



Excerpts from an interview with

**Terryyn Sithara Palani | Executive Head: Talent and EXX,
Vodacom, South Africa**

Seven Ways to Support Performance and Maintain Engagement during COVID-19

As we ease into lockdown level 1 in South Africa and most employees start returning to the office, yet again we find ourselves faced with changes to “new” routines formed during the lockdown. The situation that we find ourselves in is indeed unprecedented – not only could we not have predicted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world, we were also largely unprepared for the economic impact across our country. What we did proactively plan for was a support plan for Vodacom’s staff & customers including supporting government with 22,000 smartphones & over a 100TB of data, creating access to online medical consultation to all South Africans via the Online Healthcare Platform in partnership with Discovery and conducting a number of pulse surveys to understand where we can best support our employees during these difficult times. These pulse surveys gave us a concrete starting point for many ground breaking initiatives being implemented from the insights the surveys provided: 12h00 – 14h00 meeting free times, “take your chair home” campaign, additional staff data allowances & parent support via webinars with Nikki Bush to mention just a few.

We don’t know how long this pandemic will be with us and it is imperative that we support our staff and management teams to maintain focus through continued uncertainty and disruption as this is critical to remaining relevant in a COVID and post COVID world.

With reference to vast bodies of research on the topic I believe that these seven key activities can create the desired support:

1. Prioritise the Culture & ensure that everyone is living the values of the Organisation

“People may not remember the things you said or even the things you may have done, but they always remember the way you made them feel”. That is more true now than ever before & ensuring that we are living the Spirit of Vodacom will ensure that when employees look back on this pandemic they will remember that they were employed by an organisation that not only prioritised their wellbeing, but that of their customers & the communities in which they operate. This is not only the right thing to do but it has huge implications for staff retention & brand equity.

2. Maintain regular catch-ups with your team and make it fun

An office is not only a place of work but also a place where most people find lifelong friendships and an opportunity to socialise with like-minded individuals. Remote working makes this a little harder to achieve but regular catch ups and virtual socials can create the feeling of connected-ness that we all need. Adding in a virtual quiz or some online partying with the countries’ best DJs and comedians doesn’t hurt either.

4. Maintain consistent 2- way communication

Consistent 2- way communication is key during these uncertain times as it creates a sense of comfort and provides the opportunity for employees to understand the company’s response as well as to ask clarifying questions. Transparent communication that takes place timeously and frequently builds trust and Vodacom staff have all experienced this through the weekly Fireside chats with our CEO. This has not only kept us informed but has also provided the opportunity to ask pertinent questions and find much needed clarity in these uncertain times.

5. Create clarity through focussed Objectives

Knowing that there is a plan and definitive objectives helps employees to channel their energies at a time when many things may seem uncertain. When managers create a clear link between an employee’s daily efforts and the company’s objectives there is also a greater sense of purpose. Having clear goals and objectives are a priority at this time.

6. Look out for signs of struggle

At every level of the organisation we should be cognisant of the adverse effects that the current situation could be causing for our staff and our colleagues, we need to be cognisant of changes in behaviour or demeanour as work performance alone is not a clear indicator. If a staff member or colleague seems to be in a difficult situation and are open to discuss it, we should exercise empathy and also share what resources are available. It is important to check in on our colleagues and staff that are single or living alone at this time as isolation is not easy to manage for anyone and can be even more challenging when in lock down alone.

7. Anticipate Secondary Effects

Now more than ever we need flexibility. When businesses and schools came to a halt there were new challenges for employees. Parents that depend on schools, ECD and day care centres have found themselves transformed into primary caregivers, school teachers and for a few months’ hairdressers too.

We need to be cognisant of these secondary effects of the pandemic and allow for modified schedules, alternative shifts or even time off. Some households may be moving from a double-income to single – income home as companies and small businesses are forced to close either temporarily or permanently and any level of emotional support, financial assistance, workplace flexibility or financial aid can be a Godsend in these situations.

I hope these insights help you channel the efforts that you have already put in place. Remember, while this is indeed a challenging time for everyone in the world today, we all have the choice to look for the opportunities in the situations in which we find ourselves & support our teams, colleagues & loved ones to find the silver lining.