

Management Lessons from the Pandemic

By Mark Tarallo
August 26, 2021

Feedback

"The very practice of management no longer works."

These are the opening words of a rather formidable source: the most recent edition of Gallup's *State of the American Workplace* report, released in 2020. It's one of the most comprehensive surveys of U.S. management trends in existence, based on data compiled from nearly 200,000 employee panel and poll participants and more than 31 million survey respondents.

The report's findings are sobering. A large majority of employees say they are not managed in a way that motivates them to do outstanding work. And only about one-third of employees say they are engaged at work. "These figures indicate an American leadership philosophy that simply doesn't work anymore," Gallup CEO Jim Clifton writes in the report.

Gallup found a similar trend worldwide a year earlier. In 2019, its *State of the Global Workplace* report found that global employee engagement was a dismal 15 percent. "The current practice of management—which attempts to turn weaknesses into strengths—doesn't work," the report says of global management practices.

In sum, a majority of workers around the world are not engaged at work. A large majority say they are not managed in a way that motivates them to do outstanding work. This was the grim state of management going into 2020.

Then came COVID-19.

The Great Accelerator

The coronavirus pandemic transformed the world and the workplace, and accelerated some of the existing trends that Gallup and others had observed in the management and leadership space.

For example, before COVID, Gallup found that more and more workers were looking for a sense of purpose. "All employees need fair pay. But they are now driven more than ever by mission and purpose and require a workplace culture that delivers it," wrote Clifton in the *Global Workplace* report.

This movement toward purpose-driven work was accelerated by the pandemic, which has had a "life is too short to settle" crystalizing effect on many employees. In turn, this acceleration has helped drive the Great Resignation that workplace experts say is now taking place.

In the U.S., a record 4 million people quit their jobs in April alone, according to Labor Department statistics. In Canada, 33 percent of employed Generation Z and Millennial professionals reported plans to pursue a new job, according to a recent survey from the Robert Half staffing firm. Worldwide, a Microsoft survey of more than 30,000 global workers found that 41 percent were considering quitting or changing professions this year.

A range of factors are driving these transitions, but one reason has been consistently cited: Employees would now rather quit and start over somewhere else than remain in a job where they feel unheard and undervalued, and lacking a sense of purpose. This makes the already needed changes to the practice of management and leadership even more urgent.

Mission, Purpose, Meaning

If Gallup is correct and the prevailing practice of management no longer works, how can one buck the trend and become a superb manager? Moving forward, it will be incumbent upon managers to be aware of what the workforce of the future will need and want: a workplace that delivers mission, purpose and work that is meaningful.

"Researchers have shown meaningfulness to be more important to employees than any other aspect of work, including pay and rewards, opportunities for promotion, or working conditions," write Catherine Bailey and Adrian Madden in a recent piece in the *MIT Sloan Management Review*.

In defining meaningful work, Bailey and Madden found that it has some essential attributes. Meaningful work matters to people other than just the workers themselves; it is self-transcendent. It sometimes feels poignant and emotionally deep, but these feelings usually come and go in an episodic fashion. The deeper meaning of the work is often experienced upon later reflection, rather than in the moment itself. And it is best understood within the context of one's personal life experiences.

But accomplishing meaningful work, being aligned with mission and having a sense of deep purpose are by no means givens in many jobs and organizational roles. And Bailey and Madden found in their research that "poor management" is the top destroyer of meaningfulness.

Managers in the post-COVID workforce can maximize their chances of succeeding in their roles by serving as "matchmakers" of mission and meaning. These managers will take the time and effort to understand, appreciate and develop the capabilities of each individual team member, and then match them with the organization's mission in a way that makes best use of those talents.

To do this, these successful managers will coach to strengths and build on them, look for developmental opportunities to help staffers advance career goals and recognize the accomplishments of each team member. They will also be adept at explaining how an employee's work is critical to the larger mission of the organization, so that the forest is not lost amid the trees.

Technology vs. Humanity

When one looks past the pandemic and into the future, an irony comes into view: What if the most serious challenges to management and leadership in the future come out of the unintended consequences of brilliant innovation?

It's likely that we are nowhere near the advanced stages of technological innovation. This raises the possibility that the development of artificial intelligence technologies will continue until, in the words of futurist Scott Kloosky, AI goes "from knowing me, to representing me, to being me, to replacing me."

It is also possible that current exoskeleton technology will continue to evolve until IT implants can safely augment brain function. If this occurs, will "transhuman" beings, with their enhanced brain capacities, use their advantages to become a new elite leadership class?

"We invent technologies without ever really having an understanding of what they are going to do to us. It's probably time to get a little wiser," Kloosky said at a recent conference I attended.

But even in a future such as this, successful managers will realize that as technology continues to advance, the human element—which technology can never fully replicate—will become more and more valuable. And so, for all their technical skill, these managers will be focused on the human side of management.

In hiring and recruiting and promoting, they will look for professionals with key human attributes such as high emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and the ability to think outside the box and question assumptions.

They will understand that it is only human for people to forget what a manager said or did, yet remember how that manager made them feel. They will be aware that, by dint of their organizational position as somebody's "boss," what they say might reverberate in an employee's head for days.

These successful managers will think of management not as a fixed practice, but as an endeavor that demands agility, including the ability to adapt to the evolving values of the workforce. They will know that they need to be agile in managing their own human biases.

And they will know that further change, and further challenges, are coming. They have learned to relish the adventure.

Mark Tarallo is the author of the new book *Modern Management and Leadership: Best Practice Essentials*

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