Virtual Expectations: What to Do When Employees Aren't Meeting Yours

Description

Recently, I was talking to someone who is a partner in a large company. This person told me that during this crisis, they've kept all their employees (a very large staff) and are paying them to work from home. The owners are putting in a ton of hours, and even loaning money to the company to meet payroll. Meanwhile, this person sees employees on social media doing things like painting their house. He's frustrated because it looks like they aren't doing their share, and the whole burden is on him and the other owners.

Is the perception true? Maybe or maybe not, but it's how this individual feels right now. There is a breakdown of trust. And I'm hearing similar frustrations from other leaders as people settle into this new way of working.

As leaders, we need to trust our employees to do the right thing. And employees need to know we trust them not to take advantage of the situation. Suspicion and resentment are toxic to relationships (which is harmful at a time when we all need to be working at the top of our game).

What can leaders do to avoid this scenario? And what can employees do to make sure they're not just meeting expectations but exceeding them (and that their manager knows that)? Here are a few tips, questions, and insights:

FOR LEADERS

Assume that everyone wants to do a good job. Over many years of working in many different settings, I have found this to be the case. (Of course, there are a few bad apples, but most employees do care.)

Hold up the mirror. Is some of this your fault? Most likely what you're seeing or suspecting is not defiance. Are you doing (or not doing) something that's blocking them from meeting performance?

Focus on the fix. Is it skill or will? Most issues with a good employee are fixable. Maybe you need to communicate differently, or provide training, or have a performance conversation. If it's an issue of "will," it might be time to make a tough decision.

Is the problem working virtually or working without being managed? You may not realize how much you were managing the person when they were physically present. This new way of working is bringing a lot of leadership issues to light.

Have you done the training needed up until now? Now may be the perfect time to train in needed skills—or at least arrange training for when things get back to "normal."

Is there clarity around what you expect? Sometimes we think we're being clear when we aren't. If you're not sure, start asking employees to repeat back what they heard (verbally or in an email).

Don't assume they know what to do to be helpful. While it might be clear to you, with the structure disrupted, they may not see the things they could do.

Have more regular check-in meetings to keep everyone on track. This will keep everyone engaged and plugged into things as they change. It will also be easier to delegate if you stay connected.

Be transparent about the financials and the decision to keep them employed. Sometimes seeing the financial big picture has a way of getting people focused and creating a sense of ownership.

Don't have everyone reporting to you. Split responsibility. You will quickly become the bottleneck and keep things from moving forward. You will also spend most of your time answering questions that others could likely have answered.

Think of this as an opportunity to cut some apron strings, grow your people, and get yourself out of the middle of everything. When you approach it this way (with an eye toward delegation), it will change your leadership approach. Even if they don't get it right, it's a step in the right direction.

FOR EMPLOYEES

Stay connected to leaders. Keep your to-do list in front of them and make sure they know what you're working on. This will reassure them that you're busy and productive.

Really plug in. Don't wait to be told; ask what you can do to help. When you finish a project (and you might find you're actually more productive at home), jump into the next one right away. Get outside your comfort zone and offer to help with a project in a different department or serve on a new team.

Learn new things to help the company in your downtime. This may be the perfect time to take an online course or participate in a webinar.

Think like a consultant. Ask yourself, *How do I add value?* Really "own" your job and think of your manager as your client. Are you an asset or a liability? What untapped skills might you bring to the table? Can you suggest new ways to serve customers during this difficult time?

Be solution-minded. For example, every time you bring a problem to your manager, bring a solution.

Think about the processes you're involved in. How well are they working in this new environment? If you see issues, what ideas do you have to fix them?

Remember, this could be a great time for you to shine. Your manager, coworkers, and customers really need you right now. Step up your game and do your best work, every day. It will be noticed and remembered.

This time of transition isn't easy for anyone. We're all learning as we go. But no matter where leaders and employees are working—in the same room or on the other side of the world—there must be trust. Without it, no relationship can be strong, productive, and rewarding. Whether we're leaders or employees, we need to let this truth guide us—both now and when the pandemic is over.

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