

# Out of sight, not out of mind

The importance of line management in the virtual world

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# Presentation Outline

- Introduction to the topic
- Teleworking and the Covid-19 pandemic
- The importance of line management in the virtual world
- What line managers can do to improve wellbeing virtually
- What HR can do to support line managers
- Final conclusions



“The Covid-19 crisis is the ultimate test of management and leadership – a sudden, dramatic, life-threatening upheaval, where the outcomes are uncertain. In this extraordinarily difficult time, the value of great management and leadership is being demonstrated every day...Poor decision making during this period will not be quickly forgotten.”

(Chartered Management Institute, 2020)

- The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted for many organisations, in a significant and rapid shift in both when and how work is done.
- How well these changes were managed could have had an impact for both employee wellbeing and organisational productivity.
- As line managers are already ‘the squeezed middle’, it is important to understand how hybrid work can be best managed going forward.

# Teleworking and Covid-19

- As a result of the Covid-19 lockdown the number of adults regularly working from home rose dramatically.
- At that point there was limited volition in the decision to work from home, but now, many employees have greater choice over when and how they work.
- Introducing hybrid work can lead to a number of benefits including: recruitment and retention, employee flexibility, diversification of the workforce (among others).
- However, risks to teleworking have also been identified: social isolation, home-work conflicts, skill-requirements...

# Line management in the virtual world

- The shift to teleworking at the beginning of the pandemic had an impact for employee wellbeing.
- But changes in the impact for line management wellbeing was also reported.
- Line managers had to learn to adjust to alternative cues and methods to monitor employee wellbeing when teleworking adding an extra layer of responsibility to an already multi-faceted role.
- So what skills should line managers have?

# Line management in the virtual world

- Could emotional intelligence help managers performance?
- ‘The ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought and understand and reason with emotion and regulate emotion in self and others’ (Meyer et al., 2004)
- A managers emotional intelligence can play an important role in the effectiveness and quality of social interactions – and so having managers with emotional intelligence seems more important now than ever.
- Recognising that employees may be having different experiences and stresses when teleworking is beneficial for both employee wellbeing and implementing relevant adjustments.



‘At a time of crisis, leaders and their organisations will be judged on their ability to navigate challenging circumstances in a responsible way – that means, not just triaging their organisations but looking at how they do so; how they decide to ‘share the pain’ between staff, shareholders, suppliers and others, and how they make people feel as they do so.’

(Chartered Management Institute, 2020)

# What line managers can do to support wellbeing virtually

- Line managers can use a number of strategies to support those who they manager virtually:
  - **COMMUNICATION:** Regular contact to maintain a positive employment relationship
  - **LISTENING:** An often under-rated part of communication – listen to what people are saying...but also what they may not be saying.
  - **TRUST:** Has to work both ways for virtual management to be effective.
  - **UNDERSTAND CURRENT CIRCUMSTANCES:** Employees have been differentially affected by the pandemic, so line managers should be aware of any home-working circumstances that could have an impact on staff wellbeing

# What line managers can do to support wellbeing virtually

- **ESTABLISHING CLEAR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:** This will help clarify roles and tasks to allow for effective performance and development conversations.
- **FEEDBACK:** Helps employees understand how well they are doing and provide recognition for staff.
- **PHYSICAL WORKING CONDITIONS:** Have home-working set-ups been considered? Have workplace assessments been undertaken?
- **MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS:** Line managers are in the best place to spot any behaviour changes and should be ready to signpost to any wellbeing interventions...

BUT a line manager's mental health should also be monitored.



‘On a day to day basis, it’s typically line managers who are at the forefront of managing the complex range of organisational factors affecting people’s wellbeing at work...but this expectation is not always matched by adequate investment in their skills and capabilities. Too few employers provide an effective framework to ensure that managers can play the positive role that’s needed to support wellbeing.’

(CIPD, 2020)

# What HR can do to support line managers

- It is clear that line managers are important, but may not have all the necessary resources to be fully effective. So what should HR be doing?
  - **TRAINING:** If teleworking is to become more common-place then line managers must be trained, or up-skilled to make them more effective. More needs to be done to support managers discuss mental health and wellbeing confidently. BUT, organisations and HR should not fall into the 'training trap'.
  - **CLARIFY LINE MANAGER EXPECTATIONS:** Is a line manager's bandwidth being strained by rising and often conflicting demands? Is it time to consider what the important elements of the line manager's role *should* be.
  - **WELLBEING CULTURE:** Do organisational policies and practices promote a positive wellbeing culture? Are proactive approaches to wellbeing adopted? Is an 'always on' culture the 'norm'?

# Final Conclusions

- It seems that teleworking and hybrid working are becoming more common-place. How long this will continue for is unknown, and perhaps too early to say, but in the meantime there are key actions that line managers and HR can undertake to ensure that out of sight does not mean out of mind:
  - Consider the emotional intelligence of line managers.
  - Make wellbeing a core organisational priority – and remember this includes line manager wellbeing.
  - Ensure that changes in work patterns do not have negative implications for employee wellbeing.
  - Line managers to be aware of employee needs.
  - Strong communication channels

**Thank you!**

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