Executive Leaders: Address Employee Fatigue in Times of Crisis

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The pandemic, economy, politics, war and climate change have combined to exhaust workers. Executive leaders who aren't used to dealing with workers' emotional health can assuage fatigue, stress and anxiety with a few simple but important steps.

Overview

Impacts

- Fatigue makes it harder for executive leaders to drive change.
- Fatigue requires executive leaders to deal with the emotional health of their teams.

Recommendations

Executive leaders who are driving digital business should:

- Elevate the meaning of workers’ tasks and roles by reorienting their organization toward a larger mission or purpose, not just clinical business outcomes like increased revenue or shareholder returns. Communicate the mission in clear language so that it simplifies jobs rather than adding one more item to workers’ to-do list.

- Free up time and energy for workers by permanently removing items from their to-do list. Make a habit of taking something off workers’ plates whenever you add a new requirement.

- Regain the trust of workers by toning down optimistic rhetoric. When great success doesn't materialize as leaders predicted, or sounds tone deaf, people question everything leaders say.

- Maintain workers’ trust by defaulting to transparency and proactive communication. Do not use “corporate speak” — vague or cliched language that says little.
Introduction

Boards of directors continue to make digital acceleration and digital momentum a top business priority for the enterprise and its workforce (see Roadmap to Renewal: The 2022 Board of Directors Survey). Unfortunately, while the board is yelling, “Faster!”, workers are exhausted, suffering from chronic physical and emotional fatigue. And executive leaders can’t blame them. Four crises converged on the workforce at the same time to raise anxiety levels, contribute to burnout and damage trust:

- The pandemic (new variants, protocols, vaccinations)
- Economic uncertainty (supply chain problems, inflation, deglobalization)
- Political turmoil (social justice, polarization, disinformation, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine)
- Climate change (grimmer prognosis, greater urgency to act)

Executive leaders won’t be able to execute the board’s postpandemic business strategy unless they address the fatigue their teams already suffer. Of course, many leaders themselves suffer from fatigue and are therefore more likely to make bad decisions in handling staff. We can simplify the issue of fatigue to two major impacts, and we provide hacks and simple actions leaders can take to address them (see Table 1).
## Table 1: Impacts and Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impacts</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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| Fatigue makes it harder for employees to be productive. | - Show workers you recognize the stresses they are under.  
- Give workers meaning by reorienting your organization toward a larger mission or purpose. |
| Fatigue requires leaders to deal with the emotional health of their teams. | - Regain the trust of workers and revive workers’ willingness to commit emotionally by toning down optimistic rhetoric.  
- Design a series of hacks to address the specific emotional needs of your workforce. |

Source: Gartner (June 2022)

### Impacts and Recommendations

**Fatigue Makes It Harder for Employees to Be Productive**

Workers right now aren't just tired. They are burnt out, stressed, worried and regularly worn down. "Fatigue" better expresses workers' physical and emotional state and the risk it poses both to their well-being and to the enterprise's mission. Wordnik defines fatigue as "the decreased capacity or complete inability of an organism, organ, or part to function normally because of excessive stimulation or prolonged exertion."

A psychological definition of fatigue reveals additional dimensions that executive leaders must address: "An erosion of enthusiasm caused by obstacles, roadblocks, or added rules and constraints. Psychological fatigue is a diminution in emotional, spiritual, or attitudinal components of our skills, our contributions, and our output."

Fatigue is a whole-of-person affliction. People wonder whether their efforts are worth it, and they may even start to rethink their priorities in what we call the "Great Reflection."
Fatigue causes a gradual breakdown of performance, generally as a result of small, repeated insults that cause accumulated damage and can lead to eventual collapse. In the case of already stressed workers charged with sustaining the enterprise's digital momentum, they can reach the breaking point when:

- The work done by employees seems unending or meaningless.
- The work doesn't deliver promised benefits, at least not soon enough, or has undesirable effects.
- Management calls it a success, even when employees can see it has failed.
- Employees don't directly benefit from the work undertaken, or the reward is constantly delayed.
- Senior leadership appears tone deaf to concerns on the ground.

In fact, the symptoms of fatigue are almost the exact opposite of what leaders need from workers to execute on massive digital expectations (see Table 2). Leaders must take deliberate steps to counteract the effects of fatigue.
Table 2: Business Requirements Versus Effects of Fatigue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirements for Digital Acceleration</th>
<th>Effects of Fatigue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to make good decisions quickly</td>
<td>Reduced decision-making ability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to move forward in complex environment</td>
<td>Reduced ability to do complex planning and solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superlative communication skills</td>
<td>Reduced communication skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to perform under stress</td>
<td>Reduced productivity or performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reduced ability to handle stress on the job</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sustained peak performance</td>
<td>Increased sick time, absenteeism, rate of turnover</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gartner (June 2022)

**Recommendations:**

- Show workers you recognize the stresses they are under by speaking of the challenges faced by people in their daily lives and their impacts. Work with HR to determine what accommodations could be made to relieve unusual stress, such as giving employees extra days off or even sabbaticals.  

- Elevate the meaning of workers’ tasks and roles by reorienting your organization toward a larger mission or purpose, not just clinical business outcomes like increased revenue or customer satisfaction. For example, instead of increasing customer satisfaction scores, focus on improving customers’ well-being. Public sector organizations and nonprofits have an advantage in this area in that many are mission-based by default. But private sector enterprises can be purpose-driven, too. For example, Nike's purpose “is to move the world forward through the power of sport — breaking barriers and building community to change the game for all.”
Fatigue Requires Leaders to Deal With the Emotional Health of Their Teams

To keep employees safe and productive, management must immediately address workers’ anxiety and fatigue, which includes worries about family and career, and do what it can to improve their work-life balance (see Help Workers Process Loss in a Time of High Tension). This is difficult because leaders often have little training on how to reduce worker stress and probably didn’t envision they would have to when they trained for management roles. Nevertheless, leaders can do many things to promote workers’ emotional health without training.

To create an immediate positive impact, leaders can use hacks to reduce worker fatigue. Hacks are small changes that garner big results (see The Art of Culture Hacking). A series of hacks can have a large cumulative effect. The following hacks address fatigue:

Leadership:

- Repeat the “why” of change like a mantra to remind people of the mission that their work serves.
- Start meetings with “What’s working?” to show people that the organization is succeeding in many ways.
Recommendations:

- Include what is not changing every time you announce a change to reassure people that not everything is in flux.
- Be prescriptive when asking for something scary and new to make it easier for people to know what you expect them to do.
- Be aware of cognitive dissonance (for example, saying frontline workers should make more decisions while adding more rules for them to follow) and spend more time reducing it or explaining to diffuse people's cynicism.

Team:

- Create a team ritual to reinforce a sense of belonging and commitment to a common mission.
- Make a video of everything achieved during the crisis to inspire the team.
- Create separate learning zones and performance zones so that people feel comfortable taking the time they need to acquire new skills.

Work:

- Name someone the CEO of their idea to create a feeling of empowerment.
- Design work in stages that can be completed from start to finish in a day or a week to break daunting initiatives into doable segments.
- Create milestones and a ritual to celebrate hitting each one to generate a sense of progress.
- Track the switching costs associated with starting, stopping and interrupting work to estimate the cognitive strain associated with trying something new.

Recommendations:

- Regain the trust of workers — that is, revive workers’ willingness to commit emotionally — by toning down optimistic rhetoric. When great success doesn’t materialize as leaders predicted, or sounds tone deaf, people question everything leaders say. The current climate requires clear-eyed, honest communication about what actions the enterprise is taking and where they stand. No corporate speak. Default to transparency and proactive communication.
Design a series of hacks to address the specific emotional needs of your workforce. For example, if employees are disheartened because they don't see the results of their work, focus on hacks at the leadership, team and work levels that publicize accomplishments. Hacks are less effective if implemented piecemeal.

**Evidence**

1. Psychological Fatigue Is the Silent Productivity Killer — But Extreme Teamwork Can Subvert It, Fast Company.

2. Employees Seek Personal Value and Purpose at Work. Be Prepared to Deliver.

3. Fatigue and Its Management in the Workplace, ScienceDirect.


5. Breaking Barriers, Nike.

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