How to Keep Your Team Focused and Productive During Uncertain Times

by Amy Gallo
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Uncertainty is uncomfortable for everyone. Whether it's political turmoil or a reorganization at your company, employees who are concerned about their future are likely to be distracted and unproductive. What should a manager do? How can you keep people focused while also helping them cope with the feelings that change and ambiguity bring up?

What the Experts Say
Most of us feel overwhelmed, upset, and anxious when faced with uncertainty. "We have a fundamental neuroanatomy that orients us toward stress in highly charged times," explains Rich Fernandez, cofounder of Wisdom Labs and an expert in resilience. And this can start an unhealthy cycle: "A symptom of distraction is more distraction. Then we feel more anxious," says Susan David, a founder of the Institute of Coaching at McLean Hospital and author of Emotional Agility. On a team, these feelings, and the resulting hit to productivity, can be contagious. "We subtly pick up on the emotions and start to feel or mimic them ourselves," she explains. To help people stay focused despite what may be going on in the world or the office, Fernandez believes in "compassionate management," where you "seek to understand how you can be of service and benefit to employees while balancing the need to keep them on task." Here are practical ways to do that.

Take care of yourself first
You'll be better able to support your team and model resiliency if you acknowledge and manage any stress and anxiety you feel yourself. Start by taking the time to understand what you're feeling. "You want to label your emotions. Put distance between yourself and them so that you can make a conscious decision about how to act in a way that's in line with your values," David says. Ask yourself: Whom do I want to be in this situation? What's most important to me? "If one of your core values is to be collaborative, for example, ask, 'How can you help people feel like they're part of the team?'"

Acknowledge the uncertainty
If you sense your employees are concerned about the future of the country, your organization, or their jobs, don't carry on with business as usual. "These experiences are very real and can't be ignored, denied, or repressed," says Fernandez. Even if your intention is to keep people focused, bottling your emotions, or expecting employees to do the same, can be dangerous. People start to feel uncomfortable voicing their feelings or concerns, and "you start to get a rebound effect," says David. Instead, directly address the issue. You might acknowledge that things seem chaotic and unpredictable at the moment. At the same time, you only want to commiserate up to a point — you should avoid "brooding," where you get stuck in a negative spiral. Acknowledge how people are feeling, but then "move on to talk about how you want to act as a team," she says.

Encourage self-compassion
Some of your team members may be looking around and wondering how their colleagues are keeping it together while they're losing sleep and unable to be productive. Encourage them to have some self-

compassion and acknowledge that stress is a normal, physiological response to feeling out of control or threatened. "Help staff recognize that change can bring about a lack of agency," says David, which can send our brains and bodies into overdrive. If you're feeling stressed, admit it, or talk about previous situations in which you've felt anxiety, so they know they're not alone.

Ask people what they need
Talk with employees one-on-one and let them describe what they're going through. Do some "perspective-taking by putting yourself in their shoes," says Fernandez. You want to "truly understand what they think and feel, even if you don't agree or feel the same thing." This empathy forms the basis of trust so that you can move into problem-solving mode. Fernandez suggests saying, "It seems like a tough time. What would be most helpful at the moment? Let's think about it together, because I want to help and make sure you can get your work done." Maybe they need some extra guidance on how to reduce distractions, advice on prioritizing their work, or increased flexibility.

Focus on what you do control
Research has shown that even small rituals can reduce stress and improve performance, as can incremental progress toward clearly defined goals. You might also give people more flexibility in dictating their work schedule, so long as you "encourage them to plan in advance and make an agreement that the performance expectations remain the same," Fernandez says. David recommends returning to values as well. Even when "a lot of power and choices are being taken away, you still get to choose whom you want to be," she explains. So help employees clarify what's important to them. You can do this with the whole team by asking, "How do we want to act during these times? How do we want to treat one another?" Members might agree that they want to continue delivering a quality product to your clients while being respectful and kind to one another, for example. "It helps a team stay grounded when you reassert and reaffirm a shared sense of purpose," says David.

Encourage and model self-care
Sleep, exercise, and good nutrition are proven stress killers and productivity enhancers. So encourage your team members to take care of themselves, says David. For example, if an employee tells you she's taking her phone to bed to read work emails or the news, you might suggest she leave it in another room. If you see people checking Twitter or gossiping about a reorganization during lunch breaks, you might invite them to go out for a walk instead. It's not a manager's place to dictate these behaviors, but it's OK to give advice, especially based on your experience and what's worked for you. Mindful breathing helps to calm anxiety and increase focus, Fernandez says. Although it may seem awkward to remind your staff to inhale and exhale, you can share the research on its benefits.

Principles to Remember

Do: •Normalize stress — it's a common physiological response to uncertainty
          •Increase employees' sense of control over their actions and work schedule
          •Encourage people to take care of themselves by getting sleep, exercising, and eating well

Don't: •Neglect your own anxiety and concerns
          •Ignore people's emotions
          •Let the uncertainty be an excuse for not getting work done