STRESSING THE SYSTEM

The Challenges of COVID-19

Lynne Peyton

Lynne Peyton Consultancy has been supporting senior managers in children's services and mental health services to get better outcomes, both in statutory and not-for-profit sectors, for almost 20 years. Formerly a senior manager in health and social services herself, she retrained in NLP, neuroscience, business development and personality profiling so that those planning, commissioning and delivering services to the most vulnerable in our society have access to different ways of thinking.

Her CORE multi-level, leadership programme supports organisations in coping with constant change management by improving leaders' Communication, Optimisation, Relationships and Evaluation skills. In this feature article, Lynne reflects on her experience of hundreds of hours coaching senior managers and mentoring teams throughout the current pandemic.

The context

The challenges for modern leaders in all types of organisations have never been greater. Before the pandemic, concerns about workplace stress, high absenteeism, challenges in achieving work-life balance along with worries about employee retention were commonplace in many public sector, not-for-profit and private agencies. Response to the pandemic, which forced almost everyone to work from home initially and more recently has required adaptation to different working practices, has had overt as well as many unforeseen and still largely unacknowledged consequences. While there is growing evidence of the impact of remote working on employees' mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing, agency responses have been varied.

This article sets out a formula for optimising staff wellbeing, team performance and results while responding to the changing societal context and changing industry demands. These are ongoing factors for all companies and have been accentuated in the present circumstances.

The formula may be summarised as: Skill Set/Systems + Mindset + Team Purpose/Identity + Action = Success

Skill Set

Prior to March 2020, while most organisations across industry sectors were becoming more comfortable with online working and paperless methodology, the importance of face-to-face meetings and direct contact was well recognised, especially for more challenging discussions and negotiations. It was never imagined that direct contact with others within and outside organisations would be

suddenly halted and that months later, staff would still be working on rota schemes to reduce occupancy in office buildings, wearing masks in the corridors and be restricted in the numbers who could attend meetings and training sessions.

As a response to COVID-19, better ICT systems have been developed, platforms upgraded, and managers have learned news skills in hosting meetings on Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Yet the challenge for many organisations is that remote working has left many staff, particularly new employees, without appropriate induction, basic training and informal mentoring, with the result that they are poorly equipped to understand and perform their basic job requirements. Sometimes more senior and experienced staff may be working from home and, because of perceived inaccessibility, their advice and guidance are not readily sought.

Systems

Many major organisations do not have appropriate, responsive systems and standard operating procedures (SOPs) in place to deal with everyday tasks. Where these do exist, often they have not been routinely implemented, resulting in a cohort of staff who feel overwhelmed because they are unable to keep up with everyday demands. They describe the pace as 'relentless' and talk about the 'disconnect' with managers whom they consider to be out of touch with the nature and demands of the work. Often there is an element of truth in this perception. However, this may be less to do with the volume of work – and more to do with the lack of effective operating systems to manage it effectively.

Change management expert Hugh Hilton advises, regardless of what

business we are in, we have to keep asking three essential questions: How can it be done better? How can it be done faster? How can it be done more efficiently? All without compromising on quality. An essential strategy for first-line managers to mitigate overwhelm is to set clear expectations of their direct reports, including supporting them in the application of tried and tested systems for everyday practice. This should include timelines for each task and alerts to indicate problems when either quality or timeliness is at issue.

Mindset

Coping effectively with remote working requires much more than just new skills, it needs new mental and emotional strategies. Managers and staff need to develop strong resilient mindsets to deal with working more independently and addressing new challenges such as the lack of boundaries around work and home life, as well as isolation from peers and sense of loss at not having regular physical contact with their team. This has been a significant issue for people of all ages and is exacerbated for those who are shielding or caring for vulnerable family members.

CEOs and senior managers need to recognise that, while some people have adapted seamlessly to remote working and many cite the savings in time and money of not commuting, others have not found this an easy transition. This includes young people in house shares working from their bedroom, mums working at the kitchen table and others who live alone with lots of space but limited company. In a recent exit interview, a relatively new employee described feeling completely at sea because of the lack of induction, no opportunities for informal checking in and being unable to ask someone at the next desk for advice rather than having

to phone or email their supervisor. Another common complaint at all level of organisations is the volume of emails and challenges in prioritising which to attend to first.

Suicide prevention agencies have reported huge increases in calls from people in despair linked to the pandemic, including uncertainty about the future, loneliness and isolation. According to the Samaritans, there is no doubt that the pandemic is having an adverse impact on national health and wellbeing. So, what can senior management do to support staff?

While standard generic and professional education processes teach many of the skills to accomplish whatever line of business we are in, they often pay little emphasis to the need for a strong mindset – one that is characterised by determination, problem-solving, self-sufficiency, thinking outside the box and a capacity to engage and influence other people. These basic leadership skills need to be promoted at all levels of organisations. Encouraging managers to coach rather than direct their staff is empowering and pays huge dividends in developing the mindset of personal responsibility.

Emotional intelligence and resilience can be acquired if time is devoted to facilitating appropriate conversations. Working with managers at all levels to strengthen their mindset and empower staff produces significant results. The most commonly reported benefits have included increased confidence, greater role clarity, better focus on priorities and outcomes, improved governance and overall, more productive communication, including active listening. Significantly, by listening to understand employee issues, managers have increased their awareness of the small things that help

individuals feel recognised and valued, leading to improved job satisfaction and performance, which is even more important in current times.

Team Purpose and Identity

More remote working arrangements have created increased awareness of the importance of being part of and having the support of a functioning team. Teams are essential to everyday service delivery, regardless of what business we are in. We all work in multiple teams, some of which are ongoing and others which are project-specific, some are internal to the organisation, while others are multi-disciplinary or multi-agency. Regardless of the nature and purpose of the team, it is everyone's responsibility to play their part in ensuring the team delivers its outcomes in a way that maximises and is respectful of each participant's contribution.

When teams are dispersed as at present, it is essential to ensure a range of formal and informal mechanisms for two-way communication, recognising the preferred communication style for people on the team and reaching out to them in their preferred style.

Here are just 4 simple ways to improve teamwork.

1. **Stay on purpose**
In the words of Simon Sinek, first, know your why. Teams are effective when they share a common purpose – while this is often expressed in the vision statement of the organisation, it has to be translated into meaningful goals and outcomes for specific teams. Members must sign up to the purpose of the team and identify how they can add value.

2. **Respect the individuality, talents, skills and gifts of every person on the team.**
Understand their personality type,

what motivates them and allocate people to projects and services to which they are most aligned. Ensure when allocating tasks that people have the talents, attitude, skills, knowledge and style to achieve these tasks. Too often we concentrate on skills and knowledge – when sometimes it takes the right attitude and style to get the desired result. Teams should undergo personality profiling such as DISC or BANKCODE to assist with understanding their own and each other's natural way of thinking and behaving.

3. **Communicate openly and with respect.**
Team meetings are essential to effective communication and need to be regular, short, have an agenda and be well organised. Team meetings must be engaging and interactive. Ensure you listen more than you talk, acknowledge the value of others' opinions, and encourage participation in decision making. Daily or twice weekly informal check-ins for 10 minutes are a great way to promote team unity. Buddy systems and mentoring arrangements all help to reduce isolation and check-in arrangements at the end of each day are particularly important when staff are out in the field, in potentially risky circumstances.

4. **Recognise and celebrate successes at both individual and team level – all the time!**
Start every team meeting with a roundup of the 'wins' at an individual and team level. What has gone well in the previous week/month since the last team meeting? Help people to see the benefits of achieving that particular win, for the team, the organisation, the people they serve and especially themselves. Ensure newsletters celebrate the achievements of each team.