



The Shifting Role of Management

There is no doubt about it! The pandemic has changed the rules and practices of effective management. Resources have been altered, laws and practices have been added, revised and changed, sometimes rapidly. Workplaces have been physically redesigned, and workplace practices and internal rules have been created to try to keep businesses viable.

Virtually all of these new realities plus many, many others have put an enormous burden on managers. In the past, we could always revert to the employee handbooks and classroom training to find ways to deal with significant changes in our work world. But working within the parameters of the current business environment has become a unique challenge and, more often than not, those old reliable manuals for how to manage the work are not very helpful, if at all.

Yet, we are surviving. We are discovering ways to remain viable every day, even when the regulations change daily. So, how are we doing it? How are we inventing solutions to new problems that we've never seen before, at least at this level of universality? The answers to questions like that demonstrate that the role of the manager has changed and continues to change.

People still come to work. They might not be in the same place they were before or do the work the same way, but they still come to work, and they find solutions, small and large, that allow the wheels of commerce to roll on. And, if people still come to work, then their managers and leaders must remain (or become) the pathway or enablers to those solutions. Let's look at the big picture of how the survivors are surviving.

Staying In Touch With The Workforce

The pandemic hasn't reduced the need for effective managerial communication. It has increased it. But the nature of that communication and the ongoing challenge that leaders face to stay connected to their workforce has changed significantly.

Staff meetings no longer happen in the conference room. They happen via phone and computer with the expectation that the quality of those meetings will be as good as it was in the conference room. That puts the onus on the manager. Of course, it has always been on the manager, but now the creativity and breadth of solutions in keeping everybody tuned in is much more demanding.

Over and over, we see among our clients a different approach to staying connected with staff. While, previously, it was often the boss' job to make sure staff were fully informed, now we're seeing a shift to the staff owning and sharing that responsibility. Managers are more likely to solicit needs, ideas, and solutions from their employees to be sure that employees are fully invested in the goals and objectives of the company. Now we see a more evenly balanced approach between telling and asking.

And we're seeing employees ready and willing to contribute more and accept more ownership toward the success, or even survival, of the company.

Facts and Data vs. Emotion

We have always expected that our managers will provide us with access to the facts and data we need to get our work done. Meeting that need

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within the current constantly change workplace has made that a much more demanding requirement. While the requirement hasn't changed, the breadth, scope, and variability of it has.

But the most effective approaches we've seen indicate that facts and data aren't enough. Leaders realize that the interpersonal impact of the pandemic can present them with a new set of problems. Current research shows that when employees are working remotely from home, they risk developing feelings of isolation and/or loss of work identity. The requirement for managers to assess and deal with those, and other related emotional problems falls much more into the realm of leadership, rather than management. Effective leaders will focus on how people are feeling and how those feelings affect behavior and productivity.

Reinventing the Water Cooler

"Water Cooler Relationships" are defined as the non-conscious interpersonal opportunities employees share when they are all present in the office (or bank, or restaurant, etc.). Prior to the pandemic, those short interpersonal connections between employees were not studied in any great detail, but they are now. Without them, it is far more likely that employees can develop a sense of being out of the loop with their peers and less secure in their jobs.

The requirement for leaders is to have a way to take the pulse of employees on a regular basis

and then to respond to that data with solutions designed to minimize potential damage. For some employees, the idea of sharing their emotions and fears with their boss is as alien as it is for some bosses to ask.

Some of the solutions we've seen would include "happy hour" meetings every Friday via Zoom or other platforms. In these meetings, no business is discussed; instead, the focus is entirely on the employees and their connections, collectively. Other meetings will highlight the life of a team member (or two or three) to broaden the team's understanding of their peers. We have seen leaders ask employees to send in baby pictures of themselves to see who can identify whom. The point of these activities is to remind employees that we are all people trying to find ways through a new and different work reality.

While these ideas may seem frivolous to a hard-line facts and data style manager, a leader would see them as ways for people to stay connected, work together and collectively solve problems.

The entire process of remaining viable during the pandemic places a much more focused emphasis on managers, and that requirement is broader than it has ever been. Those companies that are thriving realize that the emphasis can be shared among the team members to ensure that the teams remain intact and focused.

