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Employee Engagement

Focus on boosting employee morale in a crisis: Chief of HR, SBI Life Insurance

In an exclusive interaction with People Matters, Ms. K Manjula, EVP, Chief of Human Resources and Management Services, SBI Life Insurance throws more light on the steps organizations should take to manage employee experience during a crisis.



The impact of COVID-19 is forcing us all to manage turbulence at the intersection of our personal and professional lives in ways we haven't done so before. In such a situation, the only way to stay connected is through tools leveraged by technology. Technology in such times has been giving organizations an opportunity towards smooth business continuity but also reminds them to revisit the fundamental ideas that will work and benefit the employees in the long run.

One such organization is SBI Life Insurance, which through its well-designed business continuity plans and technological initiatives, is enabling employees to work efficiently even when WFH yet at the same time ensuring a positive employee experience.

In an exclusive interaction with People Matters, Ms. K Manjula, EVP, Chief of Human Resources and Management Services, SBI Life Insurance throws more light on the steps organizations should take to manage employee experience during a crisis.

Managing employee experience has especially become critical during the tough times we are going through on account of the Coronavirus epidemic. What are some of the ways employee experience is affected by a crisis?

We see the coronavirus outbreak as a world-wide humanitarian crisis affecting lives globally. This situation has indeed led to one of the greatest workplace disruptions of our lifetime. It has certainly changed the way businesses used to work and most importantly where it is being operated from now on. Hence, it is certainly becoming more and more challenging to ensure employee experience that promotes collaboration, inclusivity, clear and consistent communication across the organization.

Culturally we are tuned to physical interactions, meeting people and face to face conversations. Given the nature of the current crisis, where most of the professionals across the globe are working remotely from their homes, employees may find it challenging to get used to this new reality. There is a multi-layered effect on the workforce be it Emotional Impact, Impact on Work-Life Balance and respective Work Stream.

- **Emotional Impact:** With the necessary lockdowns and travel restrictions across the nation, to contain the COVID-19 spread, the situation has become uncertain and dynamic which has led to an emotional impact on the workforce. Accepting the new normal is not easy and therefore lack of personal connection or bonding can lead to an increase in stress or anxiety amongst employees.
- **Work-Life balance:** At the start, employees will face difficulties in embracing the changing normal in handling work and home simultaneously which would impact the balancing of both. This can lead to experiencing a burnout situation due to working at a stretch as there is no difference between workplace & home.
- **Impact of Work Stream:** The new reality will bring in some unexpected challenges in the personal and professional lives of the employees which will also be impacted due to certain interruptions at both ends and with limited technical support when working remotely.

What are some of the challenges that organizations might face in providing a smooth employee experience in crisis?

While organizations are adjusting to the new work culture, the virtual work environment is facing different challenges every day. With this sudden change, employees may feel aloof due to less connectivity with the teams sometimes. Therefore, it is very important to stay connected and collaborate with them at regular intervals, to ensure that the feeling of isolation does not creep in amongst them.

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Further, due to the unstructured work environment, employees may find it difficult to focus on the given work task. However, a well-designed digital infrastructure will not only empower them in completing the given task but also enable them to stay connected with their respective teams.”

Traditionally, the business of insurance is advisory linked with high dependence on human intervention. In the current situation, businesses across the globe have been hard-pressed to accept the new reality. At this juncture, the employee's health and well-being is our first priority.

At SBI Life, we embraced WFH policy for employees wherever required to ensure they are safe and with the help of our intuitive digital tools they can address any insurance needs of the customers. For this purpose, we ensured that all the necessary hardware and software requirements are made available to them for business continuity. Therefore, we can operate our major functions without any hindrance.

How can organizations take charge when it comes to maintaining employee experience in a crisis?

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“Employees are brand ambassadors as they help in extending brand reach. While organizations are doing a lot when it comes to creating an ideal employee experience, it is important to stand by the employees in such a crisis situation.”

This pandemic outbreak has stunned the very foundation of how organizations worked, while they deal with multiple challenges that have come to the forefront, work from home, travel restrictions, ensuring the health and safety of every employee and social distancing. This time of crisis has, in fact, become a solid ground for organizations to ensure they create an ideal employee experience to ensure connectedness, communication, and efficiency.

During such times, the focus needs to be on boosting employee morale, as they are key pillars of business continuity for any organization. Therefore, constant communication with both internal and external stakeholders is key.

Employees need to believe that their organization can handle such a crisis and is standing by them. To create an ideal employee experience, organizations must:

- **Connect and Communicate:** Communication is critical at such times, staying connected with them promotes belongingness, which is important in such situations. Make use of multiple communication channels leveraged by technology, to connect with the employees and keep them apprised about the organization's latest developments. Boost their confidence by demonstrating leadership by speaking to them continuously. Keep the communication open not only around work-related aspects but also check on employees' emotional and mental well-being.
- **Be sensitive and empathetic:** It is important to understand that employees might be facing various challenges during this period on both professional and personal front. Therefore, leaders/managers need to offer every possible help and go out of the way to help employees achieve daily work deliverables, provide flexibility and resources for someone in need of help. It is also important to empower them with emotional guidance to evolve in the current situation.

For a large organization like us with a pan-India presence, the challenges differ from state to state and hence, we have empowered leadership at regional levels to make decisions based on the situation to provide the best possible experience to the employees.

What are some of the initiatives that you have taken to maintain employee experience during the tough times?

The first step we took was to embrace WFH policy to ensure our employees are safe and empowering them with all the necessary intuitive digital tools so that they can stay connected with the customers and address any of their insurance needs. We also introduced a special leave policy over and above the annual leave entitlement, to support our employees in this hour of need if affected by the pandemic

Regular communications are being sent across to all employees not only on the precautionary measures to be taken during this outbreak but also providing other information, for example making them aware of phishing emails that would be hazardous for them as well as the organization at such times. Also, all the salary payouts were made well in advance during the lockdown period to ensure they are prepared with the necessary stocks at their respective homes

Striking a balance between professional and personal life can be a challenging prospect at this juncture. We believe it is also important to invest in the families of the employees. Therefore, we keep introducing simple yet engaging activities like painting and dancing competition, etc to encourage employees and their family members to participate, thus fostering meaningful relationships

Considering the situation and the fear all around due to the pandemic outbreak, we launched another initiative called "WE CAN, WE WILL!" which has been rolled out to lift the spirits at a time when we are isolated, it is an effort to reassure every employee that the organization is with them in this crisis time and together WE CAN and WE WILL emerge from the situation

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“While we are leaving no stone unturned to ensure business continuity, we are also ensuring that our employees are empowered through various digital training modules curated in-house for them to further enhance their skills.”

How can business balance maintaining employee experience and business continuity in times of crisis? What are some of the 2-3 critical steps they need to take?

These are testing times for individuals as well as organizations and we need to manage this turmoil with conviction and empathy. Some of the critical steps that are important and will prove to be beneficial in the long run are:

- **Stand by your employees:** While businesses might be strained temporarily, the organizations which stand strongly by their employees and customers in this hour of need will emerge as winners in the long run
- **Constant communication:** All the stakeholders both internal and external need to be regularly communicated about measures taken to tackle the situation and ensure the continuity of all essential services at such times. In this scenario, communication with the employees is a must to ensure continuity in knowledge sharing across the organization
- **Community service:** Organizations should also take responsibility for protecting the communities they serve. For instance, at SBI Life, all our employees contributed their one day salary to the PM Cares Fund and the matching contribution was done by the Company to the Fund. Being socially responsible is a basic expectation from organizations
- **Provide support in business continuity:** While we do recognize the importance of human interaction, it is essential to devise ways to facilitate collaboration and social interaction by leveraging technology and extending support to the employees at all times to ensure business continuity

Topics: Employee Engagement, #CXtoEX
