

Leaders show anxious, pandemic-weary care

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 3 May 2020 [+5 more](#) By Bob Weinstein CORRESPONDENT

As the pandemic churns on, employees find themselves settling into their unusual new routines.

But even as they get acclimated with Zoom meetings or working in masks, their anxiety hasn't dissipated. If anything, it's gotten worse, according to Deb Boelkes, author of *The WOW Factor Workplace: How to Create a Best Place to Work Culture*. It's up to leaders and supervisors to remind them how much they care, even as they engage, inspire, and challenge them.

"Heartfelt leadership is needed more than ever in times of great fear," said Boelkes. "And the good news is that striving to be this kind of leader is nothing new. Best-ever bosses have always sought to wow employees by showing them authentic love."

Of course, love is only part of the story. Leadership actions that create Best Places to Work include things like sharing pride in their mission, products, and services; empowering workers to feel they have a career instead of a job; challenging them; teaching skills that help them succeed; and helping them feel happy, fulfilled, and successful in their lives by fostering friendship, camaraderie, and a sense of belonging.

"Employees still need all of these things," said Boelkes. "The pandemic hasn't changed that. And the good news is, none of them are mutually exclusive. In fact, all the things you do to create a wow culture automatically show employees you care."

She offers the following tips:

- Build trust by keeping team members informed. Whatever it takes,

find ways to inform team members about what is going on, what's expected of them, and what they can expect of you.

This builds trust. Pick up the phone, make a call, or send emails or an occasional text to keep team members updated in real time. Be transparent. Share what you know. The more they know about what's going on, the more connected, comfortable, and assured they will feel.

"Tell your team members you want to be kept informed by them, too," said Boelkes. "Eagerly encourage them to contact you, at their convenience rather than yours, to ask questions, express their feedback about what's working or not working, and share their concerns. Let them know your 'virtual door' is always open."

- Pay attention to those who don't

do well working alone. Some people feel isolated, depressed, and unproductive when working alone. These are the team members at greatest risk of becoming disengaged. If you have the chance to do so — and if your situation allows — encourage these people to volunteer to be part of small groups that rotate into the office or warehouse every few days. It will give them something to look forward to, help them stay productive, and bolster their sense of self-worth, well-being, and belonging.

- Be especially considerate and forgiving of those with family issues.

Some people may find it difficult to work from home even under normal circumstances. But now, with most schools and day care centers closed, working from home can be especially challenging for those who must now also perform duties they usually pay others to perform.

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Be mindful that some workers may struggle with weaving their business responsibilities around additional responsibilities of home schooling and child care.

- Offer creative options to ease their burden at home. Anticipate that for almost everyone, regardless of whether they must now work from home or are still on the job in the workplace with added workload, work-life balance will be a greater challenge than usual. Offer the option for team members to select from a list of home-delivery services, to be funded by the organization, to help reduce the stress and ease the burden in unique ways.

Home-delivery service options might include a month of laundry service; a "meal-in-a-box" dinner service provides a replacement for regularly subsidized school and/or workplace lunches by having lunch delivered daily.

- Understand what makes employees tick and why they work there. Don't underestimate the importance of having regular perfor-

formance reviews and professional development one-on-ones, especially during times like these, even if such meetings must be held online. Just because jobs are no longer as plentiful as they were just a short time ago, never assume your best team members won't jump ship. Ask them, "What keeps you at our company?"

If you haven't done it in a while, ask about their career goals. Make sure they know they have your support in working toward achieving their dreams and desires.

- Foster networking between team members. Help every member of the team and beyond to build and maintain meaningful relationships while working apart. Create online task forces, as needed, to solve new problems that may now come up. Ask for volunteers from different departments, from key customer accounts, and/or from suppliers to keep ideas flowing and everyone engaged (both in and outside the company) and working together to achieve common goals.

- Schedule plenty of "fun" breaks. Encourage team members to periodically get away from the computer, especially if working from home. Suggest they take advantage

of scheduled break times to do things they normally may not be able to do when working from the office, such as spend time with the kids or their life partner, take a walk or bike ride for a change of scene, or just take a nap. Take advantage of this unique opportunity to work from home.

Have fun and enjoy the chance to build a new sense of belonging and family in entirely new ways.

- Allow for more flexible scheduling. If this is your industry's busy season, allow team members to take comp time at their preferred times.
- Do what it takes to make team members feel appreciated. People will do anything for leaders who praise their efforts and are appreciative, especially in times of struggle. Be especially forthcoming with good news and praise for jobs well done.

"Job-satisfaction surveys prove again and again that simply appreciating someone's work can be more important than any other factor in employee engagement," said Boelkes.

"Your team needs all the support you can muster right now," said

Boelkes. "Everyone is doing their best to adapt to the situation and keep business moving, but we still have a long way to go before things return to normal. If you lead with all the generosity and love that's in your heart, you will empower everyone to show up each day ready to be their best."

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