

REDEFINING  
APPROACHES TO  
ENGAGEMENT  
AND LEADERSHIP:  
ADAPTING FOR THE  
NEW NORMAL

REPORT BY  
ENGAGE

# REDEFINING APPROACHES TO ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP: ADAPTING FOR THE NEW NORMAL

The outbreak of COVID-19 and resulting response has forced us to assess the future of work. In an already changing world where social and technological developments have forced a shift in focus for workplace and workforce planning, COVID-19 has shown us just how quickly and extensively organisations can adapt. Within just a few weeks, what was at first described as crisis management is now our 'new normal'. And the implications of this are far reaching: how we work, how we lead, how we manage and how we engage.

Over the past four months, ENGAGE has worked closely with clients and partners to adopt a process of

continuous learning, sharing best practice and agile insight solutions to inform iterative adjustments. At a time where there is literally no play-book to reference, the organisations we have seen excel in their response have adopted a very simple approach: informed planning and preparedness to adapt.

These organisations have listened to their people, their managers, their customers and their communities more than ever before. As a result, their choices were informed, their mistakes learned from, and they are entering the next phase – a return to the workplace – in the strongest possible position.

# WHAT THE COVID-19 CRISIS HAS TAUGHT US

The COVID-19 crisis brought to the forefront a dimension of the employee-employer dynamic that fundamentally challenges the direction things have been moving in over the past five years.

We've talked a lot in recent years about the virtues of flexible working – but the case has always been a business one. A degree of flexibility actually benefits businesses because it gives them access to a more diverse pool of talent that will typically be more productive and committed as a reaction to the agreed flexibility. Flexibility is a business tool!

COVID-19 has suddenly shifted the weight of the argument back into the hands of the employee: understand my individual circumstances and keep me safe by allowing me the flexibility to do what I need to do. And we know that where organisations have responded effectively to this, it has created a pool of goodwill amongst their people that will be essential as firms move into phase two.

In one of our client organisations, 91% of employees felt that the way the organisation had responded to the crisis had helped them balance their work and personal commitments. And the analysis of the qualitative feedback provided alongside this measure showed just how big an impact this has on an employee's willingness to go the extra mile for their company during these difficult times.

The lessons we outline are the result of extensive research and experience drawn from a number of sources, including:

- Our own research survey conducted with YouGov, focusing on attitudes and feelings about a return to the workplace
- The programmes we are undertaking with our clients, and the ways in which these have been adapted in light of the crisis
- Best practice analysis of organisations across sectors and sizes, based on our 25 years of experience in this industry
- Our #LongTermLessons campaign, highlighting the experiences and changes of our own organisation, our client businesses and the public statements and news from UK and global organisations

Another of our clients saw a 35-point increase in levels of trust in the leadership team as a result of the way this team had communicated during the early phase of the crisis.

More generally, our YouGov poll of employees (working and furloughed) showed that 63% of employees felt that the way their organisation had responded to the crisis has helped them balance their work and personal commitments.

What these combined facts, and the experiences of organisations across the UK – and indeed globally – have shown us, is that, while there is a pool of goodwill, the 'old normal' will no longer exist. However slight some of the future changes we experience will be, we need to be prepared for a 'new normal' if we're to survive, thrive and grow as we move beyond the crisis.

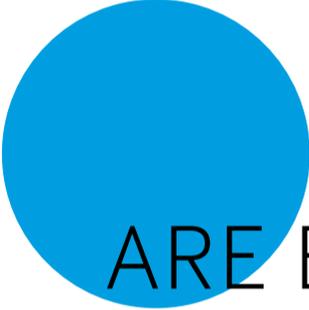
**“FLEXIBILITY IS A BUSINESS  
TOOL!”**

# PREPARING FOR A 'NEW NORMAL'



Following a series of government announcements and the gradual lifting of lockdown restrictions, most organisations are entering phase two of the crisis and planning their version of a return to the workplace. Most of the firms we are working with are approaching this as a medium- to long-term solution; many of the things we took as a given pre-COVID will not feature in this 'new normal'.

The following sections outline what we have learnt so far about how employees feel about this next phase, and identifies the key considerations for organisations planning a return to work or the workplace, however that may look.



ARE EMPLOYEES READY?

Perhaps the most fundamental of all the findings from the macro study of UK employees is that over half (55%) do not feel comfortable about returning to work. Research from firms such as McKinsey and PWC have suggested similar levels of discomfort amongst US employees.

At a very high level this presents a challenge for most organisations and the detail that sits behind this reveals an even more complex situation.

In recent report, McKinsey have suggested thinking about the risk of returning to work on a simple matrix based on:

- the proximity of exposure (how closely and how long people interact with each other in person)
- the extent of exposure (how many other people an individual tends to encounter in a typical workday)

*(McKinsey: "Reopening safely: Sample practices from essential businesses", May 2020)*

Whilst this helps plan safety measures, it doesn't take into account the personal circumstances that form individual attitudes towards returning to the workplace.

The data reveals that a much more people-centric, individual-based understanding is required. We believe the level of comfort people feel in returning to the work place is conditioned by three main factors:

**"55% DO NOT FEEL  
COMFORTABLE ABOUT  
RETURNING TO WORK"**

An **individual's** experience during lockdown: surprisingly, some of those sectors where you would imagine it might be easier to enforce a COVID-safe environment experience the highest levels of anxiety about a return to the workplace. Primarily office-based sectors, such as those in financial services or professional services, show the lowest levels of comfort.

This may be because of a lack of confidence in COVID-safe measures but it may also be because of a lack of perceived need to return. Many organisations have shown that they can move almost entirely to a work-from-home model without any disruption to productivity and service and it is possible these employees are questioning the need to go back.

Employees who have been furloughed are significantly less worried about returning to the workplace (47% uncomfortable) versus those who have been newly working from home (59%).

This finding further challenges the simple logistical assessment of the McKinsey model when we consider the types of sectors that have seen high uptake of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (for example hospitality and retail would score high on proximity and exposure).



An **individual's** personal vulnerability or commitments to others during this time: COVID requires organisations to understand their people in different ways. Many of the traditional ways of grouping people – age, gender, role and level – have been shown to have limited value when developing targeted strategies for supporting employees during the crisis and, crucially, in the longer term.

For example, just a third of those with personal vulnerabilities to COVID-19 (due to age or health) feel comfortable returning to the workplace (35% and 30% respectively).

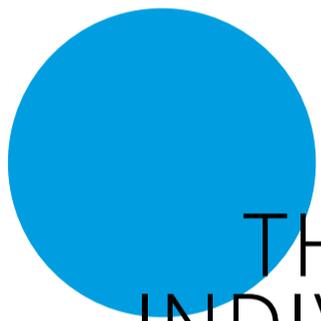
The numbers are similar for those where other members of their household are vulnerable. Personal information like this, information that employees may not have shared with their colleagues in the past, is now something that all organisations will have to take into account when planning a return to the workplace.

An **individual's** confidence in a COVID-safe environment: the YouGov data also sheds light on what concerns employees most about the physical practicalities of returning to the workplace and how employers might be able to tackle those fears.

The biggest concern amongst UK employees is how social distancing is likely to be implemented (mentioned by 51% in their top three concerns). Worries about issues such as how communal spaces at work will be managed are uppermost on employees' minds. They are also concerned about the basic, practical logistics and safety of returning to the workplace. For example, the use of toilet / washing facilities was a top 3 concern for 37% of employees and moving around the building in which they work (e.g. reception, lifts and staircases) concerns 30%. One in four employees name their commute or journey to work as a source of concern (24%). This is twice as high for employees in London where 50% select it in their top three concerns. In a recent return-to-workplace survey ENGAGE conducted for one of its clients, the number of employees in their London office expecting to use public transport to travel to work dropped by half. The result: this organisation needs to plan for nearly four times as many employees turning up to work on foot or a bicycle.

Organisations have been provided with a lot of guidance about how to ensure a safe return to the workplace and many of the recommended practical initiatives are received positively by employees in terms of the impact they think they will have: nearly half of those surveyed suggested simply providing hand sanitiser and soap would help in creating a safer environment (46%) and a similar number opted in favour of increased cleaning (41%). Fewer employees opted for more substantial PPE: only 18% favour compulsory face masks (though this favoured by 37% of younger employees), just 12% mentioned putting up screens.

More challenging for organisations will be the structural and operational changes they need to make to ensure a COVID-safe environment. Enforcing social distancing in the workplace is going to be key; four in ten (39%) employees select this as key to creating safe environment. Similar numbers favour limiting the number of people coming in the workplace; either by: restricting access to only those that cannot effectively work elsewhere (37%) or by introducing rotas to allow people to take turns in coming into the workplace (35%). Younger employees are less keen to see fewer employees in the workplace.



# THE NEED FOR AN INDIVIDUAL APPROACH

# THE NEED FOR AN INDIVIDUAL APPROACH

What our research highlights is the extent to which the question of returning to the workplace is based on the individual. An employee's preference, concerns, options and expectations will be driven entirely by their own personal circumstances.

**This calls for a much more sophisticated way of understanding and segmenting employees.**

Employers need to listen to and consult with their people to create a future workplace that is both safe and productive. This will demand individual-level responses: there is not going to be a "one-size-fits-all" solution. Organisations will need to be more flexible, segmented and creative in how they tackle workforce planning moving forward. Simply put, there will need to be multiple versions of the 'new normal'.

For employees, their attitudes towards a return to the workplace will be a risk analysis; a cost-benefit assessment. What do I gain by returning to the workplace; professionally and personally? What are the risks to me and those around me? What is the trade-off I make as a result?

For organisations, there is a new dynamic at play: they need to create a purpose for those buildings we all used to just think of as work. In this 'new normal', firms need to view work as a thing we do, not a place we go. Most of the clients we talk to agree that there is, and probably always will be, a role for the physical workplace. But what this purpose is will depend very much on the operational and, more importantly, cultural benefits of work onsite.

So what might this purpose be? What does the data tell us?

**“SIMPLY PUT, THERE WILL NEED TO BE MULTIPLE VERSIONS OF THE 'NEW NORMAL'.”**

# THE NEW FUTURE REALITY

On many aspects of working life, a majority of employees believe there will be no real difference from a return to the workplace versus working from home. For example: 61% feel there would be no change to whether they have access to the information they need; 59% believe there would be no change to the communications they get from leaders within their organisation and 58% feel there would be no change in the communication they have with their manager.

The biggest likely anticipated improvements are in teamwork and collaboration (42% believe this will improve a lot or a little), the customer service provided by their organisation (37% improvement) and innovation in their organisation (37% improvement). In this sense, it is perhaps the need for employees to see their organisations living the values of peer-to-peer support, customer centricity and creativity that they are missing.

But what is the reality of this 'new normal'? If collaboration and innovation are the key benefits of returning, how will these stand-up if colleagues are actually kept apart, even working separate shifts, or confined to employee 'bubbles'? Organisations need to rethink their values and behaviours to ensure they support these traditionally in-person activities in our new reality.

Employees also believe there will be a net worsening of other critical aspects of work life by returning to the workplace: 42% anticipate a worsening of their work-life balance (only 23% believe it will improve).

And on some issues, employees are split, which further supports the need to segment the response:

- 33% felt that mental health would be worse following a return to the workplace but 26% believe it will improve
- Similarly, 28% believe their physical health would be worse whilst 27% believe it will be better
- A quarter (25%) would have more confidence in the security of their jobs moving forward but 21% would have less

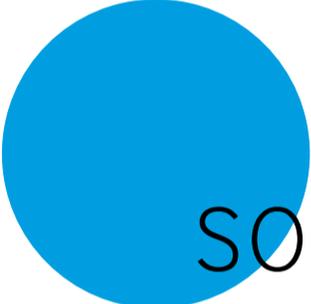
Through the crisis, we have learnt that being physically located at work isn't as essential for most as we assumed it was. Organisations need to align their return strategies with the real benefits it will bring at an organisational, team and individual level rather than just returning to previous ways of doing things.

**We believe there are now two elements to this:**

**1. The extent to which individuals and organisations can operate effectively:** this is about whether individual employees can personally contribute and whether the organisation can sustain the culture it needs to deliver on its strategic goals. The purpose of a return to the workplace will be to address the challenges of working remotely (or not working at all) in terms of productivity and personal contribution, the delivery of products and services to customers and the culture of the organisation that will support its survival on entering phase two and beyond

**2. The extent to which individuals and the organisation collectively have a sense of wellbeing and safety:** the purpose of a return to the workplace will address those aspects of personal and professional life that are suffering because of the distance some feel from their colleagues and customers. At the same time, a return mustn't see the re-introduction of some of those elements of the 'old normal' that employees have enjoyed working without.

**What we can be absolutely sure of is that any approach will need to be tailored, flexible and creative – at an entirely individual level. And this has far reaching consequences for the way we understand engagement in the 'new normal'.**

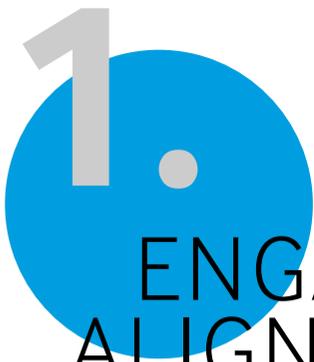


## SO WHAT NEXT?

As many organisations move out of a crisis and survival mode and into a steadier state, the key challenge will be to re-engage leaders, managers and employees with...engagement. But what we have learnt throughout all of this is that this notion of engagement needs revisiting in light of what we now think of as the 'new normal'.

At ENGAGE we don't just talk about engagement; we talk about **strategic engagement**. This is much more than a set of statements in an employee survey. This is much more than a number. This is an integral part of any business strategy and one of the key determinants of organisational performance.

**Our Blueprint for Strategic Engagement** provides a simple framework (consisting of six elements) against which to assess what engagement needs to look like in this 'new normal'.



# ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY IS FULLY ALIGNED WITH THE ORGANISATION'S VISION, STRATEGY AND VALUES...

*Everything is tailored to what the organisation is trying to achieve. A bespoke definition of engagement reflects the specific factors that employees need to be engaged with in order to play their part in helping the organisation succeed. A clear engagement strategy delivers key business outcomes as well as people outcomes. We call this ENGAGENOMICS.*

ENGAGE always encourages clients to think of engagement in terms of the role your people play in your success. This requires us to think in terms of what and why:

- **What** do we want employees to be engaged with: engagement is more than a pure-play HR tool focused on things such as pride, advocacy, loyalty, satisfaction. Strategic engagement is a much broader concept where employees are engaged with an organisations' customers and stakeholders, purpose and strategy as well their personal connection to the organisation as an employer.
- **Why** do we want employees to be engaged: we know that when engagement is understood in a more strategic way, the outcomes are more strategic: the people outcomes are around talent and productivity; the customer outcomes are aligned with experience, retention and advocacy; financial outcomes are demonstrable in terms of revenue, profit and growth.

**“A CLEAR ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY DELIVERS KEY BUSINESS OUTCOMES AS WELL AS PEOPLE OUTCOMES”**

## COVID forces us to revisit this model:

1. There may be new outcomes we need to consider: employee and customer wellbeing and safety, employee contribution may be defined in a new way, organisations may need to be looking for new kinds of talent in the 'new normal', the customer may be looking for a new type of experience. In terms of business performance, financial wellbeing may be looked at in a different way post-COVID.
2. Strategic engagement must balance what organisations need employees to be engaged with and what employees need from their organisations. The reintroduction of some of the basic needs around health, safety and wellbeing creates more of a two-way relationship between employees and their organisations. Employees need to be both engaged and safe to perform in this 'new normal'.
3. In turn, the drivers of engagement may be different: as discussed, leadership and management will look different moving forward, with more balance between organisational performance and day-to-day support; the purpose, strategy and culture of any organisation will have to adapt to new macro and micro priorities and individual ways of working; flexibility and agility will become paramount in how employees are enabled to contribute.





## ORGANISATIONAL VALUES CREATE A CULTURE THAT UNDERPINS THE STRATEGIC GOALS...

*Values and behaviours are meaningful and relevant to the organisation; they reflect a culture that underpins the vision and strategy of the organisation. They are role-modelled at every level. Values-led assessments of leader, manager and employee behaviours helps organisations target their interventions on the cultural attributes that need improving in order to support organisational performance.*

Organisations need to look at how they can now support a culture that helps drive performance under the new ways of working. Are the values and behaviours that underpin this culture embedded strongly enough to hold up under a mixed model of remote and face-to-face working? Are they still fit-for-purpose, internally and externally? Are leaders and managers still able to role-model these behaviours in a virtual world? Do your values still guide decision-making?

What can be learnt from what was achieved during the early stages of the crisis that should be now form a central part of the organisation's culture?

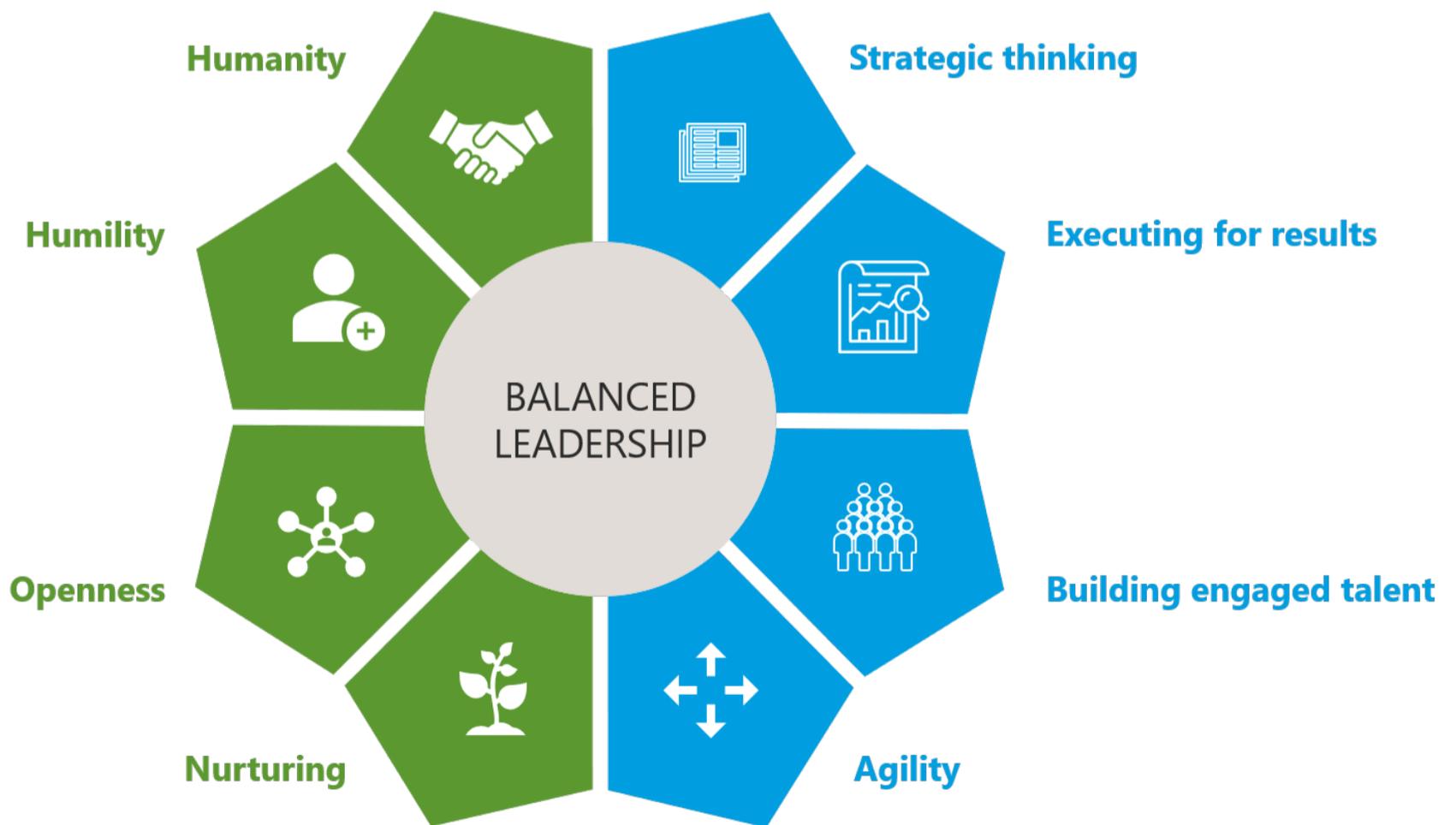
3.

# ENGAGED LEADERS EFFECTIVELY CONNECT EMPLOYEES WITH THE VISION AND STRATEGY...

*There is a clearly defined vision and strategy. Leaders themselves are fully engaged with this and also understand their role in delivering it. They understand how to communicate and connect employees with this so that people at every level are engaged to play their part.*

ENGAGE believes that traditional leadership frameworks – typically very much based around big picture thinking, results focus, building high-potential, inspiration and innovation – must be revisited under this ‘new normal’.

The introduction of a more human side to leadership will be essential if leaders are to bring their people with them in such uncertain and testing times. Leaders need to be able to make mistakes and change direction while maintaining trust and confidence, and it is the introduction of elements such as humanity, humility, openness and listening that will create a more balanced approach to leadership in this new world.



4.

## ENGAGED MANAGERS DRIVE IMPACTFUL CHANGE AT A LOCAL LEVEL...

*People managers translate and localise the vision and strategy for their teams. They are held accountable for driving change and encouraged to feed upwards on issues that reside with leaders. They bring the values and behaviours to life for the people they manage, embedding them as tools for performance assessment and recognition.*

Managers suddenly find themselves with a dual-role at work: they continue to be the channel through which the big picture strategy is localised for their teams, but they are also now the main point of contact for employees trying to navigate this new way of working.

Now more than ever, organisations need to be clear about exactly what managers are accountable for in terms of engagement, and they also need to ensure they are equipped to deliver. Managers need to be given the tools to identify the specific employee segments within their teams and empowered to respond to the needs of these individuals with flexibility and discretion.

Managers themselves must be engaged, demonstrating both alignment with the organisational goals and confidence in the immediate and longer-term COVID response.

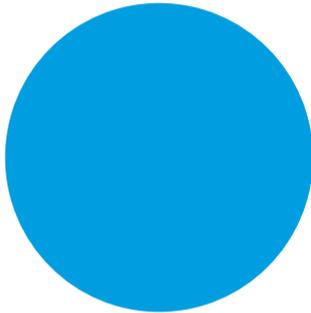
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## A RESEARCH-LED APPROACH SUPPORTS DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING...

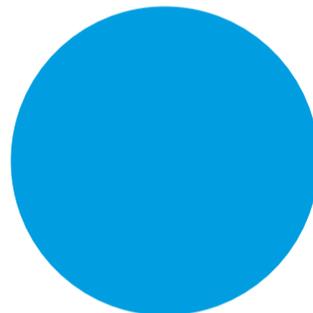
*Decisions are based on evidence. Strategy is continuously informed by feedback. The organisation listens effectively to all its key stakeholder groups. It integrates this feedback in a way that highlights how the experience of leaders, managers and employees impact each other, customers and organisational performance.*

*Analysis is outcome-focused so action is directed in the right way.*

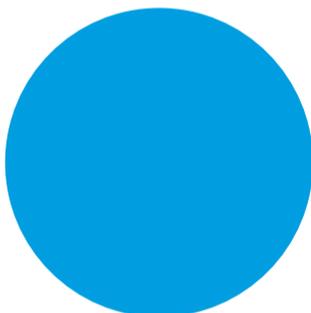
At a time when organisations are having to plan, implement and rethink in almost real-time, effective listening and insight has never been more critical. ENGAGE believes that employee measurement in the 'new normal' needs to deliver in four ways:



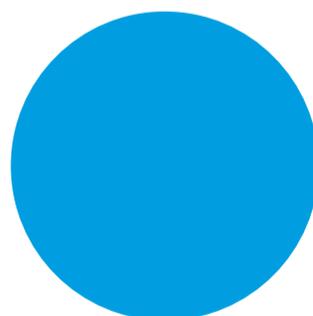
**Agility and customisation:** measuring what is relevant to your organisation, collecting feedback when you need it and making adjustments as things change



**Delivering insight for immediate and longer-term decision-making:** guiding action planning around immediate well-being and work effectiveness priorities as well as longer-term engagement with the business priorities



**Full integration:** a continuous and holistic measure of the employee experience to identify the impact of each experience on all other aspects and support an iterative approach to strategy and action planning



**Smarter employee segmentation:** to aid understanding of your employees in a new way. What defines them and the way they act and feel? What is common? What is unique? How do you identify employee groups within a team? How should we tailor strategies to their different needs?

6.

## TECHNOLOGY IS USED AS AN ENABLER OF EFFECTIVE STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT...

*Solutions are flexible to support tailored, relevant and timely insight. Complex data is simplified and minimised. Insight supports action. Analysis drives prioritisation.*

Key to delivering a tailored response to the crisis has, and will continue to be, the ability to collect relevant insight in terms of content and timeliness. The real-time translation of quantitative and qualitative data into action-focused insight through predictive analytics will allow organisations to plan, test, iterate and track progress as they navigate through the coming months. Continuous listening is made effective by the introduction of continuous analytics which tells us what we need to listen to and when.

# CONCLUSIONS: THE ACTIONS YOU NEED TO TAKE TO RE-SET FOR THE FUTURE

So, given all the data, client experience and best practice we've outlined, what practical conclusions can organisations draw? We believe there are four main areas of focus:

## 1. Organisations need to tackle the immediate challenges around the return to the workplace head-on:

- Out with the old, in with the new. To engage people with a return to the workplace, we can't rely on past approaches. Expecting employees to just turn up mechanically to the office, factory or store etc. each day at the same times won't work. Companies will need to provide a purpose for the return to the workplace. Why are we coming back into the workplace; what will we do there that requires our presence? Firms will need to make this clear to their people.
- One size will not fit all. Companies are going to need to segment their approach to returning. Leaders and managers will need to understand the individual circumstances, preferences and fears of their people around return to the workplace issues to create a segmented plan. Only then will we get employees back in the workplace feeling safe, focused and productive.

## 2. Effective leadership needs redefining

Old models will no longer apply. Leadership is no longer just about business focus. It needs to be balanced with a human focus too. Traits such as humanity, humility, listening and transparency will be hugely more important now. Leadership models will need to be adapted to reflect this. Expected behaviours will need refreshing. The factors on which we select leaders, promote them and reward them will need to shift.

## 3. Engagement itself will need redefining

A new approach is required. Engagement with you as an employer,. With your customers and with your business strategy will remain vital. But reassurance of employees around their health, their safety and their wellbeing will become equally important. How you define, measure and act upon engagement and the outcomes you drive from it will all need modifying.

## 4. Organisational measurement approaches will need reimagining

Old-world approaches are no longer fit for purpose. The way we measure what our people think, and feel, will need to be way more agile. Measurement will need to be more frequent and analysis way more segmented. And only through this agility will firms be able to iterate and tweak their response to the pandemic as it unfolds (and to the new future that follows) effectively.

**“OUT WITH THE OLD AND IN WITH THE NEW”**

To find out more,  
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