

During Covid-19, Why Are Workers So Disengaged? Blame the Boss; The difference between employees who see the pandemic as an opportunity or a threat comes down to their mind-set

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FULL TEXT

Call it a pandemic of worker malaise: Thanks to Covid-19, an increasing number of people feel disengaged from their jobs. Working from home, interacting via video, and worrying about our health and the economy are all taking a toll.

In a May-June 2020 survey of over 8,000 people across all 50 states and all types of jobs, we found that work engagement had fallen 16% since the start of the pandemic. We replicated those findings in a subsequent survey of over 500 people in February.

There was, however, one factor that protected people against work disengagement: their crisis mind-set.

Many of our respondents viewed the pandemic as a threat and an annoyance, and just wanted life to go back to normal. These were the disengaged workers. But others were trying to make the most of the changing world. Our survey showed that these people experienced almost no drop in work engagement. In fact, some even became more energized by their work during this period.

We might assume that whether people approach the upheaval of the pandemic as an opportunity or a threat depends wholly on them—their personality, life experiences and emotions. In our research, however, we uncovered an interesting truth: Bosses made a big difference.

In a subsequent survey of over 500 people, we identified exactly how leaders are making things worse, as well as how they can help improve the situation.

Leaders as role models

The biggest issue, by far, was how leaders themselves responded to the crisis. People in our online executive M.B.A. classes often talk about how their leaders "can't wait to go back to how things were." One senior leader told us before a speech: "Don't say too many good things about working from home, because I want them back into the office as soon as possible."

These leaders are modeling a negative crisis mind-set—and passing it on to their subordinates. Research on emotional contagion confirms that we can "catch" each other's emotions. Think about times when a friend's "infectious" good mood cheered you up, or when someone's unhappiness left you feeling low.

In one study, half of the participants were randomly told, "Congratulations, you won a \$5 gift certificate" before they gave a leadership speech. The others were told, "Sorry, you didn't win the gift certificate." Followers who watched the speeches of the winners reported more positive emotions, and performed better, than followers of those who didn't win.

This is exactly what happens when bosses model that their goal is to get back to the pre-Covid normal.

Our survey showed that bosses' attitudes were the single best predictor of employees' crisis mind-sets, and thus

their work engagement. When bosses were "just trying to get through this period," they ingrained a threat mind-set that decimated their employees' work engagement. By contrast, the employees of leaders who were "focused on the opportunity this crisis provided" had the highest opportunity mind-sets in our survey.

An opportunity crisis mind-set isn't the same as sunny optimism that somehow everything will be OK. Rather, during the pandemic, leaders who have balanced realism and optimism signal to employees the value of experimenting and building skills that will be valuable both during and after the crisis. They encourage employees to reflect on opportunities to rethink their jobs during this period of reset, recognizing that work becomes more engaging when we are guided by our personal interests, perspectives and talents.

For example, leaders might encourage their employees to see that they can gain marketable skills by embracing a new digital approach to work. By modeling a learning mentality, leaders can help employees adopt the mind-set they need to stay engaged.

Get personal

In our survey, a second important predictor of an employee's opportunity mind-set was whether "my boss has had conversations with me about my home life in addition to my work life."

Many bosses have avoided asking employees about their home life. It makes sense: They've long been trained to "be professional" and keep emotions out of the workplace.

Share Your Thoughts

How has the pandemic affected the way you feel about your work? Join the conversation below.

During normal times, this detached style of leadership does little to promote employee engagement; workers are reluctant to experiment and learn from leaders they don't connect with or trust. It's even more damaging in a pandemic, when employees are dealing with immense burdens that can leave them feeling isolated, overburdened and taken for granted.

It turns out that when leaders use the pandemic to connect with employees as human beings, their employees are significantly more likely to view lockdown as a time to learn and engage. This finding aligns with research on "humble leaders"—those who foster greater engagement by providing emotional support to employees during times of change, nurturing them as they explore and grow. Research shows that humble leaders help employees bring more of themselves to work by asking how they are doing and how they can help, and then doing whatever they can to get employees what they need—even if it goes beyond their day-to-day work tasks.

See the big picture

In our survey, talking about the purpose of the work to be done was the third most important behavior leaders could engage in to encourage an opportunity mind-set in their employees.

Leaders have had to put out a lot of fires these days—overseeing new online systems, finding new ways to service customers, overcoming supply-chain challenges, managing employees from a distance, among other things. This focus on the details is necessary, but often has detracted from broader concerns.

Most leaders know that purpose is a powerful tool for inspiring people to bring their best to work. Unfortunately, many employees don't "get" their organizations' purpose. They see it on the corporate website, but they don't feel it personally. Leaders can help employees internalize their organization's purpose. For example, research shows that when leaders talk about the future in an inspiring way, and use powerful analogies, employees are more engaged and produce better performance.

While working from home, many of us have struggled with some basic questions: "What is my job now?" and "How do I help my organization succeed?" When leaders talk with employees about their goals and the impact they can make together, they help employees see how their work fits into the bigger picture. Leaders can work with employees to give priority to whom they are trying to serve and what they need to fulfill that mission. These conversations can help employees "personalize purpose" better than an organization's vision or mission statement, which is often so grand that employees have difficulty connecting it to their daily tasks.

More broadly, it's a reminder that the little things have the broadest impact. Workers have felt less and less engaged this past year. Many bosses, thinking they were doing the right thing, have only made things worse. But it

isn't too late for all of us to improve.

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* Insights from The Experts

More in Work From Home

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