

JVP Seminar – 28th April 2020

Leading & Managing Remote Workers

Introduction

- Good morning everyone - thanks for that kind introduction Cath.
- I have a background of 20 years in front line HR, working for large organisations as well as being a Director of a fast growth internationalising SME.
- A lot of my thoughts that I'll be sharing about managing remote teams come from my time at Wood Mackenzie where we built a team of about 950 staff across 25 locations globally, and where time and distance as well as language and cultural barriers needed to be overcome.
- I currently work with a wide range of regional SMEs as a business owner coach and advisor so have an intimate understanding of the challenges such businesses are facing at this time, in terms of managing their staff and more broadly.
- My planned approach for this webinar is to share with you my thoughts and hopefully spark some discussion.
- We have a broad range of businesses on the line, and I'm sure that a lot of the answers to questions you may have are 'in the room' so to speak.

Context

- It cannot be overstated what extraordinary times we are all witnessing.
- Our entire society, as well as the business world, feels as though it has been rocked to the core.
- Many businesses are literally in a fight for survival.
- The government has stepped in with unprecedented levels of support.
- Business owners and leaders have been forced into making urgent decisions, and are now trying to plot a path forward in the face of tremendous challenge and uncertainty.
- All this said, I firmly believe that organisations that manage to keep their staff engaged, focused on what really matters - and that are willing to go the extra mile and be flexible - will be in a better position to weather this storm and come out of it stronger than those who don't.
- Just to note at this point, that I will be talking about leading and managing staff that are still working as opposed to furloughed, but I'll make some comments about the latter too in due course.

1. Effective leadership

- Many business owners that I have spoken to in the past few weeks have told me that they have never communicated so much to their staff. For some, this

may be quite normal. I suspect that for many this is a new thing and was a tough hurdle to overcome.

- This is without doubt the main leadership activity that all businesses need right now. Communicate, communicate, communicate.
- The main feeling that many employees will feel is uncertainty, and worry about the future. Business leaders may not have all the answers, but better to say that than stay silent.
- When I do seminars and lectures on Employee Engagement, as a means to driving high levels of business performance, I am usually focusing on what Herzberg would call 'Motivator factors' - Advancement, personal growth, achievement, recognition and so forth.
- Right now, it seems to me that many employees need reassurance around what Maslow highlighted as fundamental needs of: safety, employment, property, sense of connection, and belonging.
- Leading and managing people remotely at this time, I think, needs an understanding of this. It needs empathy. Providing reassurance, and normality, where possible are key.

2. Line Management

- While the business leader clearly has a vital role, many organisations are clearly of a scale where many others are involved in management and therefore have a key role in the day-to-day engagement of staff.
- The first thing to remember is that line managers need support too.
- Many organisations are ordinarily patchy in terms of equipping line managers to perform their role effectively, and this will be amplified under the current circumstances.
- Providing training where required should be a priority, but at the very least running sessions similar to this with your line managers to share experience, dos and don'ts, tips for managing team members remotely right now is the minimum you should be doing.

3. Focus and Goal Setting

- For many businesses, their plans might have been thrown up in the air by the current situation. Short-term and tactical decision-making and action may be the order of the day.
- It is really important that good dialogue is taking place between leadership, line management and employees as to what their goals and priorities are.
- Again, weaknesses in a businesses normal practices might be exposed right now. Many businesses are weak when it comes to performance management, goal setting and so forth, but hopefully the current situation provides an opportunity to strengthen this. Keeping things simple is key.
- Remote employees will want to feel that they are making a contribution, so shorter-term, more tactical goals and activities maybe what is required.

- I'll come on to the use of technology more broadly in a moment, but there are some really good tools out there nowadays - such as Weekly10 - that can help with goal setting, engagement of staff, and alignment with business priorities.

4. Use of Technology

- The fact that we are conducting this seminar as we are is a sign of the times.
- I am regularly using MS Teams, Zoom, Skype, even Facetime, in the course of my own business activities and I know that most businesses are now doing likewise.
- Clearly these are ideal tools to manage remote workers, that I'm sure will continue to be used more widely once we return to some sort of normality.
- Many people will be unfamiliar with such tools, so take time to show people.
- From a work management perspective, many organisations will already use project management tools - there is an extraordinary range out there.
- But this may be the time to deploy a new and readily available collaboration tool, such as Trello or Slack. Not only will these kind of tools better manage workload, they will also act as a conduit to keeping people connected and engaged.

5. Workplace Flexibility

- We now come to one of the areas of real potential challenge for employers.
- Many employees are of course in lockdown at home, trying to do their day's work, but juggling other responsibilities too, such as childcare, ensuring elderly relatives have the provisions they need etc.
- Now is a time for flexibility, empathy and pragmatism. Normal policies and procedures almost certainly will not apply in many cases.
- As stated earlier, the key thing here is communication.
- Line managers need to take the time to know their staff (if they don't already), and their domestic circumstances, such that they can then take these into account when setting tasks, agreeing catch-up calls etc.
- This is by necessity a two-way dialogue. My general principle when it comes to offering flexibility to employees (and not running things too strictly by normal procedure) is that the payback in terms of goodwill is enormous.

6. Health and Wellbeing

- Clearly, the main concern for people is either themselves or loved ones catching the coronavirus, so employers have a duty to apply the government guidelines especially as/when enabling staff to return to work.
- Beyond this, there are two key areas to consider:
- **Mental health** - The current situation is alien to all of us, and some employees will be struggling more than others with working from home, isolation, 'cabin fever', the loss of routine, human interaction etc.
- We mustn't underestimate the toll on mental health and, as employers, we need to do what we can to safeguard our people. There is a tremendous range

of resources available though (I can circulate a list that I have recently received). Encourage your employees to look at these.

- If you have staff trained as mental health first aiders, then make sure everyone knows how to contact them. Open up a dialogue on the issue, maybe hold group discussions about it too.
- Be particularly mindful of your line management group who, as mentioned earlier, may be being asked to undertake tasks they are ill-equipped for.
- Also, make sure that someone is also looking out for the business leader - who typically thinks of themselves last.
- **Ergonomics** - I have a real concern for the number of people that are now working from home without proper workstations, potentially creating all sorts of issues for themselves musculoskeletal, eye strain etc.
- I would encourage employers to get on the front foot with this, and encourage all employees that are now homeworking to assess their setup, and offer to cover the relatively modest cost of kit such as monitors, monitor stands, ergonomic keyboard, mouse etc.
- Never mind the goodwill generated, you may be reducing the likelihood of serious and costly issues in the future. We have a legal duty of care with this one.

7. Team Spirit

- Maintaining team spirit as far as possible is vital at this time. Several of the points I've already made will help with this.
- Additionally though, try to emulate other facets of team work and interaction that might have taken place when you were all in the same place, such as charitable activities, fun things such as quizzes or whatever.
- One of my clients recently asked all staff to decorate an egg in their own image around Easter for example, after which they held a virtual online competition. Another is hosting a virtual Friday night beer and pizza event. These kind of things will be extremely powerful at this time.
- If you don't currently have a social or engagement committee, maybe this is a good time to set one up.

8. Taking Opportunities

- **Adversity is the Mother of Invention.** "Out of clutter, find simplicity. From discord, find harmony. In the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity." - Albert Einstein
- I'm a firm believer that a number of positives will come out of the current situation, both societally as well as in business. I think we can all see this.
- Many organisations are taking the opportunity to do a 'start, stop, continue' review both at an organisational level and individually.
- Ask yourselves such questions: What working practices can be changed for the better? How can we better involve staff in decision-making? What training opportunities are there? What projects or initiatives do we now have the time and space to progress?
- The businesses that emerge strong will be identifying such opportunities.

Summary

For me the key things right now are:

Communicate, communicate, communicate.

Support and equip your line managers

Agree frequency of contact and method with individual staff.

Ensure people are set-up as well as possible to work from home.

Embrace technology.

Provide clarity on priorities and performance measure.

Make sure staff know it's 'ok to ask' if in doubt or uncertain.