In the age of social distancing amid COVID-19, what makes work, well, work?

Disruption abounds. Many companies have shut down travel and enacted mandatory working from home, where they can. Employees are grappling with chaotic home working environments—or continuing to come to work, uneasily, for jobs that can’t be done anywhere else.

What can organizations do at this critical moment to keep work going—and, importantly, to care for and guide their people at a time of tremendous stress?

Let’s examine the issue from the point of view of both leaders and employees—then turn to some practical solutions that address both perspectives.
As leaders, the key to addressing both organizational and employee concerns such as these is to act with empathy and understanding. They must not only engage but also enable employees to succeed.

Engagement is the “want to” of work. Are employees committed to the organization, and are they willing to put in extra effort for the good of the organization? Enablement is the “can do.” Are employees’ skills and abilities fully utilized in their roles, and does the organizational environment support them in getting work done?

Keeping teams motivated and positioned to succeed today is already a demanding task, with business environments evolving rapidly and the workforce becoming increasingly diverse, mobile, and remote. Challenging times make engagement and enablement even more critical—but also more difficult to sustain.

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<tr>
<th>WHAT’S ON EMPLOYEES’ MINDS?</th>
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<td>Worry over personal or family health concerns and job or financial security.</td>
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<td>Personal challenges—including lack of access to food and other supplies.</td>
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<td>Anxiety generated from non-stop news updates and ever-changing requirements from the government.</td>
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<td>Work environment challenges, like glitchy tech, kids at home, or safety concerns in the workplace.</td>
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<td>Difficulty connecting with co-workers and customers.</td>
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<td>Uncertain company performance going forward.</td>
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<td>Loss of full participation from employees, leading to stalled projects or initiatives.</td>
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<td>Potential attrition due to overwhelming personal demands on employees.</td>
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In 2009, we asked leaders from the World’s Most Admired Companies what the global financial crisis taught them about employee engagement. The chief takeaway? When you start out with strong employee engagement, you’re already in a position of strength, with an opportunity to grow positive employee sentiment. In fact, 69% of the World’s Most Admired Companies told us that employee engagement was higher after the global financial crisis of 2008 than before.

“Our employees are a tremendous source of strength and consistency, which is even more evident through a downturn,” one leader told us. “It reinforces creating a strong reservoir of employee engagement and goodwill at all times to help you win during difficult times.”

That doesn’t mean you can coast on goodwill, as you risk eroding the support your employees show for you. And if your employee engagement needed improvement before the crisis struck, there is no magic wand to wave to fix it overnight. In either scenario, the actions you take right now will impact your employees’ engagement as the crisis abates and will impact productivity and commitment down the road.
Follow these ten approaches as you rally your team behind you, making sure that you can build upon existing goodwill or bring flagging engagement up.

A quote often attributed to Napoleon holds that “THE LEADER’S ROLE IS TO DEFINE REALITY, THEN GIVE HOPE.”
FREQUENT, CANDID, CONSISTENT, AND PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

There’s no such thing as overcommunicating right now. Things are changing fast, and leaders must connect with employees in real time—as real people. Candor is especially valuable, as everyone’s “honesty radar” is on high alert.

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<td>Make a quickly shifting strategy clear, and constantly build alignment for change (albeit change not initiated by the organization itself).</td>
<td>Empathy from leaders reduces stress, while candor builds understanding and feelings of empowerment to act.</td>
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<td>Create engagement by fostering an empathic environment.</td>
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2.

PUT HEALTH AND SAFETY AT THE TOP OF THE AGENDA

Engagement is an exchange relationship. If organizations want employees to do and deliver more, then employees must feel valued as people. That’s especially critical when health concerns intersect with work responsibilities. It is best to tailor the messages for different employee groups who will be in different places practically and emotionally.

GOOD FOR THE ORGANIZATION

Guard your most critical asset—your employees—both physically and mentally.

GOOD FOR THE EMPLOYEES

Drives physical safety and assuages anxiety.
3.
BE REALISTIC ABOUT THE PROMISE—AND THE REALITY—OF TECHNOLOGY

Digital technology provides employees with lifelines for connection and productivity in an isolating time. But today’s technology causes frustration almost as often as it alleviates it. Be forthright about technology’s imperfections, and if possible, show a sense of humor about these blips.

**GOOD FOR THE ORGANIZATION**
Teeing up a candid exchange about what can and can’t get done via digital platforms is vastly preferable to having employees quietly wrestle with unruly tech while grumbling and gritting their teeth.

Gain real-time learning about the state of your digital efforts by encouraging employees to communicate about their experience.

**GOOD FOR THE EMPLOYEES**
Being able to provide feedback on technology both alleviates frustration and often drives real-time improvements.
Personal challenges abound right now, and Korn Ferry’s global database of employee opinion indicates that one-fifth of employees lack an adequate understanding of their benefits. As they struggle with personal issues and worries, emphasize medical options through health insurance, available employee assistance programs, and company support for addressing childcare needs.

**TAKE EMPLOYEES’ PERSONAL CHALLENGES SERIOUSLY—AND PROVIDE TRUE RESOURCES**

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<td>Many employees may not surface complaints—they may struggle silently. Being clear about resources can break invisible logjams.</td>
<td>Employer proactiveness about helping with personal challenges can be a game-changer in a time of heavy “mental load.”</td>
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<td>Employees who feel they received genuine help during this period are more likely to remain long-term loyal to their employers.</td>
<td>Many corporate-level resources have become suddenly relevant and useful, even for employees who’ve never used them before.</td>
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5. **RETHINK TIME MANAGEMENT AND REARRANGE THE WORKDAY IF NEEDED**

Working parents—and others—may struggle to balance challenges during the traditional workday, with its often randomly scattered meetings. Teams can work in “chunks,” so people can be on for blocks of meetings or work, and then off for blocks of hours to address personal needs. Meetings may need to get shorter, be consolidated, or cancelled entirely.

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**GOOD FOR THE ORGANIZATION**

- Open conversations about different time management approaches can both revive productivity and lessen invisible distraction and strain.

- Better time management practices may emerge on a go-forward basis long past the immediate crisis.

**GOOD FOR THE EMPLOYEES**

- Being given better control over time use during inherently chaotic days allows employees to create a balance that works for them, across work and life.
A moment of crisis and overload can really highlight how much “clutter” exists in everyone’s working life—how many tasks we each do every day that are truly not that important. Leaders need to give employees permission to focus just on what’s really essential to navigating the crisis—including reporting to them just around crucial priorities.

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<td>A clear—and frequently communicated—view on what’s essential to get done will create movement on make-or-break initiatives.</td>
<td>Having the freedom to focus on the organization’s true priorities creates concrete space for needed personal activities, and mental space for the prioritized activities they are working on.</td>
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<td>Understanding what the organization can do less of—and still function well—can help streamline activities for the future.</td>
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7. **ACKNOWLEDGE THAT EMPLOYEES’ EXPERIENCES MAY BE VERY DIFFERENT —AND EVER-CHANGING**

A shared crisis highlights how diverse employees’ experiences are—some may be energized by the crisis, some may find themselves with free time to fill...while others may be deeply stressed and overwhelmed by personal demands. And some employees may be in the former camp on some days and the latter camp on other ones! Making zero assumptions about how people are experiencing the COVID crisis is the right starting point for any effort.

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<td>As with any change effort, messages and initiatives will land with far more impact when differences in experience are acknowledged.</td>
<td>Being treated as an individual creates the feeling of being valued—especially at high stress moments.</td>
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Leaders need to rethink what success looks like in this new situation. In challenging times, when companies most need the energy of engaged employees, they likely will be constrained in their ability to reward them. Take a considered approach to show commitment to your people. Look at options like reduced hours, reduced pay for those above a certain salary bracket, or taking unpaid leave.

Non-monetary recognition, like openly acknowledging employees who lead by example during the crisis, can have just as much impact especially in the short term. Clarifying for employees how the organization plans to manage reward and performance amid present disruptions both reinforces a sense of equity and eliminates a source of distraction.

**ADDRESS REWARDS AND PERFORMANCE METRICS**

**GOOD FOR THE ORGANIZATION**
Employees need their extra efforts recognized and appreciated—and you need to show them that over time there is a balance between what they contribute and what they get back in return.

**GOOD FOR THE EMPLOYEES**
Calms anxiety about broken linkages between their usual metrics and the extraordinary situation—and creates new pathways to excellence.
9.

Research shows that productivity can be the same or even better while people work remotely. That said, a number of studies also point to the critical role of informal connections within the office—e.g. the random conversation in the office kitchen—in generating innovative ideas. Organizations should acknowledge this gap and provide ways to create informal interactions. Scheduling informal meetings (“virtual lunches”) can be helpful in this regard, but removing formal interaction is the greatest driver of informal interaction—which means pulling meetings off the calendar. Let’s say a given group spends 80% of their time in meetings. Bring their meeting time down to 60%, and informal interaction will start to spring up.

**ACKNOWLEDGE AND TACKLE THE GAP IN INFORMAL INTERACTION**

**GOOD FOR THE ORGANIZATION**

Continue to drive new ways of problem-solving, which can be essential to surviving and thriving in a difficult time.

**GOOD FOR THE EMPLOYEES**

With reduced formal interaction, employees fill those meeting gaps with ad-hoc calls, emails, texts, chats, and so on, creating moments where the real problem-solving gets done.
Taking all of the above steps meaningfully will improve engagement and productivity during a crisis—but they will fall flat unless you implement a final initiative: giving employees a real, palpable channel to express what they think, feel, and experience. Some of this can be done formally, with top leaders reflecting back the feedback they receive, but much of this work is done at ground level, with managers staying in true dialogue (not “messaging monologue”) with their direct reports. One of the organizations we talked to is deliberately creating small groups to work on solutions to key issues. Leaders don’t need to have all the answers. The best ideas will often come from far-flung corners of the organization.

**10. PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANTLY: GIVE PEOPLE A VOICE**

To be engaged, employees must feel heard and understood. Moreover, they must see their thoughts and reactions come to life in the real world.

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<td>This is an opportunity for new leaders and innovators to emerge.</td>
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Get more insights like this in our new report, written by and for leaders working to get through and beyond this crisis.

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Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We help clients synchronize strategy and talent to drive superior performance. We work with organizations to design their structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people to bring their strategy to life. And we advise them on how to reward, develop, and motivate their people.