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How to manage well in the 'new normal'

Communication and empathy remain key for managers as we emerge from the pandemic

You're definitely not alone in feeling the nature of work has radically changed.

The major - originally thought to be short-term - shift to remote working to control the spread of COVID-19 will likely continue in the long-term, as businesses embrace an enigmatic 'new normal'.

We have all gradually come to realise, however, that this 'new normal' goes beyond adapting to different technologies and encompasses real changes to the fundamental employee experience.

Learning and development, for example, might be in jeopardy, according to Leesman research. The benchmarking firm reported in June that 30% of its respondents felt remote working doesn't support 'learning from others'. This highlights

one of the many challenges managers will encounter guiding their teams through the 'new normal' - a task made more urgent by the fact that, right now, managers themselves may need more support than ever before.

A remote future

Organisations that shifted to remote working at scale were generally among those most able to continue undisrupted. Businesses in the arts, entertainment, and recreation sectors suffered the biggest disruption, ONS figures show, with the majority (82%) reporting temporary disruption.

In contrast, the information, professional, and scientific sectors were among those able to continue trading at much closer to normal levels, according to the ONS.

Implementing new systems - many

of which are cloud-based - has been a key driver for continuity, allowing us to remain working from home effectively and securely. But, while productivity has soared, other areas have proved harder to master in a virtual office scenario.

Managers, for example, have been challenged to find the right balance in terms of communication, according to Steve Peralta, co-founder of workplace mental health platform, Unmind. Indeed, it's been a difficult balance to strike, with the key lying between making sure workers feel supported and avoiding micromanagement.

"As we have adjusted to remote working, this has become easier," Peralta says.

"The best managers have consistently struck this balance, demonstrating their trust and empowering their employees. They've also helped to bring structure amid the uncertainty, engaging in regular catch-ups and check-ins with teams and individuals."

Effective communication also lies in



finding the right balance between remote work and remote management, meaning not only ensuring employees meet deadlines, but also supporting their mental health.

“When communicating virtually, it’s much harder to pick up on cues that employees are struggling,” Peralta adds. “That’s why it’s now more important than ever to structure meetings in a way that allows for the discussion of wellbeing, their current situation, and the support available.”

Dividing the workforce

Keeping motivation levels up and ensuring people strike the right work-life balance, too, are crucial. Olga Crosse, the founder of HR consultancy firm CrosseHR, says communication must become far more prominent than ever, especially “considering how bad most leaders and companies were at this when the employees were right in front of them”.

She adds that failing to address this may lead to workforces splitting between ‘office workers’ and ‘remote workers’ with those in the latter camp potentially missing out when it comes to promotion and training.

“There will always be some form of person-to-person contact, maybe not five days a week, but a more blended way of working,” Crosse adds.

“Managers will have to spend a lot more time and effort managing, communicating, getting feedback, acting on feedback and listening than they did in the past. They will also have to trust more. They need to be clear about their objectives and clear

about the signposts on the way.”

Alongside more communication, the new management toolset must include empathy, according to Lizzie Benton, founder of Liberty Mind. “New age managers will look nothing like the managers of the past,” she explains.

“In 2021, managers will need to have empathy, a coaching mindset, and lead their people rather than dictate to them.

“People thrive better in the workplace when they respect and trust their leaders, this can only come from a human understanding in the workplace that we are all people and each is there to support each other in achieving goals.”

Opening up

Given the urgency to respond to business changes, it’s inevitable that managers may feel under more pressure. After all, the ‘new normal’ to which we have all been forced to adapt, is set to prove trying for our collective mental health, managers included.

“Practically everyone’s mental health has been challenged in some way,” Peralta says. In light of this, managers shouldn’t feel stigmatised by asking for additional help from their own seniors, or even from their subordinates.

“Managers have a very important role in supporting employees during the lockdown – but their own wellbeing is often overlooked,” Peralta adds. “As important as it is to continue to perform their roles and take responsibility for those they manage, managers must look after their own mental

health and be open when it comes to discussing issues they are facing and support they need.”

Most organisations are keenly aware of the need to keep their teams motivated through trying times, according to Caroline Whaley, co-founder of Shine For Women.

As such, managers themselves shouldn’t let asking for support become a negative, Whaley says, adding that they should also be okay with the fact that some of their decisions right now may not be the best.

“When it comes to the managers themselves, it’s so important to recognise their own vulnerabilities and ensure they’re doing what they need to get their energy levels back up,” Whaley says.

“Even the most resilient of us have found this hard at times and there’s no shame in that. Be honest about how you feel; others will appreciate the candour and will most likely support you through it.”

Crosse, meanwhile, urges managers to seek advice and support as soon as they feel that they are not coping. If their own managers cannot – or will not – help, they should approach HR and ask to consult with occupational health.

When it comes to making an approach to gain support from those you manage, rather than your manager, Crosse suggests: “Be human and explain. Most people are in the same boat, and are human, and will understand. Empathy, and admitting a problem, makes you a better manager, not a worse one.”