

Employee Engagement as a Catalyst to Boost Employee Morale amidst COVID-19 Crisis

Ms. Jyoti Sharma, Research scholar, RTU Kota, India. jyotiasharma57@gmail.com

Dr Bharti Sharma, Associate professor, ISIM Jaipur, India. drbhartisharma25@gmail.com

Abstract - COVID-19 causes a significant impact on world economy by influencing financial markets and susceptible industries like hotels, tourism and travel. When these industries slow down or closedown they indirectly influence recession in other associate industries. It is observed that the pandemic is having a substantial effect on personal, behavioural and work lives and can lead to employee disquiet, frustration, burnout, fatigue and poor health, which in turn results in low productivity, poor quality and high absenteeism. Human Resource Managers facing vast challenges as having the pressure of cost cutting, simultaneously they need to retain the talents. Employers are trying to tackle the situation but conditions are getting worst every next day. State Government asks establishments not to fire the employees even if they go on leave taking into consideration of the corona virus outbreak but practically Organisations could not avail Human resources financial liability in this crisis period. As it results further excavate the crisis and will not only decline the financial condition of the employee, but also shackle their morale to combat the epidemic. Now the need of the hour is to transform the existing employees from Fear zone to Action zone by boosting their morale and confidence. It is essential to convert their fear into assurance, anxiety into peacefulness and uncertainties into certainty. Now HR leaders need to tweak their employee engagement strategies to boost employee morale resulting into level of contentment. It is essential for the organisations to concentrate on innovative employee engagement practices to re-establish productivity, if it is left unattended these feeling can downturn employees self-esteem and commitment.

The objective of this paper is to understand and conceptualize the impact of Pandemic Covid-19 on Employees Morale and to study the consequences of the pandemic on employee engagement practices. The aim is to suggest change in employee engagement practices during Covid -19. The research is primary and secondary data based. For the study the researcher compiled and analysed 75 responses (filled from employees of 20 different organisations). Interviews were conducted from 4-5 HR Managers different organisations. Secondary data is collected from different articles, news channels and various other sources.

Employees are lying in fear zone amid covid-19 Pandemic, essentially they are facing two types of fear firstly those who are working at workplaces like bank employees, health workers and delivery boys in FMCG sector, having fear of get infected from Corona and secondly those who are at home are having fear of Lay off, pay cuts and reduced working hours. Hence it is required to focus on restructuring the policies and plans to help the employees to come out from the fear zone as it directly affecting their quality of work and productivity. Therefore it is required to transform the engagement strategies and policies for augmenting employee commitment like drive engagement via innovation, motivation through compassion and empathy, priority to protect employee experience and productivity via proper communication and addressing their problems, ensure engagement through teamwork and modify recognition to acknowledge employee efforts.

Key Words- Innovative employee engagement practices, employee commitment, employee morale, productivity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 is an ongoing pandemic caused by SARS-Cov-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2) kept

shaken the world. It was identified in Wuhan city (china) in December 19 and start spreading quickly hence WHO declared the outbreak be a public health emergency on 30th January 2020. No one knows at that time that it is, a mere

jerk, and soon people would witness the holocaust in the world. When this diseases infected several people of 197 countries WHO recognised it as a pandemic on 11 March 2020. The pandemic worked as a double edged sword not only invaded our health system but also causes socioeconomic disruptions in the entire world, like postponement and cancellations of sporting, religious and cultural events.

Covid-19 causes a significant impact on world economy by influencing financial markets and susceptible industries like hotels, tourism and travel. When these industries slows down or closedown they indirectly influence recession in other associate industries. This, in turn affects the lives of several people working in these organisations or they are self-employed. Organisation in the world facing different challenges in managing the consequences of this Pandemic. Before this month India's chief executives had long list of afflictions like GST Rates, sales slowdown customer complaints, competitors new substituents in the market but overnight their vision cluttered and they all dreadfully focused on single business perspective that how to survive and combat with COVID-19 Pandemic.

It is observed that the pandemic is having a substantial effect on personal, behavioural and work lives and can lead to employee disquiet, frustration, burnout, fatigue and poor health, which in turn results in low productivity, poor quality and high absenteeism. Human Resource Managers facing vast challenges as having the pressure of cost cutting, simultaneously they need to retain the talents. Employers are trying to tackle the situation but conditions are getting worst every next day. As Covid-19 causes collapse in business, corporate leaders are bothered about the welfare of their employees and their commercials. They are making strategies and developing action plan to cope up with the adverse circumstances without hampering the welfares of their employees. A speedy change in global situations is an unprecedented challenge in front of Human Resource Managers, and they need to take immediate measures and develop action plans to counteract the adverse conditions. If leaders take the decisions to cut the cost by retrenchment or lower down the salaries !0 to 30 % it lowers the motivation of the employees and if they will not do this it would be tough to survive and sustain in the present scenario. Government declared 21 days lockdown but no one knows the future or able to see the light at the end of tunnel. Hence employees are living on a fear zone where they are afraid of either termination of services from jobs or reduction of wages. News headlines of some companies decisions like "MakeMyTrip, Goibibo, redBus employees face salary cut, fear of job loss", "GoAir asks employees to take pay cut in March" are working as a fuel in the fire. Employers defend that their business had deteriorated due to a drop in bookings and cancellation of flights because of coronavirus pandemic and not having any other alternative than taking these harsh decisions. State

Government asks establishments not to fire the employees even if they go on leave taking into consideration of the coronavirus outbreak.as it results further excavate the crisis and will not only decline the financial condition of the employee, but also shackle their morale to combat the epidemic. Now the need of the hour is to transform the employees from Fear zone to Action zone by boosting their morale and confidence. It is essential to convert their fear into assurance, anxiety into peacefulness and uncertainties into certainty. Now HR leaders need to tweak their strategies to satisfy their employees and emphasis more on short-term tactical tasks that deal with the virus outbreak. It is essential for the organisations to concentrate on employee emotions related to coronavirus pandemic to re-establish productivity, if it is left attended these feeling can downturn employees morale and engagement.

1.1 Consequences of Pandemic Covid-19

COVID -19 hit hard the Indian economy and financial conditions of corporate houses, also there is no certainty that when the things will get normal. Serious repercussions are clearly visible as decline in hiring and increase in firing activities are adopted by several organisations.

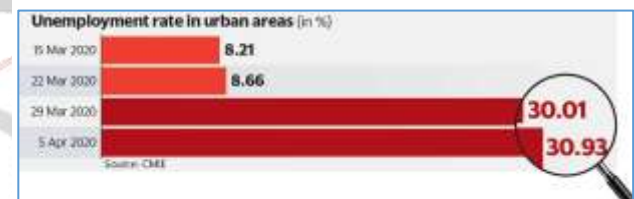


Figure 1 CMIE survey, 2020

The CMIE's job survey reveals the fact that India's urban unemployment rate flies to 30.9% , that is increase of approx. 23%., indicating covid-19's Lockdown impact on the economy. The aviation, travel and hospitality industries are the worst affected, and the other industries that showed a deterioration in hiring activity in March in India versus last year same time were retail (50 per cent), auto/ auto ancillary (38 per cent), pharma (26 per cent), insurance (11 per cent), accounting/finance (10 per cent), IT-software (9 per cent) and BFSI (9 per cent), according to the aNaukriJobSpeak Index for March 2020. Acko, Bounce, MakeMyTrip, are hardest hit by Covid-19 resulting in layoffs, salary cuts of employees. The leadership team has taken decisions of voluntary salary cuts between 50% and 70% in the interest of other employees and organisation during contingency. MakeMyTrip officials are planning to take tough measures to keep operating cost minimum by compensation reduction, salary cuts and sacking staff.

Some of the renowned name of Indian industry also hit hard from the pandemic. Wipro is focussing on utilizing the current staff effectively as no hiring policy is adopted by company, hence utilization ratio increased from 70.2% to 73.4. Organisation is making maximum use of its resources keeping promotions and increments aside for now. Best

(Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport) buses has taken decision to buses without conductors and helper as seven staff members tested positive for COVID-19. This will again led to fear of retrenchment to the employees as out of three only one employee will require per BUS. TCS and Capgemini are giving relief to their employees by announcing that there is no layoff in the company amid pandemic. But TCS has clarified that salary increments will not be accessible right now, promotions would be offered on the basis of the performance of the company. CapGemini, has clarified its employees to not take a single day off till the end of June, also those employees not having any project in hand at present have been asked to put on for 15 days' leave instantly. Serious repercussions can be seen on emotional health and productivity of the employees. However as per CMIEs recent report it is observed that in the first week of June unemployment rate is dropped to 17.6% in first week followed by 11.6% in second week of June giving some positive sign of unlock down phase.

1.2 Impact on employees amid Pandemic: Fear Zone Emotions

As COVID -19 hit the economy of country a fear zone has been created among employers and employees in the organisations. On March 15 when government of different states announces to shut down malls and movie theatres, it hit the retail business means it directly impact the employment of this sector. On 24th March when prime minister announced total shutdown in the entire country, it shacked the foundations of business houses. Contract workers are generally the most vulnerable and the first to be laid off in the episode of such recessions but the temporary and permanent would be in line sooner and later. The slowdown in business is expected to affect majorly on MSME entities in retailing, tourism and transportation, hotel industries and self-employed workers. The latest news headlines like “Salary cuts arrive at Indian start-ups amid the coronavirus slump”, Corona virus Impact: Make My Trip. Goibibo, redBus face salary cut” broadens the fear zone of employees .A survey was piloted by Praxis Global Alliance, a Gurugram-based management consulting and market research firm, in the last two weeks of March and involved 50 Indian start up CEOs from across the country and it revealed the fact that over 25% of these companies have previously announced across-the-board pay-cuts, and another 37% are “actively considering” such a step. Travel firms like MakeMyTrip has announced salary cuts as tourism sector has been affected dreadfully due to the coronavirus outbreak. Hence employees are facing two types of fear firstly those who are working at workplaces like bank employees, health workers and delivery boys in FMCG sector, having fear of get infected from Corona and secondly those who are at home are having fear of Lay off, pay cuts and reduce working hours. Hence it is required to focus on restructuring the policies and plans to help the

employees to come out from the fear zone as it directly affect their quality and productivity.

1.3 Need for changes in Employee Engagement practices leading to transition of employees from fear zone to action zone.

Although no one knows when the crisis will end, but it is the time to begin planning for the post-crisis reality. In the post-COVID-19 scenario, organisations will need to reassess policies for long-term effectiveness, restore employee trust and morale. Employee engagement programmes that are built few months ago will not be suitable for the coming time as pandemic changes the situations, financial conditions of the companies. To revitalize employee some organisations are even restoring traditional employee engagement models and techniques and remodelling their performance management processes. Also they need to examine recent employee engagement results and determine what changes HR leaders should incorporate that suffice employee expectations without hampering organisation benefit. Many corporate hoses are adopting an employee centric view and trying their best to protect their junior management and support their human resources.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Akhmetshin, E. M., Ilyina, I. A., Kulibanova, V. V., & Teor, T. R. (2019, April). “Employee Engagement” Management Facilitates the Recovery from Crisis Situations. In *2019 Communication Strategies in Digital Society Workshop (ComSDS)* (pp. 50-55). IEEE. The Researcher emphasis on the important employee engagement instruments as employer brand and internal PR. At the time of crisis it is very important to focus on internal PR to maintain employee morale and work engagement.

Vasileioy, A. (2018). Internal crisis communication and employee engagement: A closer look at multinational companies. The aim of this study was to gain a better understanding of how multinationals practice internal crisis communication and in what ways they engage with their employees across the three phases of a crisis (pre-crisis, crisis, post-crisis). Multinationals have in place various internal channels and structures to make sure that information will reach all employees. However, there is a need for further development of their strategies when it comes to employee involvement

Mani, S., & Mishra, M. (2020). Non-monetary levers to enhance employee engagement in organizations—“GREAT” model of motivation during the Covid-19 crisis. *Strategic HR Review*. The purpose of this paper is to identify non-monetary variables that can be leveraged by HR practitioners to enhance employee motivation and engagement in their companies. Author emphasise on “GREAT” model of motivation that give the acronym

GREAT (growth, renewal, enabling, aspirational and transparency levers).

Bedarkar, M., & Pandita, D. (2014). A study on the drivers of employee engagement impacting employee performance. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 133, 106-115. Researcher proposed an integrated model of employee engagement and focused on three specific drivers of engagement. These drivers lead to employee performance, which ultimately results in higher organizational performance

III. OBJECTIVES

- To understand and conceptualize the impact of Pandemic COVID-19 on employees Morale.
- To study the consequences of COVID-19 on employee engagement practices.
- To propose model to show transition in Employee Morale from Fear Zone to action Zone due to Employee Engagement Practices.
- To suggest innovations in employee engagement practices during COVID -19.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is primary and secondary data based. For the study the researcher compiled 75 responses (filled from employees of 20 different organisations). Researcher has also conducted interview of middle level managers from ten different organisations like MIRAE Asset, ICICI bank, HDFC Bank, Aditya Birla group, Hyrefox consultancy, Gxpress Solution, Deutsche Bank, Hero Moto Corp limited, HBB financial services limited, Sub-k iTransactions Ltd. different organisations.

Secondary data is collected from different articles, news channels and various other sources.

V. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

Researcher has collected data from 75 respondents from approx. 20 different organisations however 68 were considered for study purpose.

- I. 84.6% respondents have confidence in their company's response to the financial crisis COVID-19 Pandemic, while 6.2 % respondents do not show that much confidence in their company. 9.2% respondents were not sure of their opinion.
- II. 86.2% respondents are agree that their company is making sufficient adjustments to deal with changes brought with Covid-19 Pandemic in job description /job role. However 4.6% respondents do not agree with same. 9.2% could not reach to any conclusion
- III. 90.7% respondents agree that their company is supporting employees during the Covid-19

Pandemic. Only 6.2% do not agree with this. While 3.1% could not reach to any conclusion

- IV. 86.2% respondents believe that the leaders of their company are making effective decisions in favour of employees during COVID-19 Pandemic however 7.6% employees do not believe on this. While 6.2% respondents were not sure of their opinion.
- V. 93.8% respondents agree that they are receiving timely communication regarding update in recent policy {travel/flexible working/quarantine/reimbursement etc.}. Only 1.6% are not agree with it. 4.6% could not reach to any conclusion.
- VI. 87.6% respondents agree that their company is adapting changes in work conditions that motivates them while working in the organisation. While 6.2% do not agree with the statement. 6.2% respondents were not sure of their opinion.
- VII. 86.2% respondents believes that they are provided with the proper infrastructural requirements that is needed to carry out job role for remote work during Covid -19 pandemic. 4.6% do not believe on it, while 9.2% respondents could not reach to any conclusion.
- VIII. 40% respondents agree that their workplace stress of uncertainty and insecurity is affecting their personal life. 43.1 % do not agree that uncertainty and insecurity is affecting their personal life. While 16.9% respondents were not sure of their opinion.
- IX. 83.1% respondents agree that they are staying connected as a team/colleagues during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Only 1.5% respondents do not agree while 15.4% could not reach to any conclusion.
- X. 89.2% employees stated that they have been trained by the organisation to keep themselves safe and healthy during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Only 4.6% employees do not agree with the statement while 6.2% respondents are neutral about the statement.
- XI. 76.9% respondents believe that their employer is giving them platform to raise concerns or queries for anxieties and stress, however 9.3% respondents believes that they are not having any such platform to raise their problems. 13.8% respondents were not sure of their opinion.
- XII. 84.6% employees agree that organisations is taking measures/actions like short term training exposure, organising webinars, management development programmes to encourage and enhance the productivity of employees. Only 4.7% respondents do not agree, while 10.7% respondents are neutral.
- XIII. 75.4% respondents agree that the employer is taking care of their physical and mental health

during COVID -19. 10.8% do not agree with the statement while 13.8% respondents were not sure of their opinion.

- XIV. 72.3% employees agree that they are provided with the fair and equal opportunities for growth and development from their employer. However 9.2% respondents do not agree with same, while 18.5% could not reach to any conclusion
- XV. 81.5% employees believe that their employer is providing proper training for developing a culture of work from home and office in the changing scenario while 9.3% employees do not agree with the statement. 9.2% respondents were not sure of their opinion.

VI. CONCLUSION

From the literature review and above discussions it can be easily visualize that Pandemic impact Employee Morale severely, shattering them physically, mentally and financially. Than it become need of the hour to remodel their Employee Engagement Practices as the existing one will not be suitable for the Pandemic situations. As expected all the managers who were interviewed landed on to the same opinion that Covid-19 has substantially impacted Employee engagement practices that is reflected via freezing hiring, pay cuts between 20-35% no monetary incentives etc. These all changes diminishes employee’s morale and productivity. To improve work engagement and to enhance employee productivity HR managers required to restructure the existing Employee engagement practices.

6.1 Model representing changes in Employee Morale from Fear Zone to Action Zone due to Employee Engagement Practices

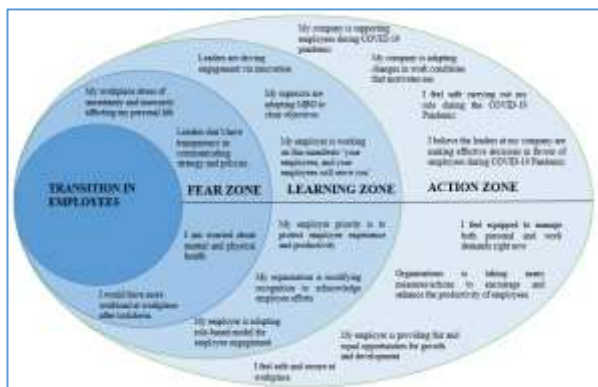


Figure 2 'Model representing Transition of employees in different zones'-proposed by authors

The researcher projected this model to understand the transition of employees in three different zones. At the beginning employees were lying in fear zone due to financial hardship, risk of unemployment, worry of pay-cuts and the fear of contracting the disease affecting their personal and professional life. The massive flow in misinformation has elicited fear-driven reactions, and employees were breathing in stress and trauma.

At times of crisis employers are trying to support their employees to cope with anxiety and fear by showing empathy, self-regulation and more open and frequent communication. HR leaders are adopting innovative employee engagement practices to retain talents like modification in recognition, more participation of employees, emphasis on teamwork, and priority on employee’s physical health and mental health. During learning Zone, these practices adopted by employers support employees to come out from fear zone and help in transition from fear zone to action zone. These innovative employee engagement practices enhances employee morale and their belongingness towards organisation.

Hence model is proposed to be implemented by various companies to increase productivity through action zone employees, so the transition is important to transform employees from fear zone to action zone.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discussion with the corporate personnel’s and analysis of their responses following suggestions are made to innovate employee engagement practices during Covid- 19.

- I. **Modify recognition to acknowledge employee efforts-** As employee morale and confidence diminished due to disruptions, managers are required to redouble the appreciations and recognition and it must be on time. At this times it is not easy for companies to have budgets for monetary rewards, they are converging on non-monetary rewards like they share their employees working pictures at LinkedIn also they share their posters as ‘Warriors/ Fighters of organisation’ at workplaces. Some organisations are issuing certificates or letter of appreciation to the performers of company, while in other organisations top performers are receiving calls from CEO or National Head as the token of appreciation.
- II. **More Participation of employees-**The main role of HR leaders is not only to push talent outcomes in favourable circumstances but to safeguard these talents at hostile environment. It is required for institutions to minimize ambiguity, uncertainties, distrust and fear. It is the responsibilities of leaders to draft current plans and proposals to help employees find a sense of normalcy and productivity. To make employees feel more participative and involved some organisations are conducting virtual meetings as happy Friday, Saturday meet to discuss forthcoming planning.
- III. **Priority to protect employee experience and productivity-** HR leaders are promoting voluntary training sessions by seniors and experienced

employees for developing soft skills and smooth working from home. These sessions are more consistent and voluntary than earlier. Covid sessions from third party ventures are conducted to make employees aware on risk factors and how to mitigate that risk.

IV. **Priority on employee's physical health and mental health**-To ensure that employees do not sacrifice with their health, many organisations are providing some facilitation support to their employees like medical chairs are provided at their homes those who have medical issues of back ache. To overcome mental fatigue regular yoga sessions are organised also regular meetings with expert counsellors are conducted for emotional well-being of employees. Also to reduce overall stress many organization are coming with rejuvenation activities for employees and family members to reduce stress

V. **Flexibility in rules and policies**-To deal with the situations employers are providing flexibility in time, place (can work from home or office premises) and taking leaves like they can have full day leaves, half day leave if they are not feeling comfortable physically or mentally. Company rules are more liberal or flexible than earlier. Sales teams have strict instructions not to meet with clients physically, only promotional phone calls are allowed. Priorities now change as leaders are more concerned for their employees than productivity.

VI. **Redundancy tremors** -A little bit of empathy and compassion can create maximum impact and motivate employees to go extra miles for the institution. In worst situations when organisations need to restructure their employees, being empathetic is the best solution. According to an article, *Layoffs that don't break your company* published in HBR, the author mentions that employee productivity & satisfaction decreases by 20% and 41% respectively post lay - offs. It is human behaviour that if something wrong happens in the surrounding its repel effect also affect the individual. So leaders are communicating evidently about the conditions to the remaining employees and discuss the strategies, policies and the future plans of the organisation.

VII. **Transparency in Communication**-Changes are also visible in communication in hierarchical system as now subordinate can directly interact with their super senior regarding any problem. In virtual meeting HR managers can join anytime and ask for employees and their family health and wellbeing or any other problem they are facing to

make them feel that they are valuable assets for the organisation.

VIII. **Ensure engagement through teamwork**- To ensure the belongingness organisations need to implement tech tools that allow the employees to collaborate and co-operate. Virtual coffee break and frequent video calls with colleagues ensure engagement and synergistic teamwork. There are several tools such as Zoom, Zoho, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Office 365, etc. leaders are allotting tasks or targets in teams so that employees stay connected to each other. To ensure high cohesiveness within team members some organisations are conducting competitions to help employees stay connected to each other and increases their belongingness towards institute

REFERENCES

- [1] Akhmetshin, E. M., Ilyina, I. A., Kulibanova, V. V., & Teor, T. R. (2019, April). "Employee Engagement" Management Facilitates the Recovery from Crisis Situations. In 2019 Communication Strategies in Digital Society Workshop (ComSDS) (pp. 50-55).
- [2] Vasileioy, A. (2018). Internal crisis communication and employee engagement: A closer look at multinational companies.
- [3] Mani, S., & Mishra, M. (2020). Non-monetary levers to enhance employee engagement in organizations-"GREAT" model of motivation during the Covid-19 crisis. Strategic HR Review.
- [4] <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/covid-19-lockdown-impact-unemployment-rate-rises-to-23-4-11586202041180.html>
- [5] <https://www.hrkatha.com/news/hiring-firing/wipro-to-utilise-existing-staff-to-defer-campus-offers-hikes-promotions/>
- [6] <https://www.hrkatha.com/news/hiring-firing/new-rule-from-best-causes-fear-of-job-loss-among-bus-conductors/>
- [7] <https://www.hrkatha.com/news/compensation-benefits/tcs-defers-increments-will-not-reduce-jobs/>
- [8] <https://www.hrkatha.com/news/compensation-benefits/capgemini-revises-leave-policy-cancels-all-leaves-till-june-end/>
- [9] <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/retail/covid-lockdown-retailers-expect-around-80000-job-losses-says-survey/articleshow/75029366.cms>
- [10] https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=8&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwIatJukhoXpAhXA4nMBHbxgBB8QFjAHegQIARAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.gartner.com%2Fen%2Fnewsroom%2Fpress-releases%2F2020-03-25-gartner-identifies-six-initiatives-hr-can-undertake-t&usg=AOvVaw0f_qKZIYZ9eA7tWD1D_HE
- [11] <https://d3fy651gv2fhd3.cloudfront.net/charts/india-unemployment-rate.png?s=inurrate&v=202007011018V20200716>
- [12] <https://joshbersin.com/2020/04/covid-19-may-be-the-best-thing-that-ever-happened-to-employee-engagement/>
- [13] <https://www.business.com/articles/improve-employee-engagement/>