

Employee motivation in times of organisational hardship

By **Marius van Dijke**

The phrase ‘new normal’ seems here to stay. Many countries are still in some form of lockdown, while others are loosening restrictions – all dependent on externally driven timelines, internally driven politics, and a host of known – and as yet unknown – variables. As countries deal with the crisis, companies and organisations across the globe have to make major decisions quickly. But in these challenging times, what of employees and their intrinsic motivation?

If companies make products, how can they remain viable in the face of drastically reduced consumer demand? If they provide services, how can they survive when their premises are shuttered? And if they are part of the fabric of our society – such as local, regional and national governmental organisations – how do they continue to function with stay-at-home orders?

Of course, employees face challenges of their own. Can they juggle working from home with the demands of family and home schooling? Have they been fired or furloughed? Or are they essential workers who now face a more demanding work environment than ever before?

Clearly, organisations and their employees must now deal with all of these factors. Some are proactive, some are reactive, and some seem frozen in place. But whatever approach organisations are taking, those working for them are feeling the effects. More than ever, organisations now depend on their employees to move beyond selfish self-interest to focus on collective well-being. However, a large component of this

collective drive depends on a sense of perceived justice within the organisation. Unfortunately, research into organisations demonstrates that these factors can be severely compromised in times of change. Plainly put: in times of crisis, organisations find it difficult to be fair.

Defining fairness

Investigators in this area often divide the idea of “fairness” into various dimensions, with procedural fairness and interactional fairness being among the most prominent. Procedural fairness involves interactions between the organisation’s supervisors and employees. Do employees receive a voice in important decisions such as who gets promoted and who gets let go? And is the well-being of employees taken into account? Interactional fairness involves the information employees receive. Are they kept in the decision-making loop? Are they treated with dignity and respect?

Most organisations try their best to ensure procedural and interactional fairness. However, both of these types of fairness come under fire in times of



major upheaval and change, and many organisations fail in this regard. How do their employees react? Some become passive and withdrawn. Others attempt some type of retaliation. And still others simply leave. All of these outcomes lead to negative effects for both employees and the organisation.

Maintaining motivation

This raises an important question: how do employees who perceive a lack of fairness maintain their motivation? Our work has looked at the power of nostalgia (a sentimental longing for the past) to maintain intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation as defined within the context of organisations means active engagement in enjoyable and interesting work activities. This type of internally driven employee motivation is of vital importance to organisations – if their employees are happy, persistent, focused and



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productive, then they will be more likely to achieve their collective goals.

It would seem self-evident that focusing on future goals will lead to improved performance. However, when fairness is under threat, employee well-being and performance might not just depend on a strong focus on the future. A focus on the past can also be beneficial. It turns out that a sense of nostalgia in the presence of low fairness can lead to increased intrinsic motivation with accompanying beneficial outcomes for the organisation. Nostalgia

can have a positive impact on how people see themselves, how they apply meaning to their lives, how optimistic they are and how connected they feel to others. Said another way, nostalgia increases self-expression, especially in times of threat.

To deal with reduced fairness in times of organisational stress, employees can actually think back to a time when they had a sense of self-directed behaviour. This enhances their own personal feelings of social connectedness. It reminds employees that they have a set of per-

sonal resources they can rely on to get them through challenging times and situations – and reduced fairness. In other words, feelings of nostalgia can create a “reservoir” of social connectedness that increases intrinsic motivation towards their daily work and maintains co-operative organisational behaviour.

Giving employees a voice

The cynical among us might feel that stimulating nostalgia is self-serving from the perspective of organisations. However, the beneficial effects are seen not just on an organisational level – they can include employee-specific coping mechanisms in times of organisation crisis.

Clearly, organisations of all types and sizes will need to look closely at their management styles and decision-making processes. A move towards central management usually results in decreased employee representation and lower perceived employee “voice”. A move towards decentralisation might increase employee voice, but might also reduce organisational cohesiveness. This is playing out in a fascinating way in the USA, as national COVID-19 efforts collide with a wide variety of state-driven reactive approaches and timelines.

Harnessing nostalgia

As organisations move forward, a focus on stimulating nostalgia might help to maintain employee motivation. This doesn't mean getting stuck in the past or moving backwards. It can involve symbols of a cherished past. Or perhaps a collective remembrance of momentous events in the organisation's history ▶

– a “back to the roots” approach. Organisations should highlight what they were before the crisis, and emphasise that “who we are” has not changed.

There are a variety of ways that organisations can use a sense of nostalgia to maintain and even enhance motivation. They should encourage valuable relationships to flourish on the work floor before a crisis strikes. To do this, organisations should ensure that there is nothing blocking relationship development while actively creating ways for employees to interact. Proactively, for instance, they could de-emphasise large differences in pay among employees. They could also make sure that the physical layout of the office isn’t preventing collaboration; they could include those working from home in all activities, and they could create special times for non-work-related interaction.

the chance that employees will develop nostalgic relationship memories that can serve as a buffer during more challenging periods.

When referring back to times during which the organisation achieved something momentous, they should de-emphasise the role of the organisation as a whole, and avoid speaking about the organisation as an abstract entity. Instead, they should emphasise the role that employees played in the success.

Personal nostalgia

Organisations should also keep in mind the fact that many nostalgic recollections are not about the organisation at all. Instead, they are connected to the employee’s childhood. These “childhood recollections” play a role in stimulating intrinsic motivation and prosocial behaviour equal to recollections of or-



Organisations depend on their employees working together towards a common set of goals. When external forces endanger these goals, organisations must do all they can to ensure that this sense of collective ambition is maintained throughout upheaval and change. Companies that harness the power of nostalgia will be in a better position to maintain their momentum until the “new normal” becomes our everyday working lives. ■

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This article draws its inspiration from the papers:

Nostalgia buffers the negative impact of low procedural justice on cooperation, written by Marius van Dijke, Tim Wildschut, Joost M. Leunissen, and Constantine Sedikides, and published in *Organizational behaviour and human decision processes*, 127 (2015) 15–29. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2014.11.005>

Nostalgia promotes intrinsic motivation and effort in the presence of low interactional justice, written by Marius van Dijke, Joost M. Leunissen, Tim Wildschut, and Constantine Sedikides, and published in *Organizational behaviour and human decision processes*, 150 (2019) 46–61. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2018.12.003>

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Reactively, they could ensure that any workplace conflicts that do occur are dealt with quickly and fairly, with transparency and open communication. And above all, they should lead by example, demonstrating from the top the desired organisational behaviour. Actions such as these will lead to positive benefits in the here and now by enhancing everyday motivation. But just as importantly, they will also increase

organisational experiences. For example, the organisation could encourage salient nostalgic recollections in the office by setting up Christmas trees or celebrating events such as Sinterklaas, which will directly connect to most employees’ childhood experiences. Linking these positive childhood experiences to the workplace can have positive effects on intrinsic motivation and prosocial behaviour. They’re also a lot of fun.