

How HR Leaders Can Help Their Workforce Deal With The Fear And Anxiety Around COVID-19

In efforts to safeguard their employees, clients and customers, many businesses have moved to remote working a response to the COVID-19 global crisis. As a medical doctor, with a degree in psychology and a PhD in immunology, I know that working from home isn't enough, and that helping staff manage their fear and anxiety will be an essential challenge for HR teams as we move through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most organisations have recognised their legal and moral responsibility towards their employees. Most have directed employees towards practical advice – hopefully from reputable sources, such as those provided by the World Health Organisation.

The focus to date has been on physical measures - things like hand washing, social distancing and making plans to work virtually for as many people as possible. But given the profound interaction between a human being's psychology and immunology, such guidance is not enough. In fact, organisations and their HR teams in particular should do much more if they care seriously for their employees.

Fear Damages Immunity

The thing that impairs human immunity more than anything else is the stress hormone cortisol. And what determines the level of cortisol we have flowing around our body is the level of fear and anxiety we experience. The more we panic the worse our immune system becomes and the more likely we are to become infected if we are exposed to the virus. In addition, how well we cope with the virus if we do become infected is also significantly influenced by our cortisol levels. The more anxious we feel the more likely the virus will replicate and the more likely we could experience complications such as pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), which is the thing that is killing people. Furthermore, the more anxious we are, the more likely the virus will linger and replicate in our bodies and this may actually make us more contagious to others.

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Emotions Matter

So responsible organisations need to not only offer practical guidance, they need to offer emotional guidance too. They have a responsibility not to fuel the panic and anxiety. In fact, reducing fear and anxiety for employees must be a top priority for all HR teams.

Employees are being bombarded by scary stories on mainstream and social media. Their anxieties are being fed by this stream of news, rumour and speculation. While there is little control, organisations can exert over the news reaching their employees from outside, they should take care not to amplify employee fears in their own internal communications.

Social Distancing And Mental Health

The right information helps reduce anxieties, and good internal communication is a start when it comes to addressing this emotional aspect of the current pandemic.

It's worth remembering that some of the practical advice might even directly increase fears and anxieties. Where they are able, many employees are being encouraged to work from home. They might also be asked to self-isolate if they have been in contact with someone who has COVID-19. While absolutely necessary from a physical health perspective, this social distancing is likely to affect our mental health too. It can create feelings of isolation which can increase anxiety levels. Without those social support networks in your office, you may feel less able to deal with the anxieties you face.

All of this means, that the priority for HR right now is to find ways to help reduce the fear and anxieties of employees and help them self-regulate. In other words, help them move away from a state of fear and anxiety towards a state of positive determination. Effectively embrace the classic mantra "keep calm and carry on". Get the message out that panic will not help you. It will reduce your immunity and make you more likely to make the wrong choices for your situation.

FEEL Positive

Encourage staff to practice effective emotional regulation. They can do this by stabilising their breathing - breathing



rhythmically and evenly through the heart area. Not deep breathing and not abdominal breathing. Such a breathing pattern stabilises your biology. Then they should try and deliberately experience a state of optimism or resolve or patience. They need to really try and feel this emotion in their

body rather than just thinking it. Positive thinking won't cut it. Positive feeling is what will increase the levels of the vitality hormone DHEA in your system. DHEA is the body's main antidote to cortisol.

Enabling employees to become masters of their own emotional state is critical to

reducing fear and anxiety. It's clearly very relevant to the current pandemic crisis and it's my strongest piece of advice for organisations right now, but it's something that will soon be seen as central to any effective employee wellbeing programme once this present crisis has passed.

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His latest book *The HR (R)Evolution: Change the Workplace, Change the World* warns that we are at a critical junction and sets out a radical new vision for the future of the workplace. This title can be ordered on www.routledge.com.

Alan's other books include:

- *Coherence: The Secret Science of Brilliant Leadership*
- *4D Leadership: Competitive Advantage through Vertical Leadership Development*
- *Wicked and Wise: How to Solve the World's Toughest Problems*, co-authored with Ken Wilber
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