Surviving the ‘COVID Marathon’

What started out as a sprint to remote work has become a fatiguing marathon. For organizations to survive, experts say, leaders need to build workforce endurance.
The problem:
Even with a vaccine, the convergence of professional and personal is likely to continue well after the pandemic is over.

Why it matters:
Employees are still reporting heightened levels of burnout and stress, prompting concerns among leaders about workforce durability in a fully remote or even hybrid remote-office environment.

The solution:
Build workforce endurance using a “deployment model” to help employees adapt and cope with their new environment.

In the classic 1993 comedy Groundhog Day, Bill Murray plays a sardonic TV weatherman cursed with reliving the same day in the same town with the same people doing the same thing. There’s no escaping this recurring time loop, leaving him feeling empty and hopeless and struggling to find ways to accept his new reality.

It’s sort of like how work is done now. Or as John Ammendola, president and CEO of Ohio-based Grange Insurance, puts it, “The next 180 days are going to be no different than the previous 180 days.”

For leaders like Ammendola, that’s a scary thought. After all, things were supposed to be better by now—COVID-19 vaccines were supposed to be widely available, the economy was supposed to have rebounded,
and all those workers who were laid off last year were supposed to have been rehired. But instead, new strains of the virus are spreading, vaccinations are lagging, the economy isn’t adding back jobs, and unemployment is ticking up again.

The result is an exhausted and burned-out collective global workforce. Survey after survey reveals that the burdens of job insecurity, remote work, and added personal responsibilities are creating extreme stress and anxiety for workers. LTG (ret) Bill Mayville, a Korn Ferry senior advisor who consults on leadership, technology, and cybersecurity issues, compares the current working environment to a military deployment where leaders and workers are battling a powerful adversary: fatigue. “Leaders are increasingly concerned about the endurance of their employees,” says Mayville.

The concern is well-grounded. On average, burnout costs organizations $120 billion to $190 billion a year, and individuals who suffer from burnout take 14 months to two years to recover. It’s already a deep hole to dig out of, and all the evidence suggests it’s only going to get deeper. COVID is accelerating the digitization of business and, if conventional wisdom is correct, remote work will become a bigger and more central part of everyday life. Thinking about it in the context of deployment, Mayville says, leaders have to consider that they are taking workers out of familiar environments and putting them into unfamiliar ones that contain a certain level of isolation, uncertainty, and risk. “In the beginning it was about workforce preservation, then the focus shifted to workforce productivity,” says Mayville. “Now the impetus for leaders is on creating workforce endurance.”
Perspectives

Grange Insurance has about 1,200 employees across 13 states selling personal and commercial insurance. Prior to the pandemic, the bulk of its workforce was on-site in Columbus, with only about one-third of employees working remotely in other areas of Ohio, Wisconsin, or elsewhere. Ammendola says during the first six months of the crisis, employees from everywhere pulled together and were running on pure adrenaline. “The rush of the call to action carried them through,” he says.

After the rush, however, comes the crash, and Ammedola says employees are naturally having a hard time staying engaged and motivated. As much as he worries about the current situation, he’s even more concerned about navigating a post-COVID hybrid model. “At least now everyone is playing on the same field,” he says. “Engagement will get more splintered when that is gone.” Put another way, it’s one thing for leaders to navigate a Zoom call with a team of 20, but it’s a totally different dynamic if five people are in a room, six are on video, and seven are dialing in. “Ironically, that’s not as optimal as what we have right now,” Ammendola says.

Furthering the deployment analogy, however, Mayville says one way to prepare for that inevitable reality is to focus on the “squad effect,” wherein a network of frontline player-coaches create cohesion and foster trust. “People have a higher tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity when they have something big to rally around,” says Mayville. While the plan comes from the CEO, successfully carrying it out depends on the credibility and authenticity of frontline leaders to initiate engagement and instill purpose in the mission, he says.
Ways to Build Workforce Endurance

1. Create the “squad effect”
   Activate frontline leaders to build trust and restore camaraderie among team, unit, and division members.

2. Circulate with a purpose
   Devise a cadence for connecting with team members that includes defining a purpose and desired outcome for each meeting.

3. Build energy and engagement
   Accelerate what should go faster and slow down what requires deeper thinking or is not urgent.

4. Find your rallying cry
   What is that big believable goal that everyone can share in and be inspired and engaged to achieve?
To be sure, as organizations sort through different hybrid work models, leaders worry that the more spread out the workforce, the more likely people are to feel they are missing out. Thomas Crane, vice president of human resources and communications with the construction engineering company China Construction America, calls it “the crisis of left-out-ism.” He says, “The challenge we are trying to figure out is how, with a globally distributed remote workforce, to keep people connected.”

Solving that challenge isn’t as simple as greater collaboration and teamwork. It involves rethinking the employee experience, bridging communication gaps, and linking productivity to purpose. Michael Eichenwald, a senior client partner with the Korn Ferry Advisory practice who focuses on global financial markets, says leaders have been checking in with employees at a regular pace and cadence for months, and all that’s led to is video fatigue and suppressed emotions. What’s missing, he says, is a purpose and desired outcome for each connection. “Leaders need to understand who they are engaging, why they are engaging them, and to what effect,” he says. “That’s the connective tissue that leads to increased endurance.”

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The hope was that 2021 would bring more certainty to the business environment. But with nearly 3.5 million people filing for unemployment in January and only 49,000 jobs created during the month, organizations are already rethinking their forecasts for the year. Moreover, while everyone wants to see the pandemic end, one-third of Americans still say they are unsure if they will get vaccinated, according to the latest data.

Maryjo Charbonnier, chief human resources officer at the media company Wolters Kluwer, says the cumulative effect of these factors is leading to a wearing down of the workforce. “Employees are starting to lose their resiliency in the face of the sustained assault of uncertainty,” she says.

The only way organizations can surmount this collective psychological hurdle is by building workforce endurance. Indeed, if endurance is the power to overcome a difficult situation without giving way, then leaders need to build it among their workforces as a competitive advantage. Mayville casts the idea of workforce endurance as a way to reinforce an organization’s culture and values regardless of the operating environment. Grounding decisions in that manner will help leaders put mechanisms in place to arm employees with the technical and emotional skills needed to toggle seamlessly between whatever hybrid environment works best for the organization. “Structure is gone for much of the workforce, so it’s up to leaders to restore resiliency and help employees adapt and cope to the environment they have now,” Mayville says.
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