

The Lockdown Performance Challenge

If you are a new manager, or one that would like to think that he or she has seen it all, the repercussions of the Covid-19 virus onslaught have been, to put it mildly, challenging. The list of challenges seems to be as long as the Nile, but perhaps the one that is the greatest is how to achieve the levels of performance that are needed by your company. And to be clear, the reality that many organisations now are re-thinking their need to have large office spaces and are instead leaning toward having employees continue to work remotely, which won't exactly make achieving high performance any easier.

The media has been full of interviews with corporate types who have made it pretty clear that companies are re-thinking the need to have large headquarters facilities anymore as there are more and more people working from home. The reality of this has resulted in managers needing to figure out how to get the performance that is needed for our new world of business.

It goes without saying that many employees quite like this new environment. They save piles of money on transportation to their workplace and instead just need to get out of bed and do whatever they do, or are supposed to do. Theoretically, big savings on clothing as well, as now all you need to have in your wardrobe is something that looks somewhat presentable from the waste up as that is all that your Zoom meeting will show. Then there is the reality that there isn't any manager walking around, checking to make sure that everyone is doing what they should be doing. The issue of costs are clearly important to the senior manager types, but even more so is the challenge of performance.

Here is how the whole performance thing works. The bosses – the ones who have the posh offices that they may or may not even use anymore – are the ones who are ultimately responsible to get the best from all their employees. As we all should know, getting the best means cranking high performance because that is how the money will flow in the door, giving those senior types their big bonuses. But what the senior types do is tell you that your job as a manager is to ensure that your team demonstrates the high performance that is needed. In the 'old' work environment of months ago, this was something you could keep your eye on because you were right there with your team, but now that isn't the case anymore.

History has shown that there are two ways to achieve high performance in organisations. One way is to stay on top of your team, and if needed, whip them into shape. This is the stick method, and whilst it can work, using it is a bit difficult in our new environment as keeping watch over what they are

doing and how they are doing it isn't all that easy when your contact with them is via video and phone calls. There is the other way to ensure that your team demonstrates high performance, and this method is based on pure, unadulterated common sense.

First, when you are doing your Zoom calls, dedicate part of the agenda to helping them understand where the organisation is going and how it is planning to get there. This is especially important now as the virus has put a blanket of unknown over all of our heads and not having answers has quickly become a curse. By helping your team understand the where and how of the organisational future, it gives employees context for the rest of what you need to do.

Second, motivate your team to do what needs to be done by helping them see how their daily activities fit into the overall organisational picture. It is pretty likely that everyone on your team has some kind of job description, but do they recognise what they really do? Making the connection of what they do and how they do it, and the team's goals and objectives can create a positive connection that employees will recognise. This, with clear signs by you that their efforts are valued and appreciated help to shift employees' mindsets from compliant to committed.

Third, make sure your team has the resources it needs to accomplish the goals that have been set for them. Again, this should be a recurring agenda item for your video contact. Ask them what they need that they don't have, and why having it will be important. Do what needs to be done so your team can have what they need to succeed. In this environment that we have found ourselves in, ensuring your team has the resources it needs may not be as easy as it used to be, but your job is to ensure that the team can succeed, not be set up to fail.

Fourth, during your meeting calls, start to talk about what some of the undiscussables are that could be blocking individual and team performance. Having undiscussables lurking below the surface are a sure way to kill off motivation and commitment. Get them out in the open so they can be dealt with, and so your team can move on.

Being a manager in any environment can be challenging, but in the environment we have today, it can be extremely challenging. Your job is to make sure that things get done, and the best way to do it is to create an environment in which your team knows why it is there, is committed to its challenges, feels appreciated, and wants to deliver performance...and you can do this remotely.

James B. Rieley advises senior leadership teams from all sectors of business and industry, higher education, and government, and has written extensively on the subject of improving organisational performance through leadership.

The Lockdown Performance Challenge: Questions to Consider

1. Do you think that managing your team is easier than it used to be, or more difficult than it used to be?
2. Why do you think that?
3. If I asked your team members, what would they say?
4. If you were a team member (not the manager), and you were now working remotely, what would you want to know?
5. Why do you think that would be important to know?
6. Have you asked your team what they want to know?
7. Have you enabled them to surface undiscussables?
8. Do you think that your team feels that you and the senior management really values their input and efforts?
9. Have you ever asked your team what they think about the value they bring?

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