POST-COVID19:

Your Organisation Will Never Be The Same Again

LAGOS BUSINESS SCHOOL
PAN-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

LBS INSIGHT

During this crisis, many employees are investing in productive reflections, reordering their priorities and reconsidering their place and purpose in their organisations ,,

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Your organisation will not be the same after the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) crisis is over. For one, many things about the people who will be returning to work will be different. If as it is said, "the time to prepare for war is in the time of peace" then now is the time to prepare for what will undoubtedly need getting used to or addressed when the new normal begins.

It could turn out that deciding to get people working from home would have been a lot easier than the decisions that organisational leaders would have to make when all we are going through now eventually become the new normal. The reason is quite straightforward.

Usually, in organisations, we expect that those bright people we contended for, and so carefully selected to become our employees are scanning the environment, noticing and joining dots to see emerging issues long before they become problems and are either creating solutions or contributing to their development.

It is easy to overlook the fact that as employees are looking out for dots, many of these dots will have personal implications for them. Thus, as they look out for the organisation, they are also looking out for themselves and foreseeing issues that could affect them. Depending on the climate within the organisation, hopefully, the organisational picture they come up with is one in which they see themselves and their issues addressed; if this happens, they do not feel vulnerable. The likelihood of this non-vulnerability increases as the organisation becomes more transparent. If this is not the case, they come up with a picture for themselves that could be quite different from the picture the organisation collectively painted and is using. The picture they have for their issues is private but informs their behaviour. In such a situation, trust is impaired, the climate gets increasingly uncomfortable, and performance is a casualty. Employees are very smart and are doing this out of enlightened self-interest, but sadly, many organisational leaders overlook this fact.

Most organisations have already made decisions that could be life-changing for them and will continue to review their decisions as this ongoing crisis evolves. Many have made decisions to freeze their operations and get people working from home. For some that are delivering physical products and certain kinds of services, this may not be quite a feasible option. Some organisations may have stumbled on opportunities for growth and are actively pursuing this; like a new product line or a change in the way a service is delivered as a result of evolving needs of customers. They are opening themselves to strategy-defining opportunities just as they should. Hopefully, they have all taken decisions to protect their people, fashioned ways to keep them informed and support those who might be affected. Many would have developed a business continuity plan to serve customers, as well as suppliers that need them for

business survival. A short-sighted reaction could lose the organisation's valuable customers and suppliers. Companies are likely to be making decisions about how much to invest in keeping both alive even if it is from enlightened self-interest. These will signal the true values of organisations and their decision to be responsible corporate citizens. Hopefully, they are realising the need to come up with approaches to ensure that they are enabling and motivating their people who still have to continue to get out of their homes to work, to ensure that those that have to work from home can do so effectively.

Finally, it can be expected that organisations are stress-testing their vital statistics and sensitivities – cash-flow, margins, Health and Safety metrics, etc. to drive their priorities. The reality is that by doing all that has been identified so far, they are producing dots that demonstrate what is important to them and what is not.

Here is the irony. The more organisations have managed to get the smartest people to work for them, the more seriously this scenario plays out. As employees read what is happening right now, as they work from home or take the risk to get to work, a number of them are logging dots they are identifying from the organisation's leadership and are joining these dots. This is something that must concern organisational leaders because the private pictures that are being drawn by employees will inform their behaviour and performance going forward.

It could be that product lines and services may be phased out and machines decommissioned. The machines do not know this, but the very smart people we so carefully recruited are thinking about these things, evaluating options and developing personal strategies. The mere fact of COVID-19 creates additional anxieties that must be borne in mind. It also heightens anxieties about pre-existing work conditions (like a work relationship with a colleague or a supervisor that was not going well before all these started), finances, performance, health, career, and work-life balance issues among others.

One important fact is that most people have had more time on their hands than they have probably had in years. Some would have been invested in productive reflections. Many people will be reordering their priorities, as they come to the realisation that they have been rather overestimating their invincibility and underestimating their vulnerability. This is especially so with all that is going around on social media, some of which are quite deep and worth pondering. Some may be finding that they could actually do much more than they are doing currently and more than their organisation is demanding of them and are resolving to do and achieve more. Many may, in fact, have started doing something about actualising their newfound aspirations. Some may be wondering why they ever gave so much to their organisation at the expense of their loved ones. We can go on and on.

A major challenge to pay attention to could be how organisations retain the loyalty of many of their employees going forward. How they feel treated – *make that valued* – is going to be a key determinant of the pictures they paint as they join dots. Of course, the most valuable ones are those whom their organisations will be at the risk of losing by physically exiting or psychologically separating, leaving the organisations with those that actually have limited options and to all intent and purposes are stranded. Stranded employees are the last to leave, but stranded employees are not committed employees.

"There's a natural mystic blowing through the air. If you listen now you will hear…Things are not the way they used to be…" Bob Marley

We do not know what the future holds, but the signs and dots are in the air. We can design our future by taking all the dots we can find, joining them in a way that ensures that most of our people can find themselves in the picture that forms going forward. Now is the time for serious organisations to earn the trust of their people. It goes beyond sending them solidarity messages and recirculating health and safety tips. They need to see that their leaders truly care and that they feel valued. A key indicator is how much they feel that what they are hearing, seeing and receiving from their organisations are about them, as individuals, and not self-serving transactional gestures of organisations and leaders that cannot see beyond how organisational needs are met.

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