


Change Management During a Crisis: How to Maintain Employee Well-Being

Businesses continually face crisis situations: a long-term client unexpectedly switches business to a competitor, global market changes affect supplies, or economic factors disrupt operations. Often employers develop solutions on the fly to cope with business changes while also helping employees make work and life adjustments. Having a plan makes all the difference.



Here are six tips for effective change management during a crisis that help to maintain all aspects of employee well-being.

1

Adjust quickly, but think long term

Uncertainty can increase employees' stress as they worry about the impact on their jobs and livelihood. Employees who are stressed are less satisfied and engaged.

According to a recent study from McKinsey & Company, respondents who say their organizations have responded exceptionally well to a crisis are four times more likely to be engaged and six times more likely to report a positive state of well-being. Having a long-term plan helps to maintain employee satisfaction and well-being into the future.

A crisis usually causes different problems and situations for different types of businesses. For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic began, companies of all sizes with office workers had to create plans to help employees work and serve customers remotely. Employers whose services are considered essential had to follow quickly evolving safety practices to care for employees and customers.

Initially, many employers and employees thought these adjustments would be short-term. But within weeks, businesses realized that remote work arrangements and new safety protocols could continue for months.

While employers are implementing changes, it makes sense to think about what those practices might look like in the future. For example, remote workers may have the tools they need to get by for a few months. But what if they need to work from home for more than a year? And what relief can be offered for essential workers as a crisis continues?

Employers and management should work together to plan long-term strategies for how to address employees' needs.



2

Communicate regularly

During a crisis, employers quickly discover that effective change management requires quick responses to evolving situations.

Employees yearn for information. Satisfy this need by providing communication that is less scripted and polished and more frequent. If employers do not invest time in regular communications, the employee rumor mill will take over with rampant texting and social media posts.

Employers should continually talk with employees and leverage managers to gather feedback and stay up to date on employees' concerns. Provide time for workers to ask questions and voice their concerns and frustrations. It is more important to show that employees are heard than to provide all the answers on the spot. Gather information to answer questions and respond quickly.

Schedule standing employee team meetings to keep everyone connected. Avoid communication fatigue by keeping team meetings short, relevant, and interesting.

Whenever possible, involve employees in decisions that affect their work. Ensure employees know what they need to do each day and how their work supports overall business plans. Encourage team members to contact their managers as soon as customer issues or project problems arise. It is easier to deal with needs as they appear vs. after a complex problem develops.

Stay connected by conducting pulse surveys with employees. Ask what is working, what is not, and what materials or equipment they need to do their jobs. Then find resources to help meet workers' needs.

During team meetings, encourage workers to share their experiences and ideas. Thank employees for their work. Recognize accomplishments with a gift card or special delivery to their home. These rewards encourage employees and remind them that they are valued. In turn, companies will enjoy the benefits of happy, productive employees.

3 Encourage interaction and normalcy

When work conditions change due to a crisis, employees will adjust. But employers will find that a sense of the familiar may help ease the process.

Encourage managers and employees to continue their regular routines as much as possible. For employees who switch to working remotely, it is easy to continue with regular meetings via video conference. But do not take for granted things like face-to-face social interactions that help increase employee morale. Allow time for online social interactions or, if possible, occasionally meet in person outdoors at a distance to maintain employees' social well-being.



Committees and groups who perform community services together should be encouraged to continue. Provide resources for employees to explore ways they can volunteer virtually. A sense of higher purpose increases employees' satisfaction and sense of well-being.

Times of crisis often bring people together. Take advantage of that atmosphere and encourage employees to interact and leverage their strengths for a positive outcome.

4 Provide support for self-care

During a crisis, workers may be juggling new responsibilities, along with their regular personal and family commitments. The lines between professional and personal life begin to blur when employees work from home with spouses and children nearby. And concerns for personal health and safety can be distracting on the job when front-line workers are required to perform.

Employers can help ease stress by giving employees the freedom to adjust their work hours as needed. It may be helpful to offer extra vacation hours. Or let employees take unpaid time off to take care of their responsibilities.

If not resolved, added anxiety can lead to health issues. According to recent research from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), one-third of employers surveyed during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced a noticeable increase in requests for information about employee assistance programs. And in turn, more than one-third of employers provided resources to support healthy adjustment to remote work, including mental health support.

If benefits include Employee Assistance Program (EAP) resources, remind team members how to access this service. It helps to let employees know there is no shame in seeking help for the added anxiety they are feeling.

Those whose job roles change during the pandemic may struggle to maintain their sense of purpose. Make sure HR personnel and managers are available to answer questions and provide reassurance that employees are essential to their company's success. In situations where employees must be furloughed or laid off, companies can offer referrals for career counseling.

Make sure employees know what resources are available to them to maintain physical and mental health, work-life balance, and a sense of purpose. When employees' needs are met, it is easier for them to stay focused, engaged, and productive during work hours.



5

Focus on benefits

Another key to effective change management and employee well-being during a crisis is to focus on benefits provided to employees. Benefits help provide security and ease workers through difficult situations. They also keep workers engaged in their jobs.

Employers should offer a wide array of benefits, balanced with affordability and quality, to address a range of employee needs. Simple but expected benefits, like retirement, and dental and vision benefits, can go a long way in supporting employees' physical and financial well-being.

During a health crisis, some people may not feel comfortable visiting a doctor or dentist unless it is an emergency. For many, telehealth appointments may be a good option. Make sure benefit plans cover these services and employees know how these benefits work.

Some benefits offer rewards or incentives for those who visit their health care provider and seek preventive care for each benefit period. Check with the benefits provider to make sure workers who did not visit their doctor or dentist are not penalized. Employees should be able to retain the rewards and incentives they have already earned to use in the future.

Businesses that must drop benefits temporarily or permanently can refer employees to individual and family plans so they can maintain coverage and security.

With benefits as a safety net, employees will feel more in control when so many things in their lives are out of control.

6

Rethink, rebuild, renew

During a crisis, employees' regular work tasks may be put on hold. It is a good time for managers to work with employees to rethink their responsibilities. Encourage team members to ask, "Why have we done _____ this way?" for everything they do. Often things are done a specific way because that is how it has always been done. Employees probably have ideas to redesign their jobs or new projects to consider but hesitate to share them. Listen to their feedback and look for ways to incorporate their ideas.

A crisis is a good time to rebuild the team and update knowledge and skills. Set up team-building exercises to help members learn more about their strengths and abilities. Also, ask employees for ideas to renew their skills and prepare them for

new responsibilities. They may need different skills to adjust to business changes that occur throughout the crisis. Investing in employees by providing upskilling to improve their work shows that their employer cares about their growth and development. They also are reassured that they are essential to the team.

Many employers are poised to pivot after losing a big client or suffering from marketing changes. But larger-scale crises can take employers by storm. Those who have a change management plan will be prepared to maintain employee well-being on all levels. Physical and financial security are always top of mind. But social needs and a sense of purpose mean just as much to employees.

Learn more ideas for how to manage change and maintain employee well-being during a business crisis by listening to this [podcast discussion](#) with April Rimpley, senior vice president of human resources at Ameritas.

About Ameritas:

The group division of Ameritas Life Insurance Corp. has served customers since 1959, and today issues and administers dental, vision, LASIK, and hearing insurance and student loan repayment plans for more than 8 million people and more than 65,200 employer groups nationwide. Claims contact center associates have earned BenchmarkPortal's Center of Excellence award since 2006. Learn more about Ameritas and Ameritas Life Insurance Corp. of New York at ameritas.com/dental. Explore employee benefits and well-being topics at ameritasinsight.com.

Sources:

[McKinsey & Company Employee Survey, 2020](#), "What 800 Executives Envision for the Post Pandemic Workforce."

[Society for Human Resource Management, 2020](#), "COVID-19 Research: How the Pandemic is Challenging and Changing Employers"