

5 Certain Ways to Engage Employees During Uncertain Times

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When was there ever a time that wasn't uncertain? Whether we want to admit it or not, we are experiencing times of tremendous change as markets rapidly evolve and global influence becomes more prominent. It's a time requiring us to think differently about how we lead others for the betterment of a healthier whole. As such, it demands that we revisit ways to strengthen our organizational culture, engage more authentically with our employees and neutralize the impact of uncertainty with our clients, vendors and partners.

An air of change and uncertainty has been present my entire career. Every company I have worked for has been infused by constant change. Thankfully, I've worked for the right leaders, been surrounded by top talent and have associated myself with wise, selfless mentors. Along the way, I've learned that to successfully manage change and uncertainty, you must engage your employees by empowering them to be part of the solution, rather than giving them reason to perceive they are part of the problem.

Oftentimes you'll find leaders that keep a low profile, and that say as little as possible during times of change and uncertainty. It's as if they are trying to protect themselves and their careers, instead of leading those that demand and expect great leadership from them. Uncertainty in an organization has the tendency to create hearsay, amplify political rumblings, and cause break room conversations amongst employees; this further fuels uncertainty and makes it difficult for employees to trust the workplace culture and its leadership, which impacts their ability to perform at their highest levels.

For example, last week I was coaching a Fortune 80 executive who was being blindsided by several unanticipated changes within the organization that was impacting his influence and department responsibilities. Needless to say, he felt undervalued and disrespected because he was not informed of these decisions in advance. He felt that the decisions being made were not indicative of his leadership capabilities and potential, nor that of his employees. He thought these decisions were based more on the leadership's agenda to support political goodwill and shareholder value – rather than what was in the best interests of the department and the employees that he leads.

It's not that he didn't accept the decisions and why they were being made – which showed his willingness to be a strong team player. However, what disappointed him was that his leader didn't involve him in the process – so that he himself would have ample time to inform and explain the situation at hand to his own department employees and help neutralize the possibility of amplifying the uncertainty.

Leaders that are focused more on what a particular moment in time means to them have the tendency to unknowingly fuel tension with their employees instead of finding ways to engage them. They miss opportunities to use moments of uncertainty and change as critical experiences to propel learning and development.

Unfortunately, this type of example is quite common – and it often leads to distrust and disruption that could have been avoided with honest, direct and frequent communication. Most of the problems that leaders have with their employees have to do with knowing how to manage and communicate uncertainty to them.

Great leaders know that managing uncertainty is a matter of putting themselves in the shoes of their employees and delivering the compassionate leadership they expect. People don't want good intentions from their leaders during times of uncertainty; they want their leaders to be not only strong, confident and decisive, but transparent and vulnerable enough in their leadership role to express a sense of genuine care and concern.

Employees are engaged when their leaders continuously provide insight and clarity to the situation at hand. A leader's role is to neutralize the uncertainty by communicating often and providing their employees with unique perspectives and knowledge. Employee engagement thrives when they are empowered with as much direction, certainty and involvement as possible – as this shows that you value and respect them.

Many leaders believe this type of approach may diminish their authority – but what they fail to realize is that this approach strengthens their executive presence and earns them respect along the way from their employees.

As you continue to face uncertainty and change throughout the course of your career, here are five things you should consider in order to keep your employees engaged and to assure you never lose the trust, loyalty and support you need from them:

1. Be Honest and Consistent

When someone asks you a question, give them an honest answer. Don't dance around the issues. Have your employees' backs and make them feel safe.

If it is a topic that you don't have the authorization to discuss – then be honest and tell them that. Just be consistent and don't share any confidential information with anyone within the department. Every leader has their favorites and those they can bounce their ideas off. In this situation, you can't – because if you do and others find out, your leadership reputation and credibility will be tarnished, and their loyalty towards you may begin to wane. Honesty and consistency are key success factors to create engagement during uncertain times.

2. Meet Often and Evaluate Mindset

Minimize distractions by having formal meetings with your department and sharing any insights you may have. These types of meetings are not only about providing status reports that channel out of your own senior staff meetings, but also about the opportunity to genuinely engage with your employees.

These meetings are not to be rushed. They are intended to slow down the chaos and bring together the people that must be on your side in order to get through the uncertainty. Take the time to talk things out and bring down the intensity and lighten the mood. Get to know what your employees are thinking about and begin to evaluate their mindset. Having a strong understanding of how the uncertainty may be disrupting performance, attitudes, etc., will give you the insight you need to learn about your employees – but more importantly what you need to do to step up your game and deliver what is required to ensure you never lose touch with what matters to them. In the end, you want your employees to know that you genuinely care and that you can connect with them on multiple levels.

3. Listen and Pay Close Attention

Leading through uncertainty is a critical experience not only for you – but more so for your employees. As such, make it memorable and be extremely mindful through broadened observation so they can positively embrace it. Often you or your executive assistant will catch wind of the break room discussions and the rumor mill that is flowing throughout the office. In fact, you may begin to hear things that people are saying about your mishandling of the uncertainty that may upset you and make you feel the need to defend yourself. Remain calm and allow the situation to organically unfold.

Listen and pay careful attention to everything that is taking place – not just in your department but also in other departments. Take your notes to the next staff meeting and compare them with those of your colleagues. Allow the collective knowledge that comes from all departments and their leaders to provide you with greater insights that can help you anticipate the unexpected and best prepare you to handle tension from employees – and neutralize it so that engagement can remain strong.

You have to live this type of critical experience in order to truly master it and it takes a tremendous amount of mental toughness to endure the journey.

4. Create and Share Key Learning Moments

My experience in leading through uncertainty has taught me that if I can effectively and consistently deliver steps 1-3, then I have the self-awareness – through broadened observation to create key learning moments and share them with employees.

Employees know when you are mindful of their concerns, but also when you have the ability to take a potentially negative situation and make something positive from it.

This takes a tremendous amount of commitment and focus – but it's a powerful way to keep your employees engaged and believing in you. Beyond formal meetings, quick impromptu huddle sessions where you can share key learning moments help you create a culture around the uncertainty that is focused on promoting the positive impact that can be gained from any situation. It also allows you to further gauge the maturity of your employees and how much uncertainty they are capable of handling. Be intentional about collaboration, making sure you give employees the room to ask questions and extract key learning moments that stimulate engagement.

5. Reveal Your Executive Presence

Your composure, how you react to the negative hallway dialogue, how you handle the politics and the effects of the uncertainty – all will reveal your true leadership style and approach. Each is an opportunity to unleash your impression as a leader. Always be present and be compassionate, yet decisive – and never stop engaging with your employees, who more often than not experience the uncertainty through a different lens and therefore have opinions that may not always be in alignment with yours.

In the end, you cannot go at leadership alone. It's all about people, how you treat them and show your genuine compassion and commitment to their careers, their development and discovering their full potential. When you have executive presence, you can slow down and see and seize opportunities more clearly. You are able to make smarter decisions and can begin to anticipate the needs of your employees more clearly. When this happens, employee engagement becomes second nature regardless of workplace circumstances.

Times of uncertainty will always reveal your maturity as a leader. Therefore, see it as an opportunity to advance your leadership by serving others, rather than as a setback to your own agenda and career expectations. Keeping employees engaged and focused when there is uncertainty all around them can seem like a daunting challenge – but less so for the forthright leader who listens attentively to their employees' needs, makes themselves available and shares with them often, and conveys to them a consistent and confident executive presence.