



## THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

### LEADERSHIP DURING LOCKDOWN

#### How have leaders adapted throughout the pandemic? How can we be better prepared for any potential lockdowns and for the future.

Rewind the clock, by roughly a year – let’s say January 2020 – and consider how you managed your team. For a start, you probably knew where they were physically located and when they’d be there, whether that’s on desks adjoining yours, in the next room, down a corridor or on a different floor.

Then you most likely knew how to talk to them effectively, with the luxury of a face-to-face conversation just a walk down a corridor or an elevator ride away. You probably knew what to say to them, because the world in which you operated didn’t fundamentally change from one week to the next as it has done in the time of the pandemic.

You also knew what not to say to them, being able to gauge their mood should there be something amiss with how they’re acting that could impinge on their working life. Body language was just one of many visual cues you had in your armoury.

Now, back to today, and the situation couldn’t be more different. We don’t know specifically where our team is: we don’t see them when they come in to work; we don’t see them working late at their desk; we don’t know if they’re taking their lunch breaks. We also don’t have all the answers anymore – well, as much as we ever had them anyway. COVID-19 has meant there are shades of grey in almost every aspect. And, we can’t gauge the mood of an office simply by instinct through casual interactions.

Judging the mood of an office, and, should it need adjusting, doing what we can to change it accordingly,

is one of the signs of a good leader. However when so many of the tools have been taken away due to the pandemic, and our office has become virtual, the best leaders have had to adapt. “Some leaders are really engaging in cheerleading when it comes to encouraging new behaviours,” explains Laura Soto, Head of Global Wellbeing Products, Cigna.

“This comes from the right place, because we take it upon ourselves to engage our team with the energy that’s been lost in the natural environment and the dynamic that’s been lost from in-person interaction.

“Ultimately we’re all going to have to evolve and adapt to strengthen the relationship we have with each other as those energies that we had in the office – such as going for a coffee, a chat at a desk in-person – have gone, and we must find ways to build a replacement behaviour.

“As a team lead, we can’t carry the emotional weight of our teams, emails only go so far, and I see leaders as being a bit lost. Sometimes, they’re cheerleading because of the lack of a better idea, and they need to cement the connection.”

#### Honesty is the best policy

So, the first step, should be honesty. Never before have we collectively desired answers to the same questions, but unfortunately there generally haven’t been many answers. Whether we like it or not, the idea that, as a leader, you should have answers is now a thing of the past as we’re dealing with something »



that goes far beyond the confines of our own company or even our own sector. Which is why we should show empathy and be honest, explaining that, to all intents and purposes, we know as much as the employees. This kind of honesty might seem unsettling, but it puts you on the same level, and delivers a trust that lets them understand that, while you don't know anything now, as soon as you do, they'll be the first to know. Sunil Setlur, Chief people officer, Go-Jek, explained on a recent webinar jointly hosted by Cigna and *The Economist* that honesty is very much the best policy. "One of the amazing things all our CEOs are doing is a monthly download, where they answer every single question," he explained. "Some of them are very hard [questions] and unfiltered, with questions that go from company strategy and direction to macroeconomics, tactical process-related stuff – every company has issues – requests to do things differently."

That honesty from the top-down has been reflected across the board, with information key to ensuring the workforce is as happy as possible. Sunil also pointed out that they've had to ensure the message is shared through whichever channels possible to ensure everyone is informed. "There's been a tonne of stuff, lots of email communication, lots through our internal social platform."

"The content game has gone up too, as people are at different levels of understanding, and we've quadrupled the size of our amazing internal communications team. I would say we've over communicated as we've tried to find different ways of being heard."

Even without access to an internal communications team, being honest with your team – even when that honesty is simply saying that you don't know the

## ***"We must find ways to build a replacement behaviour."***

answer – will at least help your own relationship with them. By putting yourself on a level playing field, it will mean there's more chance of them sharing how they're feeling about the situation. In these times, this is the most important information a leader can have about their team.

### **Flexibility is key**

The rigidity of the working day is now a thing of the past. Every leader now has to understand that an employee is not only an employee, but also a parent, a carer, a partner – they have other functions and responsibilities. And this is something we've all physically seen with the various guest appearances of relatives and pets on virtual meetings, it's impossible to ignore, but we shouldn't be ignoring it anyway. Dawn Soo, Regional Medical Officer, Asia-Pacific, Cigna International Markets explains: "Employers will have to respect we all play different roles in life, we're a child, a parent – there's a new level of trust with employees and we have to accept that, moving forward, schedules will have to be flexible."

That flexibility requires trust, but at a time when 59% of people are reporting they're working more hours than before<sup>1</sup> and 79% recording a feeling of being always-on<sup>2</sup>, employees are responding by working even harder than ever before. Which isn't always a good thing and makes the importance of listening greater than ever to ensure their needs are »



## ***“We’ve gone from managing time to managing people’s energy.”***

Sunil Setlur, Chief people officer, Go-Jek

being met, socially, physically and mentally. “As time went by and the realization this [pandemic] could go on for much longer, with no definitive end date, our approach changed,” explained Sunil, when discussing how Go-Jek met employee needs. “We said three things were important.

“We wanted to listen a lot more – I think our employees were the most polled they’d ever been – as we did a number of surveys, outreaches to understand how they’re feeling, what they wanted to do, what we can do to make them more effective.

“The second thing we wanted to do was maintain community and social bonds and we wanted to do that in a way that was meaningful – because adding another Zoom meeting after a week of back-to-back Zoom meetings is maybe not the best way to do it.

“The other thing was a fundamental shift in the way we manage,” he continued. “We’ve gone from managing time which is what you do when you get people into an office, to managing people’s energy.”

This meant Go-Jek had to manage the ‘effectiveness of outcomes’ rather than specifically count time spent in hours and days.

Listening paid plenty of dividends for both parties, part of the effectiveness drive meant they realised that not everyone had a suitable at-home set-up, so they initially developed a loan programme for office furniture and ergonomic equipment. When they realised it was going to be longer-term, they launched a home allowance with ‘no strings attached’ so people could be comfortable in their home-working space.

Another big change was centred around energy. “The thing is we’re exhausted, we don’t have the energy,” explained Sunil. “Sitting in front of a screen drains you...”

Which is where initiatives such as the second Friday of every month becoming a no-meeting day, and the last Friday becoming a company holiday. Both concepts, said Sunil, made “people feel they have the time and space to manage energy, especially when people were ploughing back the hours in commute time back into work”.

Flexible thinking on every front.

### **Empowering employees**

What all of this means is that we have to equip employees with all the right tools, this can be in the most literal sense with the right technology, equipment and even an ergonomically perfect office chair. It means giving people the right support to meet their whole health needs. This covers every aspect of their life, from the physical and mental to the social and even the financial – we have to be aware of the many factors that can impact on their total well-being that go beyond those we’re used to dealing with. “Leaders are going to have to become more empathetic and more personal in order to keep that human element,” explains Laura Soto. “They are also going to have to become more creative in creating energy and a vision for the future because those things are sorely needed now, as we’re staring down a tunnel of days that all feel very similar.

“We have to empower people to take on new projects and be their own leader.”

This can be done both informally and formally through the provision of courses. “Most companies are giving their employees a lot of opportunities to develop their skills,” said Sumit Tandon, Regional HR Director, Boeing International. “You don’t have to be attending meetings, there are lots of digital technologies out there that you can use at your own »



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time, your own pace. Learning is a great way of keeping yourself positive and giving yourself a sense of accomplishment during the stress.”

Just because you may be a leader yourself, doesn’t mean you have to exclude yourself from this either. “One of the steps I’ve taken,” explains Tony Jasper, Global Employer Services Leader, Greater China, Deloitte. “Has been to take a leadership coaching course, to improve my working style, but also from an intellectual standpoint.”

Even without embarking on additional learning, just the simple act of empowering people, can lead to some unexpected, but positive outcomes.

“We’ve seen a lot of stories of employees helping each other out, unprompted, so what we now do is

have a lot of emphasis on empowering people to go out and help their colleagues,” explained Sunil. “One of the programmes we are trialing is a Lean on Me programme where you can partner up with somebody and talk about how they’re feeling.

“Big company-wide recognition schemes are less effective now, so what can we do to create a culture of gratitude and give people the opportunity to say ‘thanks’ at a difficult time?

“Look at the neuroscience of crisis, logic should tell you that in a crisis people look after themselves, but in my entire experience the science shows that when crisis happens people really look after the tribe. So, how do we give people the opportunity to look after each other as well? It doesn’t have to be a grand gesture of ‘let’s go help a marginalized part of society’, it can just be something simple, someone at work started a cat channel on Slack, just asking ‘what are you guys doing to keep your cats entertained or off your keyboard?’ It’s now a 400-person community.

“Sometimes it’s a case of getting out of the way, and telling people about these opportunities and then let them make the bridges.”

#### References:

<sup>1 & 2</sup> Cigna Covid-19 Global Impact Study

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