

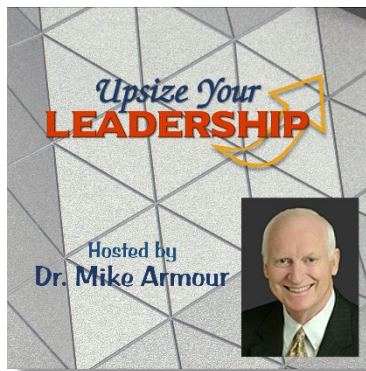
Managers Have Never Faced This Challenge Before

New Realities in the Workforce

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With the thousands of books which have been written on management, we now face a moment in organizational life which has no equivalent in the annals of management. It has to do with managing the emotional and psychological climate in businesses and institutions once workers return in mass to office routines after months of working from home.

Lately I've been purposefully talking to people about their attitude toward a return to work as normal. What I'm hearing are frequent comments which managers should heed. These comments suggest a swelling undercurrent of feelings and attitudes which will adversely affect the return and could easily catch managers unprepared. In today's episode, I want to talk

about this undercurrent. My hope is to give you insights which will upsize your leadership as we emerge from the pandemic.

Never in the history of the workplace have we faced a situation anything like what is starting to play out in companies and institutions by the thousands. Managers are preparing for the day when workers who have not been under the same roof for over a year finally come back together in a traditional work environment. There is no equivalent experience in the entire history of mankind.

It's easy to assume that the return to historic work patterns will be welcomed by everyone and enthusiastically embraced. Anecdotally, however, I'm hearing a lot of evidence to the contrary.

The first indicator that the return to normal will not be normal at all came in a conversation several months ago with a former client. He is the global IT strategist for a well-known international firm. The COVID outbreak occurred just as his company was finishing an extensive office renovation. It was designed to bring their North American IT staff together in one big space. And it was not only a big space, it was an open space. No offices, few cubicles. Just one big, open, spacious building.

Naturally, when social distancing requirements were imposed over a year ago, they had no choice but to set everyone up to work remotely. Like many other corporate leaders, the organization's top leadership was quite uneasy with any arrangement in which everyone worked

from home. How productive would they be? How could the company keep tabs on what they were doing?

About eight months into this experiment, I touched base with my former client and asked him how things were going. He answered enthusiastically. “You can’t imagine how much individual productivity has gone up,” he told me. He added, “I knew our people well enough that I expected them to be responsible in getting their work done. But I didn’t expect both the quality and the quantity of work to be as high as it is.”

I then asked, “What’s going to happen to that productivity when they all come back to the new IT center.” He paused for a long moment, and then in a subdued tone said, “I don’t think they’re coming back, at least not long-term. Every one of them likes this remote arrangement so much that they never want to be back in a traditional IT work setting.”

My next question was, “How is the company going to accommodate their feelings?” “That’s a problem,” he answered. “The CEO insists that everyone should be under the same roof again as soon as possible. I think that will create a horrendous blow to morale.”

I could not help asking, “How will the members of your team react to being compelled to return?” “They will quit,” he said. “Lots of them will quit. We hire very good people. Any company would be thrilled to have them on staff. And these workers know it. They also know that there are plenty of companies who will pay them just as much as we do, or even more, and allow them to work remotely. So, my best people will float their resumes, find a good job, and move on.”

Since you don’t know this man, I should tell you that he is one of the most confident, optimistic executives whom I’ve ever coached. So, his dour assessment struck me as quite out of character with his general outlook. That could only mean that he had more than sufficient feedback to feel that his assessment of the situation was grounded in reality.

My conversation with him launched me on a “listening tour” to find out how people working remotely are envisioning what it will mean for them to transition away from working at home. Some, I should say, look forward to it. Many of them are people who not only *need* social interaction – as we all do – but actually *thrive* on it. They can’t wait to get back into a workday filled with constant opportunities to interact with people.

Surprisingly, however, that has not been the prevailing tone with the majority to whom I have talked. In my sample, most are not eager to get back to the office at all. When asked why they prefer to work from home, they often give replies which you would naturally expect. They don’t look forward to giving up two hours of every day again just to commute to and from work. They don’t look forward to being forced into a 9 to 5 work routine instead of being able to do their work on a schedule which works best for them. Some even talked about specific workers whom they don’t enjoy being around, but who have been out of sight and largely out of mind while everyone in the office is working from home.

Many of them like the escape from daily office politics when working remotely. And unscheduled interruptions are less frequent, as well. These responses, too, I might have anticipated.

Other responses, however, would not have immediately come to mind. Many of these unexpected replies centered around developments which have occurred in our broader society during the time that people have been working in isolation.

Since this time last year, our nation has been through absolute tumult politically, economically, and socially.

- A highly polarizing presidential campaign, followed by widespread misgivings about the integrity of the fall elections.
- Loss of friends, family, and acquaintances to COVID.
- Unpredictable, non-uniform, and often confusing regulations imposed by one authority or another due to the pandemic.
- Families denied a bedside presence when a loved one was dying.
- Elderly relatives confined in care centers, forbidden from seeing family members face to face.
- Weddings postponed, funerals never held due to mandated restrictions on the size of gatherings.
- Professional and collegiate sports played to empty stadiums.
- High school sports taken off of the calendar completely.
- Vacation plans shelved indefinitely.
- An entire school year totally disrupted for children and teens.
- The cancel culture growing louder and more pervasive.
- A summer filled with arson, looting and mayhem, most of which went unpunished.
- An upset cohort of people making the first ever citizen assault on the Capitol building.
- A surge of illegal immigrants overwhelming communities and law enforcement along the southern border, creating the most extensive immigration crisis in our history.

The list could go on and on. To say the least, it has been an emotionally-charged year. And relatively few of these emotions have been positive, uplifting, and energizing. It is inevitable, then, that the past twelve months have exacted a heavy psychological toll on people. We are doubtlessly a more anxious society than we were before the shutdowns started. We are a more polarized society. And according to mental health experts, more of our children are depressed, morose, or suicidal than ever before.

What I'm hearing from people is that they have become accustomed to coping with these worrisome developments in isolation or discussing them only with family or a small circle of friends . . . people whose strongest feelings and most passionate viewpoints they already know. They are not particularly eager to transition into a job setting where they are unsure what passionately -held feelings their co-workers have developed in the year apart. And as a result, they are concerned that they will have to be guarded in casual conversation, for fear of inadvertently pushing an emotional hot button for some fellow-worker.

In a recent article in *Slate* magazine, one woman summed it up profoundly. She said, "Maybe I was naive, but I always assumed in a crisis, we'd come together as a society and have each other's back. It's been over a year of being proven wrong about that over and over again."

She's spot on in her comment. This is the first time in our history that a national crisis has failed to unite us as a people. Large numbers of people were skeptical about entering both the First and Second World Wars. But once we were in them, everyone united to hasten the day of victory. When economic recessions and depressions have hit, we have quickly moved beyond finger-pointing about who should be blamed and pulled together to get the economic nightmare behind us.

Not this time. We are coming out of the pandemic as polarized as we were at the outset. And if I'm reading the tea leaves correctly, we are actually *more* polarized than before. The polarization is bad enough. What's even more disturbing is what it says about the low level of trust within our society. No society can be bitterly polarized and maintain high degrees of trust at the same time.

One telling cause of the polarization is that, throughout the pandemic, there was wholesale disagreement as to which "authorities" to trust. Authority, government, and institutions all suffered a blow to their credibility, the most critical factor in trust. And it did not help that officials kept moving the goal post which would determine when severe pandemic restrictions would end.

Initially the nationwide shutdown was to flatten the curve so that hospitals would not be overwhelmed. At first we were told that the shutdown would be for two weeks, perhaps a month. But once the curve flattened, the shutdown was extended. It should continue, we were told, until hospital admissions dropped. But when admissions dropped, the restrictions were extended again. Now they were to be kept in place until we developed a vaccine. Once vaccines were available, the goal morphed into having the vaccines in plentiful supply. Then it became having a sufficient number of people vaccinated.

In short, people have been asked to live in very dispiriting and inconvenient circumstances for over a year, never knowing when things would actually change for the better. Above everything else, it has been a year of uncertainty. And human beings do not cope well with protracted uncertainty on a large scale. Uncertainty leads first to anxiety, then harmful speculation, followed by distrust of peers, leaders, and institutions, and eventually fear. By the time that speculation and fear have set in, trust has taken a bruising. Both psychologically and neurologically, fear and trust cannot coexist.

The same article in *Slate* quoted one woman as saying that, as compared to the past, "I do not trust people or institutions in the same way and I don't think I ever will again."

So, what's my point? I'm sharing these thoughts because I doubt that many managers have fully thought through the consequences of inheriting a returning workforce which is as emotionally damaged and as distrustful as the one which will soon gather again in our places of work. Managers can ill afford to assume that once workers are back under the same roof, everything will quickly get back to normal, with workers relating to management, the company, and one another as they always did before.

Going back to the story which began this podcast, managers should anticipate that for months to come, they will be overseeing a goodly number of people who resent being back in the traditional workplace setting. They liked it better working at home. And they wish they were still there. As a consequence, they will be hyper-sensitive to things which happen to them at work which, in their mind, would never have occurred if they were still working remotely.

While many highly resilient workers will indeed adjust readily to being back in what we once thought of as the “normal” work environment, not everyone is so resilient. They have been through an emotional and psychological train wreck. And the first priority after a train wreck is not getting the train back on the track. The first priority is tending to the wounded.

As the pandemic ends, wounded people by the millions will return to corporate, institutional, and retail workplaces. Managers will understandably be eager to get the train back on the track. But in doing so, they must not overlook the need for wounded people, now more given to distrust than before, to be given space and time to heal and to learn to trust again. Otherwise, people will have difficulty in reconnecting with others in the workplace. Many of them will continue to function in the psychological isolation which the last year forced on them. And with this retreat into isolation, the polarization which became aggravated by the last year will continually simmer just below the surface in the workplace.

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