

## In It for the Long Haul: Sustaining Employee Engagement as COVID-19 Wears on

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**Tired. Stressed. Frustrated.** Employees are likely feeling some degree of pain at this point in the pandemic, whether they are working from home – possibly juggling family care or missing the social aspects of a physical workplace – or risking their health and safety by reporting to a physical location. Creating working conditions that motivate employees to bring their “A Game” every day is no small feat, even in ordinary times. At the very least, it takes organizational and leadership commitment – and it may require the investment of time, resources or dollars.

To promote engagement in this unpredictable climate and across diverse environments, including office and frontline roles, such as manufacturing, retail, fulfillment, etc., consider the following:

1. **Offer tangible financial support.** Engagement will remain out of reach for employees who are struggling to meet certain basic, physical, logistical and household needs. Financial support to offset pandemic-related impacts can go a long way toward helping all employees feel cared for – especially those on the front lines who are assuming added risk. Many companies have offered benefits like one-time cash bonuses to cover unexpected costs related to the pandemic; stipends to provide help for child care or elder care; or even funds to offset the cost of setting up an at-home office. One caveat: Be sure the support is meaningful. For example, giving frontline workers a small gift card that’s misaligned with their perceived risk could make things worse. Also, in rolling out any new benefits, clarify the details so everyone understands what’s available, and how long they can expect the benefit to continue.
2. **Make leadership visible.** In times of crisis and change, people rely on the steady hand of leadership to instill confidence and provide direction. It’s important to encourage senior leaders to stay connected and visible, even from afar. When possible, schedule leadership visits to business locations where employees have continued working throughout the pandemic. Knowing we all feel somewhat isolated at this time, encourage leaders to be authentic and approachable by opening up and sharing personal details they might otherwise hold back when visiting with employees. Leverage live visits by capturing video footage and posting clips of employee discussions online for company-wide access. Above all, make sure executives are there to listen and engage, then act on what they see and hear. Site visits won’t deliver on their full potential, and could in fact backfire, without authentic interaction, follow-up action and continued engagement beyond an initial visit.
3. **Focus on work-life balance.** Although some employees have reported feeling a sense of rejuvenation during the pandemic, many others are having a hard time achieving balance. In a recent FleishmanHillard study, 63% of employees said they now require even **greater flexibility** to accomplish competing responsibilities at work and home.<sup>1</sup> To help them, work with HR, Legal and Labor Relations to revisit your current paid time off (PTO) policy and identify solutions to offer additional paid leave for those who need it. If you haven’t already, look at granting additional paid time off to employees should they, or close relations, test positive for COVID-19. Also, consider putting supplemental PTO on the table as added time for employees to step away from work and recharge. Other ideas to drive work-life balance include discouraging internal emails outside of standard business hours, reserving one day a week to be free of internal meetings, or encouraging staff to “turn off” video for virtual meetings when it’s not necessary.

4. **Invest in wellbeing.** To perform at their best, people need to feel their best, mentally and physically. Employers who support – and invest in – their team’s wellbeing benefit from improved performance, increased loyalty and strengthened brand and reputation, not to mention the potential for reduced healthcare costs. In an American Psychological Association study, workers at companies that support wellbeing initiatives said they’re more likely to recommend their company (87% vs. 17%) and fewer said they’re likely to leave their job in the next year (25% vs. 51%).<sup>3</sup> Make wellbeing a priority by cultivating a community of support. Invite employees to serve as wellbeing champions empowered to drive engagement in your health and wellness initiatives and, resources permitting, build a virtual hub to support their efforts. Include interactive fitness challenges; virtual workout offerings (consider partners like Wellbeats or The Sweat Force); subscriptions to online meditation and sleep apps (for example, Calm, Headspace or Sleepio); information about benefits and services, such as Employee Advisory Programs (EAPs); and access to discounts on products and services like fitness trackers or footwear. To support essential staff who are working in your facilities, designate physical spaces for self-care for employees to take breaks to meditate, sleep, listen to music, read or call their family.
5. **Reinforce social ties.** As human beings, we are biologically wired to connect with others, and work – especially in an isolated, COVID-19 world – offers an important outlet to satisfy this intrinsic need. While technology platforms – think Yammer, Teams, Slack, Webex, Zoom and more – offer the means to connect, it is the relationships themselves that really matter, and those relationships depend on personal interactions to flourish. Consider starting or expanding Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) to serve emerging needs, such as employees with child care or elder care responsibilities, or those who live alone and may need additional human connection; implementing a randomly generated “phone tree” to spark 30-minute check-in calls between different team members; or simply reserving time during team meetings for personal catching up.
6. **Don’t forget to ask.** If you’re unsure of the best path forward to engage your people, ask them. Listening and open dialogue provide the foundation of all successful communication – 93% of workers recently said a formal way to give feedback about what they need or want would be helpful or is a must-have.<sup>2</sup> Encourage frontline supervisors – who often feel like human shock absorbers – and give them the resources they need to consistently check in with their teams, asking how they’re doing mentally, physically, emotionally – and create mechanisms for these managers to share back what they’re hearing. Also, establish feedback channels where employees can anonymously submit questions, concerns and ideas. As simple as it sounds – and whether they take you up on it or not – employees appreciate being asked, and they will pay you back through deepened trust ... but only if you act on the feedback you receive.

Sources:

1. [FleishmanHillard COVID-19 Mindset Report](#)
2. [FleishmanHillard Future of Work Report](#)
3. [American Psychological Association Work and Well-Being Survey](#)