Employee Engagement during Organizational Crisis – with special reference to the COVID Scenario

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Abstract

Employee engagement is a positive, fulfilling, work- related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Organizations consider employee engagement as one of the ways to develop sustained competitive advantage. The COVID-19 pandemic, has impacted organisations worldwide, pushing them to resort to remote working. Without much preparedness and readiness most of the organisations have adapted to remote working and organisations are running business virtually. This scenario is a new trial for organisational leaders as well as employees as everyone is facing new challenges every day.

With the current crisis, maintaining the relationship between the employer and employees becomes crucial. The disconnect to the work environment and moving to a new home office has thrown lots of challenges both to employees and to employers. Employee Engagement during this critical period is the only option employers can embrace to build morale and trust in employees. In this paper, we discuss about the employee engagement strategies organisations globally have adapted and how these have been helping organisations and employees to survive the challenging time. This paper is a compilation of discussions and information gathered from many global HR leaders on the Employee Engagement strategies that has been implemented in their organisations during the Pandemic. We discuss how leadership can build trust and the enabling technology available to manage employee engagement in a virtual environment during the Pandemic.

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Organizational Crisis, COVID, Drivers of Employee Engagement

Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid 19 as a Pandemic on March 11, 2020. Since then it is the one word the entire world is speaking about every day. Many countries have seen local, regional civil wars, disasters and crisis that affected and impacted only those countries and global reverberation was minimal. Covid 19 pandemic is the only disaster, post the world wars that has brought most of the countries across globe to a slowdown, lock down and halt. The crisis is causing an unpredictable decrease in global economy and work time (ILO,2020).

In the ever changing world, where the workforce is aging and globally aligned, Organisations that keep their employees engaged will have a competitive advantage (Macey, W. H., & Schneider, 2008).

Many evidences suggest that it's significant to make sure that employees are engaged fully for a long time so that addressing the issues the issues that matter to them can be identified. (Kular et al, 2008).

70% of the work force across the globe is working from home during this pandemic. Work from home is a norm in IT and ITES organisations, but what accentuates the current situation is that the entire organisation is working from home. Most of the organisations across various countries have

embarked to remote working without much time for planning. The current remote working experiment is one of the largest and massive exercises that have ever taken place without any prior warning or readiness. In this situation, keeping the workforce engaged and connected is the challenge for all the organisations globally.

Employee Engagement – Definition and outlook

Schaufeli et al (2002) has defined Employee engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Employee engagement is the crucial factor that drives business success in the competitive market. Shuck & Wollard (2010), have defined Employee engagement is the alignment of every individual employee's cognitive, emotional and behavioural state towards organisational outcomes.

There have been many definitions for Employee Engagement depending on the weightage given to individual or the organisation. William Kahn, based on his study in 1990, formalised the definition of Employee engagement as "the harnessing of organisation members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances. The aim of the study was also to identify the situation in which engagement happens.

Employee engagement relies on the basic foundations of - trust, integrity commitment and communication that exists between an employee and the organisation. The wellbeing, organisational performance, business success can be achieved only if its employees are engaged.

Macey and Schneider (2008) have highlighted that engagement includes multiple nomological network that encapsulates trait, state, and behavioural constructs, and also the work and organizational environment that enables engagement at state and behavioural levels. They saw that engagement was not a set of constructs but they are strongly integrated set, interrelated in many ways and comprised of clearly identifiable constructs that culminated to a common outcome.

The currently available literature on employee engagement has been defined and explained from various different perspectives by various researchers and practioners. The concept of engagement has recently received a great lead of attention from academicians and practitioners but the frameworks used contain diverse items and measurement scales for the term Engagement (Robertson & Cooper, 2010).

May et al. (2004) empirically tested Kahn's (1990) Employee Engagement model. He described engagement as permutation of cognitive and emotional work experiences that is exhibited by an individual on the job.

Saks (2006) provided a vital connection concerning preceding employee engagement theories, practitioner literature, and the academics. He hypothesized employee engagement by way of a social exchange model and he was the first to separate employee engagement - job engagement and organization engagement.

Though the definition and meaning of engagement in practitioner literature has overlaps with many constructs that defined employee engagement, in academic literature the definition has a unique construct that comprises- cognitive, emotional and behavioural elements (Saks, 2006).

Employee Engagement Models

Employee Engagement is dependent on understanding the drivers of engagement and leveraging them. Depending on the research outcomes, academicians and practitioners have

developed various employee engagement models. Some of the globally adopted models are:

Gallup Model:

This was developed by Gallup, the basic indicators of this model are employees who are actively disengaged, engaged and not engaged. Gallup research shows that changes organizational practices can reflect on Employee Engagement. Gallup found that in early May 2020, the percentage of "engaged" workers in the U.S. reached 38%. This is the highest since 2000 when Gallup began tracking the metrics.

Hewitt model:

Aon Hewitt Engagement model focuses on "say, stay, and strive". This model has six indicator factors - Work, People, Opportunities, Compensation, Procedures and Quality of Life. This model includes organizational drivers and business outcomes of engagement as well as the individual outcome of engagement itself.

Zinger Model:

David Zinger Employee Engagement model reflects all important facets that could influence the participation, engagement and loyalty of employees. This model provides twelve drivers for augmenting employee engagement level.in organisations.

People Profit model:

The People profit model is an integrated model incorporates three distinct components of engagement: Thinking, Feeling, and Acting. It looks at employee engagement holistically Since it focuses on cognitive, affective and response systems it is also called CARE Model.

The various models given by various authors have various practical implications. There are many such models that cater to different category of organisations, in practice there is no one size fits all.

Employee Engagement during Crisis

Employee Engagement during turbulent times have always remained challenging. In July 2008 during global recession, Gallup found that in US only 31% of employees were engaged, 51% were not engaged, and 17% were actively disengaged. The instability in organisations left the employees confused and uncertain of their job status. During the Global Financial crisis, many organisations laid off the employees to manage the crisis. Rolls Royce, cut down 2000 jobs in 2008, then the organisation redesigned its Employee Engagement model.

The Hewitt 2010 survey conducted across 400 organisations globally revealed that difficult times like economic down turn provided the best opportunities for employees to enhance their career, that is one of the indicator of employee engagement. (Van Rooy et al, 2011)

Apart from financial crisis, organisations are also hit by natural calamities, global terrorism, corruption and political unrest across the world. The Taj Mumbai incident (2008) where the employees rose up during the terrorist attack to ensure safety of the customers, exhibited exceptional crisis management, they put their lives in danger while rescuing others. TAJ is known for its employee engagement that focuses on adequate values of supervisor engagement in reward, training and recruitment of the staff (Beena, 2014).

A study on Irish firms during global recession showed that organisations were forced to resort to Pay cuts and Job cuts. The fear of job loss lead to 'survivor syndrome' that's characterised by low morale and commitment among employees (Teague & Roche, 2013)

COVID-19 is the current crisis that has taken the entire world by surprise pushing the majority of workforce to work remotely. During this crisis, the work style across organisation has changed making businesses and employees physically stay distant from each other than ever before. To bridge this gap of time and space, Employee engagement is the only strategy that can keep people informed and involved. To avoid any knee jerk reactions from employees, the organisations have to reassure about their strategies to sail together through this pandemic.

Organizations are now trying extrapolate the knowledge and strategy that they were using to - manage their remote workforces earlier, on the new remote working workforce, which is 80% of the organisational strength. This has created a positive disruption that will definitely boost the remote working economy in a big way. Organizations and HR leaders are now scrambling to find ways to engage their remote employees as efficiently as they were engaging them before the lockdown.

Research Methodology

The data was collected in 4 focus group discussions involving 32 senior HR leaders from various countries across the globe. Industries represented by the HR leaders included retail, manufacturing, telecom services, and IT. The focus group discussions were conducted for about 60-90 mins each. Each of the HR leaders shared the insights about how they handle the Covid crisis in their organisations. The discussions focussed on the strategies adapted to keep the employees engaged during the remote working scenario of Covid 19. The driving factors that impact employee engagement strategies in their organisations were discussed.

The HR leaders who participated were part of HR Leadership forums and HR groups in social media. The discussions were conducted over zoom calls.

The calls were recorded and then transcribed. The discussion points were collated and documented for reference. Existing literature on Employee Engagement was the secondary data for this research.

The Drivers of Employee Engagement during Covid 19

Organizational agility that builds the capability of a business to be adaptive, flexible and creative through this changing environment can only help business to succeed. during crisis. The emphasis of agility during this Covid crisis was to focus on three areas – responding quickly to employee needs, meeting the customer expectations, and surviving through the economic uncertainty.

Dynamic workplaces that are run on values rather than on rules and policies are the need of the hour. The key drivers during the crisis are the organisational leaders, the culture of trust in the organisation and the technology that drives seamless remote working and employee connect experience. (Refer Figure 1)

To have an engaged workforce, it is important that engagement levels of leadership should also be high. The basic principles of Employee engagement which is driven by leaders through the culture of trust remain intact even during the pandemic. The only change is the platform that enables the current engagement initiatives – the online initiatives.

Leadership as a driving factor:

In current global scenario, it is vital for organizational leaders to emphasize on creating employee engagement as a culture component which ensures that employees stay dedicated to work and feel participated in organizational success. They also deem in the organization's values, mission and vision. What poses challenge for leaders is to create and maintain an environment

for engaging employees in the current boundary less work scenario. (Chakraborty, T & Ganguly, M., 2019)

Responsible leadership has taken centre stage, as the workforce as well as the customers find themselves in an unacquainted, fast paced global work terrain. Leading with compassion and care for the workforce and communities has gained essentiality currently. In these volatile times, a leadership team that is agile, proactive and responds sensibly rather than react, sustains to help and empower people.

A smart, values-driven, and focused leadership is the need of the hour. In most of the organisations Leaders have been the change catalysts and drivers. Virtual town halls have become the norm. Some of the practices by leaders during this pandemic are as follows:

1. Leaders make videos on how they are managing the work from home and stress. They share positive information to all employees. They have made a practice to communicate What Covid means for the organization and about the Business changes expected

2. CEO and Organisational leadership converse with employees and share business updates to employees

3. Leaders hold Gratitude video meetings. The CEO thanks an employee for the contribution he or she has made to the business continuity and that person in turn thanks someone and the video goes on

Larger organisations have made an inclusive Employee assistance program to handle and support employees during this crisis. Decentralised decision making based on the regional local needs. Organisations have made provision for quarantine leaves and special leaves to take care of themselves and their family members. In a Jeddah base Oil company, Expat workers have been given unlimited paid leave till the situation is normal.

Trust as a driving factor:

Trust is the key factor in the organisational relationships. Creating a culture of trust is the primary responsibility of leadership. During this crisis, employers have to stop micro managing and focussing only on the productivity. They have to be actively listening, empathetic and reflect that expectations are to be met. Trust increases the morale and responsibility of employees. It is times of such crisis, existing trust relations between managers and workers play a pivotal role in determining the extent of cooperative behaviour that is key for survival. (Marchington & Kynighou, 2012)

Trust cannot be built in words but has to be reflected through proactive responsiveness and care for the employees. Providing the necessary resources to empower individuals will build sense of belonging and trust among employees. Currently due to unprecedented global changes, organisations have to be more sensitive to change and stay active to sustain the crisis. Therefore, organisational trust is viewed and confided as one of the effective tools for positive outcomes in Organisations. (Ugwu, et al., 2014)

According to a meta-analysis by Global Workplace Analytics, three-quarters of managers say they trust their employees, but one-third still prefer to see their teams work from office space "just to be sure." Even if they work remotely, leaders and managers need to assure trust on the employees. Mutual trust and bonding between the employee and manager is the need of the hour.

Technology – the engagement driver:

A fast, stable, and secure internet connection, is the basic requirement for remote working. Establishing an apposite home office and provide a flexible VPN (virtual private network) access and seamless network connectivity is one of the primary steps to enable remote access of systems to employees. (Bick et al, 2020)**.** The driver and enabler of the currently successful and productive remote working exercise is the supportive technology. Technology has helped to educate, warn, and empower everyone to be aware of the situation. Organisations are able to successfully continue remote working with converging technologies like mobile, cloud, analytics, robotics, AI/ML, 4G/5G, and high-speed internet.

Virtual meetings, virtual interviews have become the new normal. WhatsApp, Viber are tools for casual employee conversation. Zoom, WebEx, Microsoft teams are platforms where town halls, meetings, fun events are conducted. Company based Intranet pages provide necessary instructions and information to employees. Slack channels are being created to keep employees engaged with online hobbies, ideation sessions, Yoga, Zumba classes to keep up the mental and emotional well-being. Apps like Pictionary, Kahoot are keeping employees engaged with quiz and virtual challenge games. Employee polls and surveys are conducted online to check and understand the pulse of employees.

Many E-Learning channels and platforms have opened free courses which can help employees upskill. Organisations are using collaborative learning platforms to empower their workforce with various courses. Webinars are also being conducted by the employees and for the employees within the organisation.

The fundamentals of employee engagement remain the same in any situation and organisations need to stick to the fundamentals. Only the platforms of engagement have changed from face to face interactions to digital.

Employee Engagement Strategies during Covid 19 crisis

Employee engagement strategies are crucial for organisations as it helps to boost employee satisfaction and in turn achieving business goals faster. Organisations follow effective employee engagement strategies like increasing employee satisfaction, enhancing the company's culture, and retaining the best talent. (Infiniti Research,2018)

In 2008 during the global Economic meltdown, Hewitt Associates conducted a survey across 400 plus organizations. The study revealed in contrary to low employee engagement levels expected, on average over 40% of organizations had increased engagement (from October 2008 to September 2009). This proved that even amidst crisis, positive organizational efforts can lead to increased engagement levels (Van Rooy et al, 2010)

The Hewitt research showed that the vital drivers of engagement during the economic down turn were consistent communication from organisational leaders and cross-training opportunities provided to employees. In fact, difficult times actually provide some of the best opportunities for career development, which is another predictor of employee engagement (Hewlett 2010)
During COVID-19, as the pandemic escalated globally, the leadership had challenges in managing the move to remote work, allaying employees' fears and other issues. The major strategies adopted by all organisations were to have Transparent communication, invest time in Employee learning and creating recognition programs. (See Figure 2)

Continuous and transparent communication:

Communication that fosters a psychological

connection between organisational leaders and employees leads to positive dispositions like higher motivation, lower burnout, and higher job satisfaction in employees (MacDonald P, 2019). Transparent communication that emanates from a single source of truth should be the source of communication between organisation and employees. Trust begins with communication, and communicating precise information during such outbreaks is critical. Honest, transparent communication is vital, any unclear messaging provokes mistrust and people will start seeking information from unreliable sources. (Berger, Z. D et al, 2020).

Communicating as often as needed and sharing the decision making process understandable and clear to the employee is critical. Messages sent across board have to be simple, clear and concise that establishes the employers' intent to improve the working situation, and testing solutions that may be mutually beneficial. Creating a 24*7 communication channel to address, redress and resolve employee queries and provide support. Some organisations have created Covid 19 response page in their Intranet portal to answer employee queries.

Learning and Development programs:

Deloitte outlines that the largest drivers of employee engagement and strong workplace culture are the learning and development opportunities. Learning & Development can be the key driver of business growth if the L&D function can transpose and become a business partner to drive the success. Different learning and development methods and tools can help increasing belongingness and engaging employees across the board. (Kumar, & Kapoor, 2019) There is a close correlation between the learning strategy and employee engagement. A healthy learning culture is essential for an organisation as Robert Half found that businesses see impactful employee

engagement in organisations that have a resilient culture of learning (Welcome, 2019)

Modern and technology driven learning and training method can also go further and better in direction (Kumar & Kapoor2019). The primary need for businesses that has shone through this pandemic is to accelerate their digital transformation efforts. A digitally agile workforce with a growth mind-set can make use of this opportunity in disguise to reskill and upskill itself.

Organisations like Accenture and HCL have their own learning portal which employees can access and benefit. While there are also free online resources and certifications from credible portals like Coursera, UpGrad and other MOOCs to keep up with the skills of the future, corporate training programs are digitally converted to personalised and gamified to make learning more interactive and engaging for the younger workforce.

On time recognition:

Recognition, even a simple 'thank-you' could be the easiest way to improve employee morale. Even in a good work place, if employees are not appreciated for their work, they feel unimportant in their role, which affects their work morale (Purse, 2017).

In Organisations that endeavour high employee engagement levels, they encourage organisational leaders to adapt appreciative behaviours along with their task-orientated leadership behaviours (Crous, 2016). When people are given recognition by co-workers or organizational leaders; the engagement levels, wellbeing and connectedness in the organization surge up. Employees believe that only way to participate in company or team recognition is when they get recognized.

During the Covid 19 virtual working scenario, employers have taken up thanks giving and appreciation during the team meetings and town

halls. Continuous success sharing and recognition of employees for small contributions also boost morale significantly. Organisations are using social media and company intranet page to share little successes of employees. Managers are making genuine appreciations in open virtual forums and team meetings. Companies are using social recognition walls to appreciate a colleague or co-worker which results in more likes and comments on teammate successes and this in turn makes recognition a more inclusive experience for everyone.

Discussion

COVID-19 is the current crisis that has taken the entire world by surprise pushing the entire workforce to work remotely. Globally during this unpredictable time, working remotely is the only viable option that all the employers can embrace to ensure safety and wellbeing of their employees. Managing remote workforce and to ensure they remain productive is one of the greatest challenges. During the discussions with HR leaders, two common concerns were raised by them:

1. Keeping up the employee motivation
2. Ensure that employees are engaged

Finding ways to engage their remote employees as efficiently as they were engaging them before the Pandemic, is the challenge for HR leaders. During the focus group discussions, the drivers of employee engagement during Covid 19 Pandemic were identified to be the Leadership, culture of Trust and Technology. These driving factors of engagement were found common in one or more Engagement Modes like Hewitt, Zinger and Boston Model.

During the Great financial crisis, firms in Europe and Australia acceded to open communication and information disclosure, which proved to be the efficacious HR practice in helping organisations to cope the recession (McDonnell, & Burgess,2013). This reference also reflects the employee engagement strategy followed during Covid 19 crisis. To keep up the employee motivation, organisations are keeping the communication channels open and providing support to employees (Refer Figure3). Organisations have made it a practice conduct casual team meetings where the team members discuss and share common challenges and practices in everyday life.

To ensure the employees feel cared and secured, some organisations are utilising their Slack channels to provide sessions on physical and mental health practices like Yoga. With the enabling technology and seamless network connectivity, keeping the employees connected, motivated and engaged is made possible during Covid 19.

The discussions also focussed on role of Managers. Employee engagement should be the top agenda for Managers and leaders because, every interaction they have with employees will have an impact on individual engagement and organizational performance (Gallup, 2016). In times like the current crisis, when their own jobs, health, families, and financial security are under threat, employees look up to their managers only for support and resolution. Without managers it looks very difficult to manage the current scenario. An example given by one of the HR leaders is that in retail environment work environment, managers are also taking the operational decisions right from decisions on overseeing the restocking of supermarket shelves to ensuring the supply of face-masks for healthcare workers also. Gallup research also indicates that the way organizations develop employees attributes to higher employee engagement.

Continuously, organisations and the leaders are contemplating on the new normal modalities. Organisations have to be more agile as the new normal sets in. In this context, focus on employee

participation and building trust will help the organisations to successfully emerge from the pandemic.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic, often described as a "once in a lifetime crisis" has thrown new challenges. It has forever changed the experience of being a customer, employee, citizen, human. This unpresented time has changed the modalities of work and engagement with customers and the employees for the last few months. Organizations are expecting to reconsider and reconstruct their future business strategy and models. The current working environment may have a complete shift to remote working. The organisation has to steer up to educating employees on skills that built ability to manage crises, growing adaptable, and developing resilience.

The prominent employee engagement drivers are clear goals, effective leadership, honest communication, compensation and benefits, training and development (Mohanty & Choudhury, 2018). As discussed in this paper, some of these were reflected by Global HR leaders as drivers of engagement during the Covid 19 crisis. The strategies like expression of gratitude, recognition during everyday meetings and Town halls have become the norm.

As we embrace the new normal, we would be required to empower ourselves with new futuristic skills. Engaging employees remotely is challenging task for organisations. Acts of empathy and compassion reflected through simple and significant acts can create perennial influence for the employees in the organization. Significant values that were always found to be vital in increasing employee engagement were selflessness, collectivism and cooperativeness.

Once the pandemic is over, it is expected that the world will see a dramatic shift in the way remote working is perceived, both from employers and employees. The current global remote working "experiment" is the perfect time for the organizations to redesign and figure out how best to motivate, engage with, and support their employees. If remote working becomes the norm organisations choose, it makes sense to ensure that the right processes and practices are in place right now. In future, when we look back on the global Covid pandemic, we will be reminded that Covid-19 was a watershed moment that changed lives of people and the way we engage with our workforce (Bradley, 2020).

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