

Maintaining Employee Engagement under Duress

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Abstract—The purpose of this study is to examine the importance of maintaining employee engagement for the organization in an atmosphere of economic uncertainty due to COVID-19. Executives can't handle forces beyond their control however, there are things they can do to protect their company, their employees, and themselves. In fact, engaging employees could mean their company's survival. How can organizations help their employees to stay focused and face such significant change? The study is based on a qualitative and quantitative research method. In-depth information was provided on employee engagement, effects of COVID-19, its relevance and integration with effective Human Resource practices to help align human activities to the corporate strategy. The major findings indicate that despite the negative headlines of employee layoffs and cost cutting due to COVID-19, organizations are still functioning. There is a great uncertainty about the future. Increasing pressure on organizations to retain its top performers who contribute significantly towards an organization's growth has further highlighted the role of employee engagement as a tool for retention. It is important to maintain employee morale during downturn through effective engagement programs. Employee engagement constitutes the core competence of a successful organization. It is linked to important organizational issues like retention, productivity and satisfaction.

Index Terms—Duress, Employee Engagement.

I. INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement has become significant for any successful organization as it correlates to the organization's performance. However, in times of economic uncertainty, most of the employees are disengaged, which in turn will lead to decrease in the productivity of employees and the organization. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to identify ways to improve employee engagement and to accept the "New Normal" way of life especially during economic downfall [45]. Most organizations are forced to work online, initiate, and facilitate employees to work-from-home due to lockdown. This condition has affected employee's work-life balance.

The study explores the definition of employee engagement and the factors or drivers leading to employee engagement. The study also details the impact of employee engagement on organizational performance such as profitability and productivity and how duress can affect the factors of employee engagement. Finally, the study concludes with strategies for executives to maximize employee engagement.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Towers Watsons defines employee engagement encompassing three dimensions which are Rational,

Emotional and Motivational. Companies with highly engaged employees harness the power of each of these dimensions to regain prosperity faster and more effectively than the competition.

Gallup identified employee engagement as an individual's involvement, satisfaction, and enthusiasm for work. In an organization, there are three types of employees [46].

Blessing White's engagement model consists of five levels of employee engagement and focuses on aligning maximum job satisfaction and job contribution. They believe that by aligning employees' values, goals and aspirations with those of the organization is the best method for achieving the sustainable employee engagement.

Overall, employee engagement measures the impact of human capital in organizations and in the integration of many different aspects of Human Resource which are employee satisfaction, commitment, motivation, involvement, psychological contract, job design and total rewards [23]. Employee engagement is critical to the success of one's business as high Engagement levels have been found to have a strong impact on the business growth, employee retention and financial return [2], [30].

The first conceptual model by Weaver (2009) suggests that both individual factors (personal characteristic of employees for example, emotional intelligence and resilience) and organizational factors (culture and the leadership of the organization) under the impact of organization duress may influence employee engagement.

The second model is by McBain (2007), which stated that three main drivers will impact the organization's commitment. First driver is the organizational culture, values and vision and the brand of the organization or product. Second driver is the senior management leadership, line manager commitment and communication flow in the organization. Finally, the working life of employee such as recognition, supportive colleagues, developing potential and clarity of expectations, flexibility of working, work and life balance, involvement in decision making and working environment.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Quantitative

The study population consist of participants from diverse background and working in a customer service line in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Simple and quota sampling was used in this study (Table 1). A structured questionnaire consists of 18 questions based on 5-point Likert Scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) and 1 open ended question for recommendation after validation of subject expert [7]. The program SPSS Statistics 26 has analyzed the data to provide the descriptive tests (frequency, average, variance, standard deviation), and Inferential tests such as Pearson

Correlation and Regression Analysis. The reliability of the questionnaire reported 0.869 with Cronbach’s Alpha (Table 2). This concludes the instrument adapted is consistent.

TABLE 2: RELIABILITY STATISTICS

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.869	18

B. Qualitative

The study also includes reviewing secondary data from documents, reports from the web, scholar journals, survey report, books, magazine and newspapers for the content and theme. The documents or reports are published based on the study of past and current markets trend and literature review into the concepts and practices of employee engagement related to COVID- 19. The findings or the results from this research method were quantified and analyzed.

IV. FINDINGS

34 persons participated in this study, 18 of whom were female, 14 of whom were between 20-30 years of age, 15 of whom were between 31-40 years of age and 5 of whom were above 40 years of age.

TABLE 1. FREQUENCY OF PARTICIPANTS

		Number of Participants	Percent
Valid	Male	16	47.1
	Female	18	52.9
	Total	34	100.0

The results of Regression Analysis showed that the value of R is 0.975, R square is valued at 0.91 and the adjusted R square is valued at 0.905 which shows good predictability of the study (Table 3).

TABLE 3: REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.975 ^a	.951	.905	.27123

Based on the result of Pearson Correlation (Table 4), the criterion shows positive significance except for individual factors 7 whereby participants were asked if they are looking for a job in another organization.

V. DISCUSSION

A. Employee Engagement and Organizational Performance

Based on the findings, this study has found positive relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance outcomes: employee retention, productivity, profitability, customer loyalty and safety. Research also indicates that the more engaged the employees

are, the more likely their employer is to exceed the industry average in its revenue growth. Employee engagement is found to be higher in companies’ growth [4], [8], [28], [40].

Employees who are not engaged are likely to be wasting their effort on low priority tasks, uncommitted and leave the organization, which will collapse organization’s performance [3], [39]. ISR survey found that both operating margin and net profit margins reduced over a three-year period in companies with low engagement, while these measures increased over the specified period in companies with high levels of engagement [20].

Based on Hay’s research, 94% of the companies on Fortune's "Most Admired" list said employee engagement created a competitive advantage, reduced turnover and strengthened customer relationships [32].

TABLE 4: PEARSON CORRELATION

Pearson Correlation	Satisfaction	Satisfaction
	Satisfaction	1.000
	Individual_Factor1	0.509
	Individual_Factor2	0.563
	Individual_Factor3	0.853
	Individual_Factor4	0.788
	Individual_Factor5	0.230
	Individual_Factor6	0.062
	Individual_Factor7	-0.469
	Individual_Factor8	0.695
	Org_Factor1	0.792
	Org_Factor2	0.500
	Org_Factor3	0.389
	Org_Factor4	0.343
	Org_Factor5	0.522
	Org_Factor6	0.574
	Org_Factor7	0.703
	Org_Factor8	0.528

B. Employee Engagement and Duress

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to massive layoffs and left surviving employees significant uncertainty and stress. Consequently, few workers willingly work harder or provide new ideas if the result is job loss.

Organizational change has the potential to cause stress and other negative impacts. Pearson Correlation result shows that even though 27 out of 34 participants were satisfied to be a part of their organizations, participants are still unsecured of their job and are in search of other options. Employees may feel nervous and uncertainty because they sense they cannot achieve the new responsibilities brought about by the change [5], [44]. Employees may see changes as a sign of a reduction in their hopes of the future in the organization thus, the energy could either make employees work more productively or behave in a counterproductive manner. Employees’ participation in decision-making, communication process, and leadership are key factors in reducing the level of stress

experienced [37], [44].

The communication of bad news is difficult to deliver or receive because it increases the tendency to disengage [21], [44]. Successful communication during change is a matter of engaging the employees [6], [44].

Mass layoffs and mergers or acquisitions produce negative psychological responses in surviving employees and between management and peers [1],[16], [44]. They tend to be more insecure, less creative, less committed, and less trusting of leadership.

Financial and market performance of the organization influenced employee attitudes in a constructive manner [31], [44]. Poor organizational performance makes employees disengage and cynical to the organization [14], [44].

VI. CONCLUSION

The workplace environment was impacted by significant levels of duress because of the economy instability. Employees' working life, the organizational culture and the management's leadership influences the engagement of employees drastically.

The research indicates that employee engagement is an important characteristic in business outcomes. After much research, there is a clear and an overwhelming amount of evidence to conclude that high levels of employee engagement positively affect individual, group and corporate performance in areas such as retention, turnover, productivity and loyalty. The best organizations will find ways to harness the motivation, commitment and contributions that their employees are providing today and sustain them in improved times [30].

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Employee engagement is the responsibility of the entire workforce [4]. However, this study will emphasize on ways for the level of executive to contribute to maintaining employee engagement in the organization based on experts and participants' recommendations [19]. To fulfil the employees' responsibilities, executives need to:

1. Provide effective and efficient leadership

If executives do not monitor and manage their own engagement, they will bring down the workforce [4]. Employees want leadership as leaders are the key to engaging employees to commit their full energy to create value and success [2], [22], [41], [48].

2. Set a clear direction

Employees' interests must align with organizational goals. The organization's direction and definition of success must be well-defined. A clearly communicated strategy also builds workforce confidence in the business competence of executives - which reinforces trustworthiness [4], [22], [34].

3. Build a culture that fuels engagement.

The collective words and actions of all leaders shape organizational culture emphasize on 5 critical elements of culture. Successful organization develops a real and meaningful culture and a set of values [2], [4],[10], [22], [29], [32], [42], [47].

4. Inspire commitment and trust

Engaged employees understand what needs to be done and care enough to apply discretionary effort. Executives need to have clear and consistent communication and cover all decision-making process with the employees [4], [22]. They need to share the business rationale and personal motivation for critical business decisions and demonstrate visible personal commitment to the success of the organization [23], [41]. The consistency of communications and actions then creates trust [4], [18], [36], [47].

5. Communication is key

Executives need to embrace "engagement" into the daily workplace conversation [41]. When all levels of the workforce focus on what matters most to them as individuals and to the organization, there is engagement [4], [22]. Executives must do three things consistently: be attentive, be receptive and be responsive [36],[40], [48]. Create programs for employees to maintain contact communication such as counseling service and webinars to deal with anxiety and stress.

6. Have strong feedback system

Companies should develop a performance management system which holds managers and employees accountable for the level of engagement they have shown. Conducting regular survey of employee engagement level helps make out factors that make employees engaged [15], [22], [35]. Build a strong communication thru structured communication channel such as email, messaging platforms and video conferencing.

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