Top tips: Lead and engage your team during the COVID 19 crisis

Crises are a defining test of your ability to lead and engage your team whilst delivering for customers and meeting the organisation's objectives.

Many customers are under pressure and may not be able to access your products and services in the ways to which they are accustomed. Many employees will have concerns about their own or their family's circumstances. At the same time, you may need to ask employees to work and collaborate differently or take on new roles and tasks. For the first time, you may be managing employees who are working from home, or a combination of employees who are site-based or working remotely.

Drawing on The Institute of Customer Service's Academy ServiceManagement training and our research into leadership and employee engagement in a service context, we've put together recommended practices and tips to help you lead and engage your team.

1) Be clear about your organisation's purpose and the role that your team plays
Remind yourself about your organisation's purpose, especially in relation to delivering service to customers. Ask yourself how your team contributes to the organisation's purpose in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Create a story or narrative to share with your team that highlights how your activities enable the organisation's purpose at this critical time. Encourage your team to share examples about how their work contributes to the overall purpose.

Reminding everyone about the organisation's purpose and the role your team and individuals play in delivering it will help you set priorities at a time of stress and uncertainty, engage everyone in a shared mission, and help encourage consistency of behaviour across the team.

2) Set tangible goals and outcomes appropriate to the current context

Set tangible deliverables and manage outcomes, rather than micro-managing individuals' activities. Be clear about the required outcome and its impact for customers and check back to ensure your employee has the same understanding as you. Discuss any issues that it will be important to consider, or that may affect the outcome. Agree the required timeline and set dates for reviewing progress.

Consider how you measure the team's and individual employee's performance. Are current measures appropriate to the current circumstances and do they support desired outcomes and behaviours? You may need to review measures to reflect what's being asked of employees and the standards your organisation can deliver for customers.

Make sure you are giving appropriate focus to short, medium and long-term objectives and impact as these may not always be the same!. In the current circumstances, it's likely that you and your team will need to focus on immediate priorities rather than longer-term objectives, but do not dismiss these. Make sure that you have clearly defined the team's priorities and that you continually review them. As the situation evolves, you may also need to make time to think about longer-term impacts of your current priorities and your focus may need to change. Avoid knee-jerk reactions and take some time to reflect on the effect of the decisions you are making – this of course doesn't mean lengthy procrastination!

3) Make sure everyone understands roles and responsibilities and any changes to the way you work

Work patterns, communication methods, or team dynamics are likely to have been disrupted. In some cases, you may be asking employees to perform different tasks or roles, or requirements may change quickly and at short notice. In this environment, it is vitally important to clarify both individual roles and responsibilities, and where employees can access help or information to perform their role. Make sure you are clear about how specifically you and your team will work differently:

- Will people be asked to perform different roles or tasks? Do they have access to the knowledge or capabilities they need? If not, how will you get them up to speed quickly?
- Are there any changes to your processes or hand-offs between different departments?
- Will employees be working different hours or shift patterns?
- Will employees be working on-site, at home, or travelling between different locations or a mix of all?
- Make sure you have put in place the necessary social distancing measures for employees who are working on site, in a public place or travelling between locations (see our guide Looking after the health and safety of your employee who cannot work from home)
- Make sure you have access to the technology solutions that enable employees to perform their job role, communicate and collaborate, wherever they are based

You may find it helpful to use a simple RACI model. It helps you set out who is responsible for a task (R); who is accountable for the task on behalf of the organisation (A); who has information or capability required for the task and should be consulted (C); who should be informed (I).

Give your team a say about practical arrangements that affect them personally such as changes to shift times or changes to job role. You may not be able to please everyone, but you will gain an understanding of individual's concerns and challenges, demonstrate that you are listening and may generate solutions that better enable your team to meet customer needs.

4) Make your communications relevant, meaningful and interactive

You may face a new set of communications challenges if for, example some of the team are site-based and others working at home, or if shift patterns mean that not everyone can attend a single meeting.

Involve your team in creating a communications plan that fits your working environment, takes account of individual circumstances, provides consistent and up to date information and allows everyone to have their say.

Consider how you will distribute important communications to team members quickly, whether through video conferencing, telephone, email, a team app, face to face or a combination of methods.

Evaluate the best way of using tools that can keep your team connected and promote collaboration. For example, Slack or Yammer can enable instant communication and interaction. Zoom can be used for virtual meetings or training. Microsoft Teams, Dropbox, Google Drive, etc give teams the ability to share data and collaborate in real time.

If some employees are not able to attend meetings, make a plan about how you will keep them informed, for example through a buddy system, email update or briefing at your next one-to-one meeting.

Use straightforward language that can be understood by the whole team and avoid jargon where possible. Invite questions and check that your key messages have been understood.

You may find it useful to communicate a regular update/bulletin message to reinforce key information.

5) Maintain one to one meetings

If you and your team members are less visible to each other or have fewer direct interactions, your one to one meetings will become even more important. As much as possible, maintain your schedule of one to one meetings and ensure that the agenda covers operational performance, recognition of success, personal development and crucially, how your employee is feeling about, and adapting to, the current working environment. You may also need to schedule daily or weekly catch up with each employee to check in on their well-being and progress on the tasks you've agreed.

Make sure everyone has the opportunity to share their concerns and they are aware of the help and support they can access such as an employee helpline, counselling or conversations with you as the line manager.

Encourage employees to continue their professional and personal development activity wherever possible. For example, if employees are undertaking professional qualifications, the current context is likely to provide opportunities for strong evidence to demonstrate their knowledge and capabilities.

Ask for feedback about how you can help the team achieve its objectives. But recognise also that individuals will only feel comfortable about giving honest feedback if you have created a team environment and individual relationships that encourage it.

6) Schedule meetings and updates to communicate and share essential information with your team

Put in place a schedule of regular team meetings/briefings or catch-ups that is appropriate to your operational environment

Be clear about essential information that you need to communicate, for example:
• Changes to job roles, tasks or working practices
• Changes to operational processes
• Changes to how customers interact with you
• Essential social distancing and hygiene measures
• Feedback from across the organisation or from customers
• Updates on current team performance and issues
• Availability of opportunities for personal development
• Help and support that is available for employees, for example employee helpline or counselling

Consider how you will use video or conferencing technology to hold meetings with employees at different locations. You may need to agree a set of ground rules to ensure the meetings are productive, for example:

- Make sure people keep their video camera on throughout the meeting
- Ask people not to multi-task during the meeting
- Request people to remain on mute unless speaking
- Remind participants that their virtual background is visible to others
- If employees are working from home, ask them to make family members aware of the meeting, to minimise disturbance

Make time for personal and social interactions. If you are holding a virtual team meeting, you could take a few moments to encourage each person to show the team his or her home workspace and share some personal context (e.g pets, home schooling children, sharing workspace with a partner). This context can help people be more sensitive to each other's constraints.

If you are chairing the meeting, make sure that all participants can contribute to the discussion; proactively invite comment from people who have not spoken. Recap and summarise issues that have been discussed and check for understanding. Send a summary of key outcomes and next steps promptly after the meeting.

7) Listen to your team

Demonstrate to your team that you are listening and that they have been heard. Try wherever possible to give the team a say on practical issues that affect them, such as changes to shift patterns, allocation of tasks, or the best way of receiving communications.

Discuss with the team issues that affect the customer experience or collaboration with colleagues. Encourage people to generate solutions, identify challenges that can be solved and gain an understanding of why some are less straightforward to fix. Many employees have direct experience of issues that affect customers: it's vital that their feedback is encouraged and acknowledged.

Be open to new ideas and approaches, even if some of them might seem impractical or hard to implement. Encourage people to think through the implications of their ideas and potential costs as well as benefits. Discuss current or anticipated challenges in the working environment and brainstorm solutions. This may help to generate new and useful ideas as well as developing team morale.

8) Recognise your people's commitment

Take time to give recognition for team and individual efforts, especially for those undertaking extra or new responsibilities. Be specific and genuine about your feedback and explain the benefits for customers, the team and the organisation.

9) Vary your leadership style

Effective leaders are adept at varying their leadership style according to the needs of a situation or employee. In the current crisis, you will likely need to draw on and demonstrate the full range of leadership styles. At times, you may need to adopt an autocratic style if immediate decisions are required to respond to an urgent situation. At other times, you will need to practice an open, facilitator approach, for example if you want to invite feedback from employees and encourage them to generate solutions. In some cases, employees may eagerly step up to new responsibilities; you may need to guide their approach without dampening their initiative. It's also likely that some employees will feel anxious or distressed by current events, so where appropriate you may need to demonstrate counselling/supportive behaviours.

When challenging situations arise you will typically need to respond in the moment. So try to make some time to think about your preferred leadership style and how you can vary or flex style to adapt to different situations.

10) Develop your emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognise and manage both your own and others' emotions in order to influence behaviour. The current crisis is likely to create situations that demand emotional commitment or are emotionally draining. People working from home for the first time may feel disconnected or isolated. Employees may be affected by distressing situations in their own lives or through their interactions with customers. As a manager and leader, you may feel stressed about your ability to keep the team motivated and on track.

Learn to recognise and manage your emotions and stress so that you can remain composed and continue to think rationally and respond in the moment.

Demonstrate empathy to others. Encourage people to talk about their concerns and how they are feeling by asking open questions. Acknowledge the emotions people are expressing and respond in a personal, genuine way. Even if you cannot solve the problems they describe you can help them recognise and process their feelings and demonstrate that you are listening.

Provide reassurance where you can by providing timely information and updates and reminding people of the help and support available to them. In a time of challenge and uncertainty it's natural to feel anxious. By encouraging people to talk about their concerns it can help them manage their emotions and realise that support is available from colleagues.

Don't be afraid to express emotions. In demanding or stressful situations, it's only natural that at times you may need to express your emotions. It can demonstrate to others that you are human and that you care. But always be respectful to others and be aware that the way you behave sets the tone for the team.

11) Be visible and engage with the whole team

Even if you, or your employees, are working remotely, make sure they know that you are still available. Agree with your employees the best way for you to contact each other if you need to interact urgently. If you need to reserve time for your own work, or meetings, communicate it to employees so they know when you are available.

Make sure you dedicate proportionate amounts of time to all your employees, wherever they are based. Make an effort to schedule regular catch-ups with employees who are working remotely.

12) Listen to customer feedback

In the current situation, your organisation may not be able to deliver your desired standards of service consistently or within approriate response times. You may have asked customers to interact with you in different ways, to accept a slower response, or you may have put measures in place to prioritise vulnerable customers.

It is nevertheless important to understand to what extent you are meeting customer needs, the biggest problems experienced by customers when they deal with you and key gaps in customer experience. Even if you don't want to run a full customer survey, you need to find appropriate ways of understanding how customers are experiencing your service and urgent areas you need to address.

13) Do what you say you will do

The Institute's research on leadership shows that "doing what you say you will do" is identified as the single most important behavior employees' want from their manager. Make sure you document commitments that you have made in one-to-one or team meetings and follow through on them.

14) Don't forget the longer term

When you are dealing with a crisis, the focus is necessarily on immediate priorities. However, the current situation is evolving and at some point your organisation will need to or be able to return to something approaching business as usual. During the current crisis, you may have had to try new ways of working out of necessity, which have simplified processes or improved productivity. Make sure that you retain this learning and continue to apply them in the future.

We hope these top tip are useful and we'd love to hear your feedback. Should you have any questions you would like to ask us on this topic, or for more information about leading and engaging your team, please get in touch at: enquiries@icsmail.co.uk