

Pandora's box in the workplace

By Auguste (Gusti) Coetzer

Hope is often regarded as a “soft” quality reserved for religious gatherings and psychologists rather than having a place in the cut and thrust of a tough business environment. But the Covid pandemic has so fundamentally changed our world that “hope” has become an essential quality that leaders must bring to their working environments.

The pandemic has created unprecedented levels of doom and gloom in all generations, social strata, cultures, industries and business. According to the World Health Organization, “the main psychological impact to date is elevated rates of stress and anxiety. As new measures and impacts are introduced – especially quarantine and its effects on many people’s usual activities, routines or livelihoods – levels of loneliness, depression, harmful alcohol and drug use, and self-harm or suicidal behaviour are also expected to rise.”

The workplace has not escaped Covid’s impact. From executives trying to keep a company going, to those facing increased health risks and high demand for their services, such as health care workers, those who have lost employment, and those left behind in the workplace who see empty seats all around them – no employee has escaped this distress.

So what can leaders do to counteract the pandemic’s impact in the workplace? One of the most powerful actions is for leadership to create hope. USA HR and coaching company, Integrated Success, said in 2019 - before the pandemic struck - that “hope is one of the top four most important things employees need at work.” If that is the case in better times, how much more important is it as we grapple with the devastating impact of a pandemic that has stripped the workforce at all levels of its belief in the future?

What is hope? Is it just some vague, nebulous feeling of goodwill? Or is it something more concrete and precisely definable?

A dictionary definition of hope is “a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen”. This, however, suggests that hope is a “feeling”. For hope to have an impact in our suffering world, not least in the workplace, it needs to have an action plan. It can’t be passive. Duke University’s Professor Sanyin Siang believes that hope is steeped in reality and action. Being a hopeful person is thus very different from being a wishful person. Hope is active!

In his book, *Making Hope Happen*, psychologist Shane Lopez clarifies the ways in which being hopeful is different from being wishful. Hopeful people, he says, share three characteristics: they imagine the future they want and set goals; they move towards achieving their goals; and they envision multiple pathways to achieve their goals. Siang adds to this the quality of curiosity that leads to innovation and initiative in a cycle of continuous learning.

Here are suggestions for “hope actions” that executives can take in these difficult times:

- Create a climate of gratitude by thanking people for their efforts. Do this in team meetings, so that everyone can hear the praise. A company recently gave two hard working staff members promotions as reward for their determined efforts over the past year, even though their new positions could not be linked to salary increments because the pandemic had made the company’s business, at best, static. The effect was to inspire the staff members to even greater benefit for the company.
- Respect people’s ideas, no matter from whom they come, and give their suggestions careful consideration. Originality creates hope, as was demonstrated when members of the English National Opera in London turned their skills in deep breathing, necessary for opera singing, into recovery classes for Covid patients who were still experiencing breathing difficulties.
- Emphasise team members’ responsibilities to each other to do their job properly and have their affairs in order. Nothing destroys hope more than having to sort out someone else’s mess. At the same time, however, avoid micromanagement. Few things strip a sense of empowerment than an employer who checks everything in minute detail.
- See problems as opportunities, and as a time to reflect, analyse and evaluate so that the team can do better next time.
- Be positive. Share positive stories, especially ones where people have overcome great difficulties to achieve success. The Facebook group, #ImStaying, is full of wonderfully

positive stories. Goodwill is abundant in the world and should be shared with your team. Watch out for disruptive personalities in your team. If they do not want to be part of a team that's building hope, ship them out.

- Be honest. If you know that there is a strong possibility that your team is not going to have their jobs in a month's time, tell them the truth. Then help them create action plans of what they can do to build hope for the future.
- Keep connected to your team. Working from home has created new opportunities to get to know your team: their children, cats and dogs, and their unique circumstances. Before you leap into the agenda for the day, ask how things are going in their family? If you see signs of distress in an employee, get back to them when the meeting is done. Encourage management to set up virtual meetings, keeping in mind the need to respect personal time.

These are tough times. They bring to mind the ancient Greek story of Pandora's box. As the first woman on earth, she is given a range of gifts to take with her. She is also presented with a large storage jar – Pandora's box - that she is warned never to open. One day, curiosity gets the better of Pandora and she lifts the lid of the jar, thereby releasing all the evils of the world, including disease, war, vice, and toil. Realising her error, Pandora quickly replaces the lid, but it is too late.

Only one thing remains inside, caught in the edge of the jar's lip: hope - so that humanity might somehow bear its sudden and eternal misfortune.

In conclusion, creating hope in the workplace is a key responsibility for all of us to create and maintain, not forgetting that even your chairperson needs tender loving care!

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