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Mental preparation for the post-COVID world

31 August 2021

Embracing unpredictability will be key in navigating the new normal. Knowing what your employees are innately good at will help your organisation excel

As Singapore approaches an 80 percent rate of full vaccination, the rest of the world is watching the island state for what the 'new normal' might look like in an endemic COVID-19 world. With COVID symptoms mostly mild for the vaccinated, disruptive and costly lockdowns can be avoided and life can return to some form of normalcy albeit not to pre-COVID ways. At least, not in the next few years.

For organisations and their employees preparing to resume full scale operations, there must be mental preparation for the reality that things might never be the same again.

"Life will be different, for ourselves, for companies that we lead, and for social interactions that we have," notes **Henry Tan**, Group CEO of accounting firm Nexia TS. "Failure to prepare mentally will result in us in a state that may either lead to depression or dysfunctional behaviour. More recent mental wellness issues highlighted the need that all of us need to prepare mentally."

Tan made those remarks at a recent webinar titled, "The 3Ps of Preparing Your Business in a Post-Pandemic World" where he urged supervisors to adjust expectations from pre-COVID times, such as staff being in the office daily. Post-COVID, it would not be realistic or productive to expect staff to be available in front of a laptop camera at all times.

IT'S ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

As the world adapts to a 'new normal', the constant disruption and unpredictability of the past 18 months have illustrated the futility of envisioning what the future might look like. Instead, embrace the fluidity and roll with the punches, advises **Lydia Chang** of Management Consultancy, Research Communication International.

The key ingredient to cope with the change, she says, is people.

"As much as we talk about business methods, strategies, systems, AI, automated processes etc., we need to realise that people are the epicentre of change," Chang notes. "If we don't realise that people are what holds the change together and, that people are what is needed to put good AI and automated systems in place, then we are going to be faced with a lot more challenges and upheavals than necessary."

Chang stressed that leadership that communicates the organisation's vision and purpose is crucial in sustaining change. When leaders at all levels are engaged, employees at all levels are energised.

But at the heart of it all it is about “knowing our people at a deeper level”, Chang asserts.

“Emotions are hard to measure, but no less vital in determining outcomes,” she explains. “If we don't know how people are feeling and we don't make the time and effort to tap into what's really happening on the ground, we will be faced with a lot more unpredictable situations where people are reacting in ways that facts and figures are not supporting.

“Polls are important, but polls have been shown to be insufficient in understanding what outcomes may appear as we go along. Quantitative data is vital and it provides information on fundamental principles of what's really going on, but qualitative studies provide insights on how these principles can still be disrupted or even reinvented.”

Each employee also has what Chang terms “deep level inclinations” that, if identified and harnessed, could prove invaluable in creating positive outcomes amidst current and future disruptions.

“I may do my accounting job very, very well, or I may have an administrative skill set, but is this something that I wake up and look forward to doing?” I think this is a necessary reality check in the pandemic world because if we deploy our people in the spaces where they're excited to get up in the morning to get to, then organisations have higher chances for optimal performance that is sustainable because people are already places that they are thriving in.

“Find a human capital analytics and leadership that helps you understand your people or yourself at deeper levels where you go beyond direct questions that assess surface realities such as, *‘How comfortable are you doing this job?’* Those kinds of questions tend to give indications of learned behaviours rather than deep level inclinations. It's the deep level inclinations that tend to hold the key to sustainable growth and success, both individually and organisationally.” She adds:

“There are change makers who are naturally inclined to change, but they may not be structurally wired to create systems or follow through with change; that's okay. If we know our people, we can pair...the best innovator [with] somebody else with the same qualifications [but is] wired to do very well in creating the systems and structures, so your businesses sustain.

“We don't want to be one hit wonders, get to a certain point, and then struggle to sustain success. Instead, we want people to be able to come in and do what they love and wake up in the morning and cannot wait to get to do more of what they're doing for you in the company or in the business. So deep level personality is not only important, it carries far greater impact in work and life than we realise.”

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