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HOW TO BE A STRONG LEADER IN THE CHANGING WORLD OF WORK

After two years of unprecedented change, leaders need to re-examine their approach to being more effective.

Success lies in the ability to adapt.

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While the workplace has changed significantly over the past few years, great leadership remains paramount to success. Despite everything, the core tenets of leadership remain consistent with those of the pre-pandemic world. However, leaders cannot – and have not – stood still. Alistair Dornan, Director of People Experience Consulting at Gallagher explains: ‘Understanding new ways of working, such as hybrid working and employees’ needs, will help leaders become more adept at building their teams and assist with engagement and productivity and ultimately help make people feel different about work.’ He adds: ‘Leaders need to support flexibility, manage change, drive innovation and mitigate risks. Even if these traits are not new, the scale of the challenge facing leaders today certainly is.’



So what areas do leaders need to focus on to be future fit?

1. Recruitment and retention

Make no mistake, talent is hard to find and hard to keep; and pay alone is no longer the solution. The CIPD suggests that 45% of employers have ‘hard-to-fill’ vacancies, making candidate attraction a huge organisational issue. Leaders can help this issue, by creating a nurturing workplace that successfully attracts candidates and makes people feel like they belong and want to stay. They can also take a proactive stance, increase internal mobility and facilitate flexible working. Engaging effectively and supporting their learning and development is also effective in the retention of employees. This is confirmed by LinkedIn’s 2019 Workforce Learning Report, which found 94 percent of employees agreed they would stay at a company longer if it invested in their learning.

2. Health and wellbeing

Leaders must take a holistic approach to health and wellbeing – that means addressing financial and mental as well as physical health. Leaders should be acutely aware of their workforce’s needs and be able to recognise and respond to signs of burnout. According to People Management research, 78% of workers have experienced at least one form of burnout since the start of 2022. The health and wellbeing...

...of employees can also be measured through trends in sickness absence rates, which rose to 2.2% in 2021 having been at a record low of 1.8% the previous year. 'Rather than merely attracting employees, we'd encourage organisations to focus on employees' health and wellbeing as a top priority. This is extremely important in light of more people working remotely and employees having to deal with the effects of severe issues, such as the cost of living crisis and the increase of mental health problems.' says Dornan. 'Leaders need to ensure everyone has access to the support, wherever they work, and whenever they need it,' he adds.

3. Managing hybrid workforces

Flexible working is now expected, rather than optional or preferred. According to ONS figures, in February 2022, 84% of people working from home because of the pandemic, were planning to continue with hybrid working. An organisation's leaders are the ones who must drive the evolution of the workplace, exploring innovative ways to arrange, manage and connect with its people. Coaching and development, engagement and instilling a sense of belonging are all crucial. While cross-training employees over a range of positions or functions can build company awareness and create a more agile organisation. Reward and recognition should be made appropriate for a diversified and dispersed workforce. Leaders must empower their teams to be resilient and therefore productive but this can only be achieved by addressing the mental and physical needs of all its employees, via open lines of communication, bespoke measurement solutions and carefully thought-out strategies.

4. Employer brand and company culture

A strong company brand and culture is highly attractive to employees. In one Indeed survey, 43% of candidates said they were attracted to a new job because it offered meaningful work. Dornan explains: 'Storytelling as a means of communicating about the company is very effective, leaders who can do this and role-model good behaviour and attitudes will improve company culture.' He adds: 'Employees should always understand where the organisation is headed, the ability to unify employees in this way is particularly important in these challenging times.' Improving brand and culture improves inclusion, diversity and belonging among employees, and that will always attract the best talent.'

5. Resilience building and skills development

When a business achieves a culture of continuous learning it can inspire employees to grow with it, ensuring the company always has the skills it needs to thrive. A LinkedIn survey of 2,000 business leaders, found that more than half (57%) preferred soft skills compared to hard skills when considering their employees' development. This includes soft skills such as leadership, communication, collaboration and time management.

Building resilience among employees can happen alongside everyday activities and leaders can provide key learning opportunities through shadowing, job rotations and secondments. As resilience and skills grow, so too will the business.

Leadership is a complex set of competencies that have become more demanding. While leaders may not have immediate answers to all challenges, investing in the talent and capabilities of their teams is essential in finding the right solutions. While Dornan says: 'We are far from business as usual, but we are not entirely rewriting the book either. Today's leaders need to be imaginative, resilient, focused and strong in order to drive progress across the diverse and dispersed workforce and to instill those same values within the employees for whom they are responsible.'

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