000 - were rated at the bottom quartile in terms of likeability, but in the top quartile in terms of overall leadership effectiveness. Kind and likeable leaders will be transformative when their teams need this trait the most.

Van den Barselaar says: "Kindness is one of the best ways to boost employee morale. It costs nothing, but it buys you infinite goodwill. It has been proven again and again that people react significantly more positively, and put in greater effort at work, when their manager exhibits kindness and compassion."

4. Celebrate small victories

It's easy to get wrapped up in routines and challenges. But even when businesses are at their most stressed - and especially then - it's important to pause and notice the accomplishments of colleagues. As a bonus, when leaders pay attention to catching their team doing something right, they are less likely to negatively stew over their problems. The positivity will be reflected back on mood and productivity.

"Improving morale in a difficult environment takes work, but it's worth it. Slowing down, paying attention to the needs of the team, and taking deliberate actions can help build momentum into a beneficial upward cycle," concludes van den Barselaar.