How can your organization thrive during a global disruption? By keeping employees engaged, connected, and productive. Your teams are looking to your organization’s leadership to provide stability, updates, and vision for a future that is uncertain. Organizations with the strongest leaders are in the best position to rally their workforce behind a shared vision—and pivot quickly as requirements change. Yet, given the unprecedented disruption we find ourselves in, our traditional leadership strategies are being challenged. Agile leaders must inspire productivity through new ways of working and additional leadership interventions.

Here are some key ways to help you bring out the best in your workforce during this or any other time of great change:

**DAILY**
- Prioritize face-to-face time (and yes, virtual counts)
- Acknowledge the disruption but don’t let it dominate

**WEEKLY**
- Increase the frequency of one on ones
- Flex your leadership style to meet the needs of your team
- Maintain a “directionally correct” vision
- Activate your middle managers—they are your change agents

**MONTHLY**
- Maintain high levels of connectivity across teams
- Use the time to revisit back-burner items
- View constraints as productivity catalysts
- Lead toward something—not just away from something else
Communicate frequently and authentically

Prioritize face-to-face time.
Turn on your webcams! Meeting face-to-face is one of the most powerful ways to bridge the remote divide. To encourage employees to use video, create an environment where it’s “safe” to do so. That means making sure employees aren’t worried about clothes, hair, or a messy desk. No one is at their finest right now, and that’s OK! The power of connection is more important than “perfection.”

Tip: Make time for video meetings: whether it’s a semi-regular virtual happy hour or quick daily pulse check, make sure you are visible to your team on a regular basis—and that they’re visible to you, too!

Acknowledge the disruption but don’t let it dominate.
COVID-19 has affected everyone, in every country, so there’s no point in pretending it’s not a major factor in everyone’s lives. And that impact will evolve over time – especially as we embrace whatever “normal” looks like in the workplace post global pandemic. Ultimately, it is critical that discussions of the disruption don’t consume the bulk of every meeting. How can you create balance? Consider using the first few minutes of every meeting for a brief “pulse check.” A quick “How is everyone?” goes a long way.

Tip: Set expectations ahead of time. Add pulse checks into the agenda, so employees know there is a start and a stop point for sharing.
Increase the frequency of one-on-ones. More frequent one-on-one meetings create the real-time connection that is so absent from remote working situations. Employees may also be more comfortable sharing in a more private setting. Just like group meetings, these one-on-ones should start with a brief “How are you? Tell me what’s real in your life” and move on quickly to the work at hand. This structure serves dual purposes, overt and covert:

- Overtly, it acknowledges the uncertainty and strangeness of the current circumstances.
- Covertly, it offers valuable insight into an employee’s current challenges. Is their spouse a first responder? Is a family member ill? Are they sharing their home—and their workspace—with children or three rowdy roommates? Or are they living alone and feeling isolated?

Understanding an employee’s context can help you flex your style and facilitate adjustments to maximize productivity. For example, consider changing meeting hours based on childcare “shifts.” Or, offer up an opportunity to lead a team project to someone who is craving more interaction.

Tip: What is the right level of frequency? It varies depending on department and role but consider increasing it by the power of four. For example, if you have been meeting with individual team members twice a month, start meeting twice a week for 15-30 minutes. At minimum, you should commit to weekly 1:1s.
Adjust your leadership style.
Leadership styles vary greatly. But in the midst of a global disruption, certain leadership qualities may resonate more with employees. This doesn’t mean you have to throw out your entire leadership style; rather, look at what’s most effective at driving productivity and value during this time of uncertainty. You may have a leadership style that is less personal: you care deeply about your team but don’t always express it. However, right now, over-indexing on compassion and empathy—being more of a “personal” leader—will go a long way toward motivating and engaging your employees. Likewise, those who tend to lead through familiarity and personal connection will want to carefully examine their compassion outflows to ensure their team stays focused and productive.

If you don’t normally have a “personal” leadership style, over-indexing on empathy or compassion may feel inauthentic to you. One way to balance leading in a way that motivates employees and remains authentic is finding the right channel and frequency to connect. For example, consider sharing anecdotes and/or pictures of your home life via group communication channels. During times of uncertainty, you’ll want to prioritize the needs of your team over your own leadership style preference.

Tip: Leading during global disruption requires compassion, empathy, and a commitment to personal interactions. Take a deeper look at the makeup of your leadership style and consider what your team might need now to do their best work. More frequent check-ins? More flexible work hours to accommodate the new realities of family life? Increased independence on projects?

Maintain a “directionally correct” vision.
During a crisis, it’s typical for objectives and vision to shift. But don’t let that discourage you. Instead – focus on the agility you’ll need to drive towards a vision that is “directionally correct.” Maintaining that vision will be crucial to your organization’s survival and it’s a powerful driver that keeps employees working toward a viable future, despite current hardships. Vision also provides much-needed structure by enabling employees to feel part of something greater (and that their work has purpose, an important motivator in times of disruption).

Tip: During any global disruption, you may have to do more to help maintain the vision. Internal marketing can help you build grassroots support for any changes, and frequent communication with team leaders can ensure continued alignment.

Activate your middle managers. They are your change agents!
According to research by Dr. Behnam Tabrizi of Stanford University, organizations that successfully navigated change did so by empowering middle-level managers (MLMs). Managers two degrees removed from the executive suite were the most effective in driving change. MLMs “serve as levers of change, influencing those above and below them in the corporate hierarchy,” says Tabrizi. But they need support to do so: Activate your middle managers by tasking them with helping you maintain vision, drive new projects, and motivate and influence your workforce.

Tip: According to Tabrizi, too many middle-level managers are “cautious and unsure of their authority.” Engage and empower them by reshaping their roles. Tabrizi recommends using “triple-A” leadership principles: Align their values with change goals, give them authorship of innovation plans, and enable them to take action and responsibility for the success of their initiatives.
Plan for the future

Maintain high levels of connectivity throughout the disruption.
As the “new normal” becomes simply “normal,” it may seem sensible to reduce communication frequency. But experts caution that it’s vital to continue to maintain high levels of connectivity throughout the duration of this or any global disruption. Uncertainty, social isolation, and lack of community will only intensify with time; employees will need increasing opportunities for social interaction, direct support from managers, and ongoing direction and structure.

Tip: Through times of disruption and change, what worked yesterday may not work today, and what one team or person needs may not work for another. Send out a survey or take a quick poll at an all-hands to show your team and direct reports you’re willing to do what works for them. Maintain the connective tissue of your team through a meaningful meeting cadence (webcams on!) and relevant email report-out process.

Use the time to revisit back burner items.
Current projects may be on hold or permanently cancelled. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t work to be done. Every leader has a list of back-burner items, projects that never make it off the wish list. Whether it’s a process overhaul or categorizing assets, now is the time to evaluate and bring forward those “we never had the time” projects. You may be surprised to discover they have greater relevance now in a changing environment.

Tip: What projects did you always wish your teams could focus on, if only there were more hours in the day? Take advantage of this time to start or continue with projects that have always been on the back burner.
Thriving in Times of Disruption – Helping employees through times of great change requires elevated levels of communication, leadership, and planning. By acting daily, weekly, and monthly to motivate and reassure the workforce, leaders can ensure employees—and the organization—continue to thrive amid global disruption. Leadership development is an ongoing process, but a critical one for empowering your people to address today’s crisis and tomorrow’s demands. By implementing these strategies and tips, you can be the agile leader your organization needs to navigate changing circumstances—and you’re not alone.

For more resources and information, visit: csod.info/leadership-pipeline

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