

Has the Pandemic Improved Trust in the Workplace?

By Stephanie Vozza

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The pandemic brought a multitude of challenges to leaders and their employees, but there has been an upside.

According to a study by PwC (<https://www.pwc.com/us/en/library/trust-in-business-survey.html>), 84 percent of employees report trusting their direct manager the same, or more, now compared with before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In fact, the pandemic may have helped level the playing field between managers and their workers, said Nicole Morris, executive consultant for the Vaya Group, a global leadership consultancy headquartered in Warrenton, OR.

"We all found ourselves in the same situation, trying to navigate this new remote way of working," she said. "Work has become humanized in a way that is different and very much authentic. It has challenged us to reconsider the employer and employee contract in a way that many of us didn't know was possible."

Increasing Empathy and Trust

The pandemic increased empathy, said Paaras Parker, chief human resources officer for Cincinnati-based Paycor, which provides human capital management services. "A couple of years ago, even if you had a flexible work-from-home schedule, there was little patience with daily interruptions such as barking dogs or kids having a meltdown on a Zoom call," she said. "Flash-forward to today, and we all got forced into a pandemic causing unwanted lifestyle changes, which in turn caused our natural empathy to kick in, and [that] has stayed continuous since. Trust doesn't build overnight; it's our day-in and day-out relations to people, sharing our vulnerability and reacting well to other people's circumstances."

Trust and security are connected, Parker said. "If your manager has seen your home, then they've seen your roommates, spouse, kids, dogs and various disruptions in your day," she said. "If they respond well to those instances, then an employee will feel more comfortable in that relationship. That feeling of security will lead to more open and honest dialogue about goals, expectations and how they are feeling not only in work but also outside of work."

Managers also became more transparent, said Amanda Chaitnarine, director of advisory services at HR analyst firm McLean and Company, based in London, Ontario.

"We saw the increase in trust because of managers effectively informing their employees about the constant change in state," she said.

"This meant being transparent, sharing next steps, and explaining the impact on their team. We saw more rationales behind decisions being [made] and a higher frequency of communication."

In addition, managers were seeking more feedback from their teams and including them in decisions. For example, many companies implemented pulse surveys to find out what support employees needed, such as equipment, more social interaction or mental health services.

"Beyond ensuring employees had what they needed to work, employees were asked about their readiness and comfort in returning to the workplace," Chaitnarine said. "This ultimately shaped decisions about when and how people would return to work, as well as policies supporting flexible and remote-work arrangements. These actions demonstrated that employee health and well-being were a priority."

Support generated greater autonomy, which also translated into greater trust. "Research is clear that employees are more productive and engaged when they are given the autonomy to work how and when they want to," Vaya Group's Morris said. "In many ways, the pandemic has forced employers to give this autonomy to workers."

Keeping Trust Levels High

As teams start to find their feet and create new ways of working, managers should continue behaviors that foster trust, Morris recommended.

For example, when managers share appropriate personal stories, this can encourage employees to share their own individual experiences without worrying about being judged, she said. This helps managers get to know employees on a deeper level.

Ask workers what behaviors will make them feel valued. "Be intentional in creating relationships and understand what matters to the person, not just the broader team," she said.

Pay attention to outcomes, not hours worked, and let employees know that they'll be measured by what they achieve.

Morris cautioned against returning to pre-pandemic ways of working. "In 2022 ... workers will have elevated expectations of their workplace preferences, particularly [if] they have been meeting or exceeding goals over the last several years."

The pandemic has taught us all a lot about employee/manager relationships, Chaitnarine said. "But at the end of the day, the ability to maintain these higher levels of trust in a post-pandemic world means continuing to inform, interact and involve employees in a meaningful way."

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