

V-5 Model of Employee Engagement During COVID-19 and Post Lockdown

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Abstract

COVID-19 has left the globe in a situation of despondency. Physical as well as the human resources (HR) of an organization were adversely affected during the lockdown. The corporate world is observing several corporate crises from the full or partial shutdown of businesses to layoffs, furloughs and resignations. HR managers are struggling to curb this renunciation of employees and grappling with reduced employee engagement. To keep employees highly motivated in this time of mayhem and maelstrom of the pandemic, HR managers need to revisit their employee engagement strategies with a new perspective. This article provides a ready reference list of variables to HR managers to enhance employee engagement level during COVID-19 and post lockdown. This article suggests five major elements of employee engagement, namely—value, voice, variety, virtue and vision. These logical elements of employee engagement are identified after an exhaustive review of the literature. Appropriate variables for each element support author's perspective. Though neither these elements nor the variables are exhaustive, yet they hold utmost relevance to enhance employee engagement in the time of the global pandemic.

Key Words

Employee Engagement, V-5 Model, COVID-19, Value, Voice, Vision

Executive Summary

The world is witnessing a new normal in 2020. The start of the year 2020 has been gloomy and gruesome. From illness to deaths, from business losses to business shutdown, from denying bonuses to layoffs, everyone has witnessed one or all these experiences. The catastrophic intrusion of COVID-19 significantly affected the corporate world. Incurring huge losses, denying payments, pausing production and deferring business plans are few vibrations felt by corporate houses with the thunderous entry of Coronavirus. The shock waves shook employees as well. Their job losses, delayed salary and denied bonuses left employees unhealthy as well as un-wealthy. Where small organization had to face complete breakdown, big organization are compromising with reduced employee engagement. To keep employees highly motivated in this time of mayhem and maelstrom of the pandemic, HR managers need to revisit their employee engagement strategies with a new perspective. This article provides a ready reference list of variables to HR managers to enhance employee

engagement level during COVID-19 and post lockdown. This article suggests five major elements of employee engagement namely—value, voice, variety, virtue and vision. These logical elements of employee engagement are identified after an exhaustive review of the literature. Appropriate variables for each element support author's perspective. Though neither these elements nor variables are exhaustive, yet they hold utmost relevance to enhance employee engagement in the time of the global pandemic. As the world is getting acquainted with this 'new normal', there is a grave need to modify the system and strategy to reap the benefit of the situation. This article serves such purpose of revisiting, redefining and reimplementing employee engagement strategies to rejuvenate the organization once again.

Introduction

The prime importance of employee engagement has been felt by many organizations in recent decades. The inception of the year 2020 brought an even grave need for

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strengthening the engagement level of employees owing to COVID-19 crisis and lockdown worldwide. The entire globe is under the grip of COVID-19 crisis. Its impact can be felt not only on the health of an individual but on the overall health of an organization. Where many organizations had to adopt the dismissal of employees, existing employees are depicting lower level of employee engagement. Big corporate houses are struggling to be at least stagnant if not succeeding during COVID-19, while many not-so-big corporate houses are on the verge of complete shutdown. Such unprecedented situation has created trepidation among the workforce related to their job security, bonuses, performance appraisals and so on. Thus, their reduced engagement level is apparent.

Impact of COVID-19 on Employees

With the intrusion of COVID-19, workers experienced a complete change in their workplace that disrupted their work experience since January 2020. Quantum Workplace studies the impact of COVID-19 on employee engagement in the United States of America. The study demonstrated meaningful growth in employee engagement with slight fall due to COVID-19. The study depicted an almost 7 per cent dip in engagement level in art and entertainment industry. Whereas nonprofit organization experienced a 15 per cent increased in engagement level post-COVID-19. Prudent Brokers in India commented on the deferred bonuses or performance appraisal for the year 2020. Fifty six per cent of the surveyed employers are still not sure about their bonus strategy for the current year. Where many have lost their jobs, 'Essential employees' are witnessing almost a complete transformation in their standards and operating procedures. NCSL states that during COVID-19 higher number of workers had to take sick leave. Many of them were not entitled to take paid sick leave. Owing to the higher number of unemployment during the pandemic, 'Federal-State Unemployment Insurance Program' had to provide temporary unemployment benefits to significant numbers of eligible unemployed workers.

Impact of COVID-19 on Organization or Employers

Prudent Brokers expressed that 13 per cent of businesses got adversely affected as they had to completely shut down their business unit. Manufacturing, logistics, construction, transport and engineering are the most hit sectors in India. Employers in India commented on the declined productivity of employees during COVID-19. However, half of the employers found to have the same productivity level amongst their employees. Twenty eight per cent of surveyed employers are unable to comment on the productivity level of employees during COVID-19. A global pandemic has led to the new situation of remote working or tele-working causing the flexible yet sometimes unwieldy situation.

Where such workplace setting has provided ample flexibility to employees, it poses a great concern for an organization or employer to evaluate its effectiveness for performance appraisal.

COVID-19 and Employee Engagement

The year 2020 opened with misery and mayhem of COVID-19. After almost a complete standstill for six months, the economies reopened itself with social distancing and other protective norms, along with persisting uncertainty at the workplace. The mantra of employee engagement pre-COVID-19 has changed its definition during the COVID-19. With a higher number of lay-offs and furloughed employees, many organizations started de-prioritizing employee engagement owing to sever business losses due to lockdown. As economies are convalescing themselves gradually, it is imperative to invest in employee engagement in a more meaningful way of keeping the 'new normal' into mind.

V5 Model of Employee Engagement During COVID-19 and Post Lockdown

The dystopian world created during the COVID-19 pandemic has characteristics of stalling business growth, uncertain business environment, and anxious and unhealthy workforce. The deleterious effects of COVID-19 are manifold. In such a gloomy and depressing environment where workplace system has turned murkier, employers need to ponder upon the employee engagement strategy scientifically.

Table 1 presents the details of the variable associated with each element gathered by exploring extensive literature that can be readily applied by HR managers to enhance the level of employee engagement during and after the lockdown. These elements focus on the individual as well as the organizational aspect of the engagement. This list is a ready reference list for the HR managers to identify where they need to make changes in employees and/or organization to enhance employee engagement.

V5 Model of Employee Engagement

V5 Model of employee engagement incorporates five major elements of employee engagement. These are: value, voice, variety, virtue and vision. Where value and voice elements are discussed in the context of employees, while the rest three are discussed in context of organization.

Value: considering the employees of an organization as a vital asset and value their efforts, loyalty and commitment to the organization. This may include optimism at work, respect at work, interaction and recognition (Demerouti & ten Brummelhuis, 2012).

Table 1. Operating Definition of Variables Assimilated from the Review of Literature

#	Elements	Variables	Operating Definition
1	Value	Optimism at work	Optimistic workplace creates a possible success scenario rather than an idolized impossible one. In such a workplace, employees feel valued.
2		Respect at work	Reverence at work for employees by their supervisor, subordinates and colleagues because they are valued for their behaviour at work.
3	Voice	Interaction	Social interaction and informal meetings with lower and middle-level staff develop a sense of being a valuable part of an organization in them.
4		Recognition	Recognizing employees' efforts, diligence and desired behaviour at work.
5		Continuous feedback	Continuous feedback mechanism ensure the opportunity to raise voice for concerns and needs of employees.
6	Variety	Supervisor's support and cooperation	Support and cooperation from the supervisor create confidence among the team to raise concerns without fear of negative consequence.
7		Inputs on policies and procedures	Employees' voice can be strengthened in a productive way when they are part of the policymaking process related to their work.
8		Autonomy	Wide variety of assigned job along with ample autonomy and related to that work ensures effortless completion of the job.
9		Significance	The new job assigned must have a value or significance in the overall function of the organization so that an employee can feel he is a part of significant organizational function.
10	Virtue	Task variety	Task allotted must ensure utilization of varied skills, knowledge and physical labour to reduce psychological distress of monotonous job.
11		Challenging jobs	Not only a variety of task, but the task that keeps an employee on his toe concerning physical and mental vigilance.
12		Affection	Developing a culture where the feeling of liking and caring for each other prevails, makes an organization virtuous.
13	Vision	Trust	The moralistic organization considers the dual play of trust within the organization, where organization trusts its employees' efforts and employees trust organizational policies and procedures.
14		Justice	Procedural fairness in the treatment of employees and addressing their needs and concerns without prejudices.
15		Harmony	Eliminating unfairness, harassment, unethical behaviour and promoting dignity and respect for all to make organization harmonious.
16	Brevity	Brevity	The vision laid down must be succinct and capable to communicate future goal in few words.
17		Goal clarity	Avoiding technical jargon must communicate clear and transcendental goals.
18		Abstract yet challenging	Must not be too clear. The vision statement must be abstract yet challenging with the flexibility to assimilate.
19		Desirable goal	The goal must be desirable but not unattainable or impossible so that organization can be inspired.

Source: The author.

Voice: providing an opportunity for employees to raise their concerns and issues without fear of being judged and negative impact (Rees et al., 2013). Continuous feedback, supervisor's support and cooperation, and inputs on procedure and policies are a few ways that can productively amplify employees' voice (Saks, 2006).

Variety: scientifically designing a job that uses a variety of skills, knowledge and expertise to have a higher degree of creativity and innovation and thus enhanced employee engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Variety in terms of autonomy, significance, task variety and challenging jobs can reduce psychological distress and raise engagement level (Christian et al., 2011).

Virtue: having a moralistic mission that supports ethical values for employees, customers, shareholders and community. Organizations having virtue clusters like affection, trust, justice and harmony can develop

a humane work environment where employees will be more engaged.

Vision: a clear and comprehensive stated goal of an organization that it strives to achieve in the future. Brevity, goal clarity, abstract yet challenging, desirable goals are a key feature of a good vision of an organization to develop an engaged workforce.

Conclusion

The V5 model of employee engagement is a ready reference model for HR professionals to enhance the engagement level with the help of five major elements namely—value, voice, variety, virtue and vision. These elements of employee engagement are identified from the literature (Harter et al., 2002; Kahn, 1990). These five

levers of employee engagement are non-materialistic and thus require minimal organizational outlay, but serious attention. Pre-COVID-19, organizations were focussing on employee engagement strategies. But the intrusion of COVID-19 caused emasculated engagement strategies as organizations were more anxious about their survival. Where 'remote working', 'teleworking' and 'working from home' had become a surge in the workplace, 'layoffs', 'furloughs' and 'resignations' had become 'new normal' worldwide during the lockdown. Workers had to record their presence at work from their homes where they had to struggle with the stress of family, work and inefficient digital remote working. Such a stressful situation caused psychological pressure amongst workers leading to declining engagement level. Fear of loss of job during COVID-19 was the major impetus behind the low level of employee engagement. By focussing on these five elements suggested by the author, an organization can ponder upon the level of employee engagement and enhance its quantity as well as quality. These elements are perpetual and can never lose its sheen even in a crisis like COVID-19 or pandemic. Your organization is a product of joint efforts and diligence of your employees. Do not forget to make them feel that they are valuable to you. Motivational emails by the CEO during the crisis, providing moral support to them, and ensuring their financial and medical facilities during or after pandemic can significantly enhance their engagement level.

Lockdown has led to new digital remote-working that has caused work-related stress to some extent. Listen to your employees' concerns and issues related to that work. Be good ears to them; welcome opinions and suggestion from them to make their work smooth and less stressful. Amplify their voice for organizational benefit. Try to eliminate assigning monotonous jobs to employees. Allot new and challenging jobs. Use their creativity in this idle period. Provide relevant online training to enhance their skills to adopt new key roles. Make yourself virtuous. Ensure that every employee during or after lockdown have a sense of trust in you, that you love them, care for them, you are just and ethical for them. During COVID-19, the entire globe has taken a completely different rotation, so have organizations' long-term plans come to standstill. Revisit your vision statement. Rewrite them with more clear, optimistic and desirable terms with new goals. Ensure its effective communication among workers and win their confidence in the organization once again.

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Puneet Kumar (puneet.2463@gmail.com) has worked with People Metrics Pvt Ltd., an Indian subsidiary of Thomas Assessment. He has experience in conducting Behavioural Assessment and Psychometric Analysis of Employees. He has been part of the team conducting assessment development centres for big PSUs. He is a graduate in Commerce from Shri Ram College of Commerce, University of Delhi and completed his masters from Department of Commerce, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. Currently, he is pursuing full-time PhD research in the discipline of management and pursuing research in the area of 'Employee Engagement' from Indira Gandhi National Open University.