Avoiding Uncertainty and Conflict: The Importance of Clear Expectations and Rules for Remote Workers

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Abstract

There is little doubt that COVID-19 has changed the workplace in numerous aspects. We witness dramatic transformations in turnover rates, extinction of professions, the basic motivation needs of employees etc. One of the most prominent changes we have seen is the rise of the remote workers and its consequences. Employees have worked from home prior the COVID-19 pandemic, but this phenomenon had grown exponentially during the pandemic. This rapid unprecedent rate required some industries to change completely the way the operate in terms of measurement, training, evaluating, managing, communicating etc. In this opinion article I will address this issue by identifying the complex consequences of remote working, mostly by discussing the importance of setting clear expectations and boundaries. I will also offer organizations some practices that could mitigate the negative outcomes of remote working.

Keywords: Remote Working; Performance; Role Ambiguity; Expectations

Introduction

Imagine you ride an elevator to the rooftop of 100 store building. The elevator opens in the middle of the rooftop. There are no rails or fences on the rooftop. What would you do? Would you go near the edges? Probably not. Most people would freeze and stay by the elevator. However, if there were some rails on the edges of the building, people would feel free to explore the rooftop. This metaphor reminds us that sometimes rules and boundaries free us other than restrict us. When employees work from the office the rules are relatively simple. If you punch the clock you are working. There are usually less feelings of remorse and guilt about taking long breaks or even checking the social media accounts. However, when working from home things are more complex.

Ironically, remote working, which should have produced more autonomy and work-life balance in some cases have done just the opposite. Some studies on the subject reported of feeling of disengagement, depression, lack of social contact [1,2] and role ambiguity [3]. Role ambiguity is the extent to which a person is unclear about what is required for the adequate performance of his/her role [4] and when there are no managers, peers, and organizations environment present, this uncertainty is likely to flourish.

Remote working has changed overnight almost every aspect of work: the training, the relationship with the managers and peers, measuring performance, etc. These rapid transformations that had little time to get accustomed to, left many employees with a lot of unanswered questions about the "right and wrong" of working from home with no social norms to imitate: Is it OK to watch TV in the middle of the day? If I am more productive in the evening, is it acceptable to work mostly in the afternoon and evening? How is my work being measured? Is it alright to contact an employee in the evening?

Some organization decided that the location is only a technicality and continued working the same is before: measuring work by hours and even monitoring the time the employees are actively near the computer. This mistrust by organizations usually led to feeling of resentment from the employees. But the other end of this spectrum was also hazardous. Organizations that have not set any kind of rules left their employees with felling of guilt for every break they took [5].

One of the main reasons for this feeling of guilt is that when employees are working from home, expectations tend to get

blurred. Employees may not be certain what is expected of them, and employers, who are novel to this new situation, may not be sure how to measure their performance. This can lead to confusion, frustration, turnover, burnout and ultimately, poor performance [6].

One of the best ways to avoid these hazardous consequences, is by setting clear expectations from the outset. This involves clarifying the employee's role and responsibilities, the anticipated outcomes, and the timeframes for completing the goals. It is also extremely important to communicate frequently with employees to guarantee that they are "on track" and to address any concerns or questions that they may have. By removing ambiguity and setting clear expectations, employers can help their remote workers to succeed. This can lead to increased productivity, improved employee satisfaction, and hopefully a better overall work-life balance.

Conclusion

This article stressed the role of clear expectations from the organization and managers in successful remote working. This requires organizations to mitigate ambiguity and set clear boundaries and by doing so, employees will free more confident and less guilty and stressed about working from home [7]. There are some techniques that organization utilize for creating better remote work. Firstly, organizations and managers need to clearly outline the employee's role, responsibilities, and expected outcomes [7]. This include explaining him what she/he is expected to do in terms of goals and output and giving her/him a detailed formal explanation about their roles and responsibilities and how it is being measured (in terms of KPI and SLA). Additionally, organizations should communicate clearly issues such as breaks, availability on the computer or phone etc. This is also important for maintaining work-life balance. It is important to set rules and boundaries about how (communication platforms) and when it is OK to contact employees so there won't be a spillover between their personal life and work life [8].

Secondly, managers should create regular check-ins with the employees (1 on 1 or team meetings). It is highly important since it gives them a chance to discuss their progress and address any questions or concerns, they might have [9]. This is of course an important managerial practice for employees who also work from the office, but when employees are working from home managers who are naturally occupied with their everyday work are less likely to recognize behavior of burnout, stress, and disengagement of their employees when they can't see them.

Thirdly, organizations should use internal communications systems that will keep the employees on the right track and synchronize the work. By doing so it will make the work more transparent and clearer and the employees engaged with the tasks and their colleagues [10]. Preferably, these systems should include engaging applications such as video conferencing, chat, and highly visible dashboards [10].

Finally, Managers should be more flexible and dynamic. They need to understand the remote working is more complexed from working from the office and things may not be going exactly as they planned, and it requires more attention, listening and patience by their part.

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