

# Fostering team bonding during remote work scenario

Cost-effective, yet effective ways can help companies nurture employee bonding.

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As we inch towards the 200-day mark of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak – where employees have maintained a synergy between workplace and family demands – mid-year review sheets are being pulled out by many organisations.

However, the conventional approach to reviews would be neither in the interest of the company nor its employees. Though many organisations have adopted a much more progressive approach of continuous feedback and coaching instead of formal mid-year reviews, HR managers should impress upon the people leaders to tread on an offbeat path this year around, steering way from adding too much pressure on the employees during feedback sessions, leading to burnout.

Instead, use this as an opportunity to boost employee morale and productivity, thus keeping corporate ambitions intact. Remember, they have been dealing with the new normal of working with their team being placed at the other end of the optic fibre.

A good way to achieve the balance, is to emphasize on the triad of team engagement, wellbeing and awareness in different forms.

## Engagement

Leaders should alter the approach to suit the circumstance, now that employees have exhibited acceptable levels of performance at their own pace, place and time of choice. Shift your focus from the number of clock hours pooled in, to actual targets achieved.

As you spot exceptional performers, use applause as a stress buster during such critical confluence of time. Appreciating the efforts of the deserving is best done through a company-wide virtual award event or a mention in the in-house magazine, discuss how your team tackled an issue better than competitors.

As you bring the employees together for laurels, engage them in problem solving too. You would be surprised to find many innovative solutions to salvage a situation. In an era when optimal resource management is critical, companies can seek suggestions from the team on how to achieve the magic number of saving, say Rs 20 crore, without impacting the profitability or terminating jobs.

One such instance where the dual objective of cost reductions and keeping employee morale intact is to curtail carry forward or encashment of leaves. This can fulfil the dual goal of employee rejuvenation through staycations and curtail the provision requirements for the leave balance, aiding profitability.

## Awareness

As the teams ace different work time zones among members, they would need the knowledge of right tools available to them, which are usually within immediate reach during conventional work environment in which teams are placed together during the same hours.

Workshops aimed at offering insights on the digital tools at their disposal or short digital guides on available resources assist individual team members to add to the collective might of the firm. Simple tricks to get more done in shorter time would be of essence.

Such awareness is critical in the work-from-home scenario, where physical technology-desk assistance has been replaced with remote support. The whole process of engaging one is time-consuming when you are racing against time.

While creating awareness is critical, other internal time barriers need to be identified and fixed with alternatives. So, the paucity of time in centrally procuring hardware and the logistical challenge in delivering them could be tackled by permitting local purchase of hardware up to a certain threshold for immediate needs followed by a reimbursement. The purchase catalogue too could be expanded to suit work-from-home environment, permitting employees to self-approve their purchase, thus making sure deliverables are not impacted.

## Wellbeing

Weaving technological solutions in non-core areas such as wellbeing of the employees is immensely rewarding. So, offer a digital system of locating hospital networks where employees would be able to seek treatment. At the back-end, senior management should team up with hospital networks to ensure team members are not left high and dry seeking treatment for self or family. This concern percolating right from the top of the order can repose faith in the employee during these troubled times.

To tend to genuine concerns and care for team members, HR heads can engage people leaders in creating a company-wide 'Empathy Charter'. Add clauses to ensure leaders don't neglect the role of communication during hardships. So, if at all jobs need to be axed, mandate responsible message that resonates empathy followed by a job-loss cover supporting the employees for six-months, which would cost a fraction as a premium.

But not all wellness initiatives come with a cost attached to them. An alternative is to create a repository of printables and activities to engage children during employees' work hours or to send virtual gifts to team mates to enhance attachment.

Though wellbeing programmes have regularly been incorporated in company packages, but they gain a new dimension through such measures during the strained times. Employees incentives can be circled around the health and wellbeing goals such as a challenge for longest plank, no-smoking windows, maximum steps, healthy serve for the day and the likes.

Encouraging employees to follow their passion, now that they are within the confines of their home would add to contentment. A common webpage can be created to foster hobbies such as music, gardening, painting, home décor, etc. Even knowledge forum regarding core areas such as financial planning, parenting or fitness can be initiated.

While offering healthy cuisine in the corporate food court, has been a regular practice in the past, a healthy food hamper delivered to the employees' doorstep during special celebrations or as a gesture for accomplishing a significant milestone can be considered.

Voluntary offerings instead of forced measures are the key for mental wellbeing efforts such as counselling, when employees have paucity of time. Let them know that a service of a counsellor is available if at all they feel the need to use it.

Such minor, but thoughtful steps nurture company loyalty, lead to higher productivity and even enhance customer satisfaction, especially for client-facing roles. Achieving these subtle, yet crucial activities without hampering the normal workflow or encroaching on the employees' limited free time is the art, called human resource management. But if led by compassion, then an overarching model is attainable.

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