9 Strategies To Build An Employee-First Culture

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Organizations should recognize that if you take care of culture, then the customer experience and profits will take care of themselves. Putting your people at the center of your thinking and decision-making will never steer you in the wrong direction.

Culture is experienced in every employee's actions, 365 days of the year. It is not about the organizational perks, being perfect or being tied to a rigid set of rules. Culture is when employees feel empowered to work autonomously and make decisions driven by core values.

There is no doubt that life and businesses have been disrupted worldwide. Today, transparent decision-making is required, and rapid action is necessary. Employee safety and emotional wellness must be top of mind for all organizations.

To move towards an employee-first culture, here are nine strategies to consider.

1. Executives set the tone

Employees rely on leaders at all levels to set the tone of how communication will be delivered in any organization. This is the time where executives must prioritize, increasing the cadence of their connection to employees. Hosting a meeting with executives and employees creates a space for a Q& A

discussion alongside weekly updates. Maximus President issued a public CEO message reinforcing his commitment to his employees as his single top priority to their health and wellbeing during the pandemic. Yum Brands CEO relinquished his 2020 salary to fund one-time bonuses for general managers and provide financial hardship grants to employees.

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2. Empathy in action

Despite the uncertainty, chaos and hardships, employers are taking steps to reinforce that their people are the priority and their livelihoods are protected. Companies are walking compassionately in the shoes of employees. Here are some companies putting people first.

- Caterpillar withheld annual salary increases and bonuses to tighten expenses amid the crisis.
- Comcast CEO and executives donated 100% of their salaries to charities to support relief efforts and committed $500 million to assist employees with pay and benefits where operations were compromised.
- BlackRock CEO declared they would not lay off any employees this year and committed to providing full-time pay to support staff even when they are unable to come to work.
- Walmart announced employees receive two week’s pay if they were mandated to quarantine or became ill with a confirmed case of coronavirus. Also, if they were unable to return post the two weeks, there would be an additional pay replacement available for up to 26 weeks for employees.

3. Humanize workplaces

Leaders try to hide their vulnerabilities at all costs;

however, when the moment comes, people get turned on by leaders stepping up, being courageous and being real. Executives can feel like elusive ghosts that you hear about during onboarding, yet you never get to meet. Internal employee podcasts are breaking the glass ceiling, de-mystifying secrecy, and offering accountability that people crave. The beauty of these employee-only podcasts is that they are uploaded on internal platforms and provide the opportunity for executives and leaders to be authentic, show vulnerability and be transparent about the current landscape. Imagine what that will do for employee engagement.

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4. Be the trusted voice

When communicating with your people, keep the information flow purposeful and consistent. Share how the current changes will impact the business and what this means for employees. By addressing what changes directly affect people, what changes have been implemented, and what steps are coming forward as a result reinforces a ‘together as one’ culture.

Written communication, visual mediums, whether it be videos or through real-time Zoom calls, is imperative in providing knowledge about COVOID-19 and how the company is protecting the workforce. The CEO recording a brief video message that can be watched by all will give significant weight in connecting with people. Salesforce shared a public email Standing Together With Our Salesforce Family to maintain communication with all their key stakeholders, including their employees.

5. Virtual office culture

With people under lockdown, pets and kids are the newest addition to the virtual workspace. Organizational executives

normalizing the presence of children while hosting meetings, to virtual lunches where an employee can showcase their pets and children as they eat lunch together are leading the way. Vox Media CEO Jim Bankoff joined a Zoom call to read stories to families.

From virtual coffee and happy hours to staff submitting baby photos and requesting people to match their pictures with each employee, companies are recognizing the importance of connection and socializing activities to support employees to remain healthy and emotionally well.

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6. Viable home options

Not every person has a ready-to-home office set up. As the move to working from home for many happened overnight, some organizations implemented a reimbursement program to encourage employees to convert a space within their home into a viable remote office.

Slack employees were provided with a $500 allowance to support their work-from-home transition, and Twitter announced all employees would receive reimbursement toward their home office set up expenses. Before ordering specific items, consult with human resource teams to develop a plan that fits your and the company’s needs.

7. Redefine team expectations

As part of virtual meetings, teams must define or redefine team values. How well you individually and as a team know and live by them even within a pandemic is a meaningful conversation to have. Reviewing what each of the core values means and how they are actioned every day to support the

culture and align with business strategy, keeps the emotional states you want to experience at the forefront of people’s thinking and contributes to building inclusive environments.

8. Water cooler chats

Connection with peers, co-workers and managers has become a hot commodity in the world of uncertainty and chaos. Meaningful contact with colleagues, whether it be through meetings or one-one check-ins provides a platform to take the conversation beyond work. Managers ask employees how they are doing on a personal level, explore how their current environment is supporting them to fulfill their roles and responsibilities. Through discussion, managers can position health and wellbeing services as an opportunity for additional support. Axis Bank offers employees virtual meditation sessions, online learning modules and informal team catch-ups to ensure people are feeling connected.

9. Prioritize mental health

Social distancing, self-isolation, borders closing, and panic buying can create havoc on anyone’s mental health and wellbeing. Amongst the genuine danger of coronavirus, the human fear response is now in overdrive for many. Now is the time for organizations to highlight employee assistance programs, mental health apps and consider offering mindfulness training sessions. With over 2000 free mindfulness exercises, employees can access simple, practical guidance to find peace.

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