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Gartner for HR

Addressing the Emotional Well-Being of the HR Team in a Crisis



Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Create a Safe Environment	4
Provide Guide Posts for Communications	6
Leverage Cross-Functional Partnerships	8
Recommended by the Authors	9
About Gartner	10

Introduction

In 2008-2009, the HR function was on the front lines of responding to the talent implications of the Global Financial Crisis. Organizations had to transform to survive in the crisis, with decisions made that would impact our workforce for years to come. During that time, many in HR, along with line managers, experienced the unfortunate reality of being the face of facility closures, layoffs, and furloughs to the workforce. It's a role that no one wants to play, but one that the HR function must manage in a very thoughtful and compassionate manner. That pressure, however, can impact their own mental and emotional well-being each time they are tasked with speaking to an employee about one of those decisions that will have a direct impact on their livelihood.

In 2020, we're dealing with another such crisis where HR is playing an even more pivotal role, as the health of the workforce is of primary concern. They've been asked to address the implications of a pandemic which is of a scale unlike any other, and one that changes day by day. Leadership is looking to HR to be the experts in shaping employee policies, such as PTO and sick leave, which have a direct and immediate impact on our workforce. This expectation can often lend itself to a significant amount of anxiety and pressure to make the perfect decision, ultimately taking a toll on their own mental state.

As a result, it is critical to keep in mind that in crisis situations, the HR staff is not immune to both professional as well as personal disruptions, like the broader workforce. They may be considered essential staff, and thus, expected to continue to work on-site, concerned about their own health, while supporting the workforce and addressing an unprecedented situation. We know that in times like this, in order to manage the stress, it's vital that these first responders "put on their own oxygen mask first" before they start putting it on for others. Neglecting themselves and their own well-being will have a negative impact on their health as well as the decision-making and leadership that they must display in a crisis.

Considering this, it's important that HR leaders keep the following key points in mind when managing their teams through a crisis.

Create a Safe Environment

Host regular meetings with the HR staff. As part of your agenda, set aside time at the onset to discuss how they are each personally handling the situation and what the impact has been on them, not just professionally, but also personally. Allow the team to share their challenges, concerns, and discuss any coping mechanisms that have worked well for them respectively. Develop a cadence around this, so that your team knows what to expect during each meeting.

Clarify work priorities with your HR team. Recalibrate your expectations to ensure that you are setting your team up for success. For example, if their performance was based around the level of engagement of shifts on the manufacturing floor, discuss how else engagement will be measured in this new environment. Ensure that you are leading this discussion with them as it will feel foreign to many of them and they won't necessarily know how to address this change with you.

Launch a buddy system or mentoring process. Consider developing a buddy system and match team members who are going through a similar situation so they can lean on one another. Take advantage of existing mentoring relationships and be more targeted in the type of support that each should be providing one another. A virtual environment often can make team members feel isolated. It's in these situations that you want to be more directive in the support mechanisms you create for them.

Create opportunities for bonding and connectedness. It is easy for team members to become disengaged in a virtual environment. It's important to consider that team members may not see each other as regularly as they used to, and informal events aren't planned in quite the same manner. Consider hosting virtual coffee chats, happy hours, breakfasts and team events. Leaders can team up with one another and host a virtual event that crosses teams or functions. Not only are these events helpful for stress relief, but they are a helpful reminder that we are not in this alone.

Connect to the Rest of the Team

It is easy for team members to become disengaged



Foster a Sense of Team

- Include remote employees in day-to-day activities.
- Highlight individuals to the rest of the team when they reach critical milestones.
- Start team meetings by calling out three accomplishments by team members, ensuring to highlight virtual team members contributions.
- Post pictures of remote employees, and send pictures of in-house employees.



Encourage Employees to Build Personal and Professional Relationships

- Create peer groups for employees in remote locations.
- Dedicate a few minutes for informal conversations during team meetings.
- Encourage employees to share information about their non-work-related interests and hobbies.
- If team members are from different countries, encourage them to share information about their cultures with the team.



Ensure Inclusion During Team Meetings

- Ensure everyone can hear everyone else during team meetings conducted via the phone or videoconference, and keep background noise to a minimum (e.g., shuffling papers, side comments).
- Check with remote employees regularly during phone meetings or videoconferences to see if they have something to add or ask.
- Use video during team meetings.

It is easy for team members to become disengaged in a remote environment. Make sure you take this into consideration when managing a remote team: (1) Foster a sense of team by including them in day-to-day activities; (2) Encourage employees to build personal and professional relationships through peer groups; and (3) Ensure inclusion during meetings by using video.

Provide Guide Posts for Communications

Ensure communications are relevant and necessary. Don't overburden your staff or others with too much information. Research shows that too much information hinders decision making. There is an optimal amount of information that results in peak decision performance, and if individuals consume too much information, they become overwhelmed and their decisions suffer. At a time of information overload, be wary of the news and media intake to make sure they are equipped to make the best decisions.

Provide guidance on the communication style to use in different situations.

Different messages require different communication channels in a virtual environment. For example, a non-urgent question doesn't necessitate a videoconference, but you certainly want to use video to discuss difficult messages. In addition, when determining the specific type of communication that you need your team to deliver, consider the following: Type of Communication, Importance, Frequency, Primary Channel and Secondary Channel.

Let your team know that it's okay to say, "I don't know." No leader is expected to have all the answers, but the HR team can feel the pressure to do so when employees are struggling with the unknown. Make sure they know that in moments when they don't have the answer, it's okay to be direct about the information they have, but transparent about the information they lack.

Multiple Communication Channels

Communication Method	Sample Situations
 Shared Online Database	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collaborative work• Discussion threads• Idea sharing
 Email	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Daily/weekly progress updates• Nonurgent questions• Individual or team accomplishment highlights
 Instant Messaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Urgent questions• Informal discussions• Real-time information sharing
 Telephone	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All sensitive or urgent issues• Any situation where tone is key• Real-time information sharing (e.g., brainstorming, decision making)• Formal discussions regarding progress on projects, development needs and recent successes
 Videoconferencing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Delivery of difficult messages (when in-person meetings are not an option)• Formal discussions regarding progress on projects, development needs and recent successes• Monitoring team morale• Team meetings
 In-Person	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Initial team meeting, if possible• Recurring team meetings for team building, if possible

Consider various communication methods to utilize depending on the situation. For example, use a shared online database for idea sharing; telephone for sensitive issues and instant messaging for urgent questions.

Leverage Cross-Functional Partnerships

Create a strong partnership between the HR and Communications team.

One of the most important partnerships to leverage in a crisis is the broader HR and Communications team. Providing consistent messaging to the workforce through a well-thought-out communications plan can be one of the most critical components of crisis management. But, this might not necessarily be a plan that some HR team members feel comfortable developing. Recognizing this possibility, ensure you have created an environment where they know how to lean on the expertise of others to support them in this effort.

Ensure leadership recognizes that the employee experience is not just HR's responsibility.

It often feels like HR needs to speak on behalf of the entire workforce, but keep in mind that it is just as important that employee experience and talent implications are front of mind for other functions as well. Make sure that you are vocal in your messaging around talent implications to the broader Leadership Team. It is important they are aware that addressing the potential implications of organizational decisions on the overall employee experience does not fall on the HR team alone. Ensure that you are reinforcing this regularly with the Leadership Team as well as your HR team.

As a first responder in any crisis, HR often bears a lot of the burden to be the spokesperson for the organization and its employees, but unfortunately, often neglects their own emotional well-being. As a leader, it's imperative that you don't neglect the well-being of your HR team during the crisis.

Always remember that they are also employees, experiencing some of the same fears and anxieties that they are asked to address with the workforce. Open these lines of communication between you and your staff. Lean into your own vulnerabilities and acknowledge how this has impacted you personally. This can create a mutual level of trust between you and your staff. Acknowledge that their welfare, along with that of the broader workforce, is just as important. The scope of a crisis varies, but when the light at the end of the tunnel is hard to see, processes we put in place as leaders will enable our teams to see a path to the end.

Recommended by the Authors

- **“Three Employee Experience Pitfalls to Avoid in Your HR Response to COVID-19”**
The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak is a significant moment for HR leaders. This article outlines three pitfalls of HR leaders in their responses to COVID-19.
- **“Crisis Communication Cheat Sheet for HR Leaders”**
Effective manager and employee communication during a crisis requires HR leaders leverage appropriate channels and tailor mass communication outreaches to employees according to the level of crisis or disease outbreak in or near their regions.
- **“Tool: Managing Remote Employees Toolkit for Managers”**
Use this insight enablement toolkit that includes customizable tools, templates and conversation guides for HR professionals to enable managers to manage in a virtual environment.

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