



Seeing Beyond COVID-19: A New Vision of Fair and Equitable Performance Management

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Within a matter of days following the nationwide shut-down of normal business operations in the wake of COVID-19, most organizations' carefully designed success metrics had become irrelevant or inapplicable, upending longstanding performance evaluation practices across sectors. As a professor, I've seen these radical changes affect nearly every aspect of routine evaluation and development practices. The age-old reliance on grade point average was suspended for students, professors,

college admissions teams and future employers. Colleges and universities switched from letter grades and forced curves to credit/no credit designations on spring 2020 transcripts. Standardized testing for K12 students and college admissions was suspended, leaving school districts to reprioritize learning outcomes and benchmarks for demonstrating basic competencies, and admissions committees searching for other indicators of academic potential. These decisions would have been dismissed out of hand just a few months prior, based on the argument that these longstanding indicators were the only fair and equitable ways to evaluate performance.

For this Perspectives column, we wanted to glean an inside view on how senior leaders are re-envisioning fair and equitable talent management practices. Employees have been tasked with new assignments to respond to the pan-

dem, like reconfiguring their learning and development portfolios and events onto online platforms, reassessing their sales targets based on market changes, and developing new software to track workflows in remote teams, on top of their regular job responsibilities. All the while, they have been dealing with the health and economic challenges imposed upon their family and community members.

The three commentaries below raise critical questions and offer viable pathways forward to assess, reward and reinforce the competencies that will be necessary to navigate through and thrive beyond COVID-19. Our contributors represent three of the hardest hit sectors: health care, education and travel, and despite the disruptions, these sectors provide an inspiring view of how our post-pandemic performance management practices may be more fair and equitable than ever before.

People + Strategy posed a question to practitioners and researchers. Here are their responses to:

“What are the challenges to fair and equitable performance management in the aftermath of COVID-19?”

Integrating New Practices for the Long Term

Dani Monroe is Vice President, Chief Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer, at Mass General Brigham.



“You never want a serious crisis to go to waste.” The concept had been around before Rahm Emanuel, chief of staff to newly elected President Barack Obama, made it famous in 2008. What’s often forgotten is the rest of the quote: “And what I mean by that [is] it’s an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before.”

COVID-19 certainly poses a serious crisis. And a serious opportunity to change how we see and interact with one another as we ramp up to whatever the new/next normal may be.

I work at Mass General Brigham (MGB) in Massachusetts, the largest health care organization in the state with 78,000 employees. We are on the front lines of the pandemic, constantly reconfiguring our 15 institutions to make them more responsive to the needs of our patients, employees and the communities we serve.

At the same time, we are reimagining health care and how to deliver it faster and more responsively. We have no other choice. The urgency of now has spurred our innovation and creativity.

New systems are being developed as old ones crumble under the reality of this new normal. Projects that would have taken years to develop are being produced in weeks. It took only one weekend to design a tool to track the demographics of all COVID-19 patients in our system and identify community hot spots.

The urgency of now is also demolishing egos, mitigating politics and eroding territorial concerns, replacing them with collaborative communication and inclusive decision-making. It’s an urgency driving leaders and front-line staff and clinical, administrative and service employees.

Action Trumps Everything

Everyone is in the zone, operating at

peak performance, using every skill available to succeed. Senses are so amplified it’s as if we’re moving in slow motion, and yet performing at 150 percent efficiency 24/7 in completing unfamiliar tasks. How else is it possible to stand up a 1,000-patient field hospital in six days? Lives are literally on the line.

People are heeding this call to action with a purpose—a passion to heal the world. If we were unaware of why purpose drives action prior to the pandemic, I can’t imagine that will be the case after.

Here’s where the opportunity side of the equation comes in. As Chief Diversity Officer, I am acutely aware that while this virus does not discriminate, it is exposing the glaring inequities for nonexempt employees who are financially more vulnerable during the pandemic. How many people would have considered grocery store clerks, transit workers or environmental service workers essential in January of this year? Yet through the end of winter and the start of spring, they kept our society from total collapse. Will they be seen in the same light a year from now?

This experience is also illuminating health care inequities that affect underserved, diverse communities that display higher levels of the underlying conditions that allow COVID-19 to wreak havoc.

For HR professionals and leaders, the big challenge will be seizing the moment and the opportunities presented by the pandemic. How can we institutionalize and integrate all the new behaviors, structures and mindsets into daily practices post-COVID-19?

This is how HR and I will partner to ensure equity is applied to new organization practices:

Document the new assignments and skills that colleagues have used to create the impossible. Once the crisis is in maintenance mode, reassign colleagues to work that is more representative of the full talent we can now see through a different lens. MGB created a multi-cultural language registry to harness our workforce’s language skills. Know-



ing their language capability provided greater flexibility in meeting the needs of patients and staff.

Make communication inclusive.

Communication is one of the greatest tools of overcoming a crisis. Yet, we inadvertently forget that not all access to communication is equal. At MGB, we created a texting program to reach colleagues in vulnerable assignments. Many of them do not have a computer and English may not be their first language. These groups miss critical information every day and depend on what their colleagues know to defend against COVID-19.

Deliberately shape our collective future. It’s easy to revert to our old isolating behaviors after a crisis. This time, we need to keep equity issues in the forefront as we reimagine our organizations. Make sure there is diversity on strategic committees to influence the shape of the new tomorrow, and include equity as a criterion for success so it gets baked into new solutions and behaviors.

Human beings have a propensity to avoid change. Do not let this occur in your organization. Validate and reinforce the new reality. It is up to us to help keep moving forward, not backwards to systems that did not serve us well in the past.

We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to reinvent and improve our organizations. Let’s not waste it!

Challenges to Fair and Equitable Performance Management

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My college honors thesis advisor gave me feedback that has forever stuck with me: “You are uncomfortable with ambiguity,” she said. “To succeed in your career, you will have to learn how to thrive even when you don’t have clear direction.” This was sage advice to my 20-year-old self. The COVID-19 pandemic now requires all workers and companies to demonstrate their ability to thrive in the midst of uncertainty. With most people working remotely, organizations and employers have to account for an added layer of ambiguity as they rethink what effective performance management looks like in 2020.

Performance management’s evolution over the last decade has included a major shift away from the standard annual review process and towards more frequent feedback, opportunities to change course and more employee participation. In the light of COVID-19 there will likely be another major shift. With the need to move most organizations to work from home (WFH) almost overnight, companies are confronting the challenge of evaluating performance in a fully virtual world. The key to doing so effectively and fairly will be for companies to take into account myriad new challenges facing employees.

Definitions of ‘Performance’

Many companies have long resisted remote work environments, based on claims that facetime in the workplace contributes to better oversight and thus higher performance. There were always underlying flaws in this logic. Office facetime is often more of an impression management technique than a

true accounting for hours worked or productivity. Most managers do not know what their employees are doing on an hourly basis even if they are in the office, and those who do are likely hurting their employees’ performance by micromanaging.¹

Now that workers do not need to commute into the office, managers may impose expectations that employees work beyond their normal hours. In a pre-COVID-19 WFH experiment, call-center employees who were randomly assigned to a WFH condition for nine months demonstrated a 13 percent performance increase.² While this may at first seem a positive, the largest contributing factor to that increase was workers taking fewer breaks and sick days.³ Is that a fair and sustainable measure of performance?

Time and Attention Reality

Workers with children at home who now require homeschooling or other caregiving responsibilities, which were previously segmented during an employee’s workday, must now be a consideration in the ability for workers to perform at their best. This aspect of COVID-19 might exacerbate gender and racial disparities that already exist in the workplace. For example, in academia the data suggest COVID-19 has already decreased female professors’ productivity, as measured by fewer journal submissions of research manuscripts compared to male professors.³ Another set of obstacles are likely present for employees of color, whose communities have been disproportionately impacted by the health and economic challenges of COVID-19.

Performance management for 2020 must account for the realities of uncontrolled work environments where everything from ergonomics to doubling as homeschool teachers to overwork may impact an employee’s productivity. Those are new factors in most organizations.

Mental Health Impacts

A 2020 study of global workers by Qualtrics reports two out of five employees said their mental health has declined since the COVID-19 outbreak.⁴ Organizations that claim to value the health and wellness of their employees would be remiss not to consider the impact of social isolation and concerns about the virus’s impact on employee productivity.

The Call to Action

The workplace may never be the same as it was pre-COVID-19. For performance management, fairness and equity will be a challenge under these circumstances, and organizations must address that challenge head-on. Ideally, innovation that improves fairness and equity under these most trying of circumstances will take permanent root. Companies that meet the needs of their workforce today, drive high performance and prepare for the future of work in a very uncertain world will have developed an important advantage: navigating ambiguity at enterprise scale.

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Leading with HumanKindness

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As a senior leader at a global travel technology company, the business impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been swift and unforgiving. Our Asia-Pacific team first flagged the potential impact of the virus on the regional travel market. At the time, few of us imagined that just a few weeks later a pandemic would bring the global travel industry to a grinding halt.

Like many organizations, in early February, our team wrapped up our 2019 performance review conversations. During calibration sessions, there was a robust discussion about the relative importance of the competencies (i.e., results orientation) used to evaluate individual performance, separate and distinct from corporate performance. With a global pandemic now at our doorstep, I have observed the need for myself and other leaders to demonstrate a critical competency that is often missing from the typical performance assessment toolkit, something I call HumanKindness.

Leading with HumanKindness is about being brave enough to be human at work and kind enough to allow others to do the same. It means having real, open discussions about the challenges we are facing personally as we confront the uncertainty ahead. It is about acknowledging the collective longing for normalcy and stability. It's about unlocking deeper empathy and compassion for our colleagues—and ourselves. By opening ourselves up, we create the opportunity to become more attuned to the needs and dreams and hopes and fears of the people we lead.

For far too long corporate cultures have deemed it taboo to be human or kind at work. In the most conservative work cultures, employees are coached

to not only look alike (dark suit, white shirt, black shoes, neatly cropped hair) but also act alike (confident, commanding, driven). This one-size-fits-all leadership archetype strips away our ability to truly connect with coworkers and limits the colorful ways that we express our individuality at work. It also makes it more difficult to embrace individuals who don't fit the mold, thereby resulting in less diversity. Over the years, technology companies have been nudged by their younger ranks to be more inclusive. As a result, there is increasingly more attention paid to emotional intelligence and the value of diverse experiences; however, there is much work to do.

The current pandemic has torn away the masks that many of us have been trained to put on instead of bringing our full humanity to work. Working parents can no longer pretend their kids don't exist. Kids are bursting onto conference calls and demanding that we be their teachers and tech support whether we like it or not. Managers can no longer reasonably demand that employees prioritize work 24/7. We are being forced to confront our financial insecurities and our mental vulnerability as we see coworkers furloughed with little notice and laid off with tenuous government safety nets.

As leaders, we have a choice to embrace these very human and real conditions, or turn a blind eye to all that is bubbling up—marching forward as if conducting business as usual.

I believe companies and their employees are better served by leaning in—deeply—to the shared human experience we are having at this moment. As leaders, we should create space to not only discuss how this pandemic is affecting the business but us individually—in specific terms. We should aspire to extend the same kindness and care we would to an eight-year-old who wakes up in the middle of the night with nightmares caused by the latent anxiety to the 38-year-old middle manager whose performance may be slipping of late due

to his preoccupation with the needs of his elderly mother who lives alone in a different state.

Leading from a place of HumanKindness isn't just the right thing to do; research suggests taking actions to improve morale at work and increase employee happiness drive better business performance. Economists at the University of Warwick found that happiness made people about 12 percent more productive at their jobs. It should be no surprise that more engaged teams drive business value. While many businesses are familiar with using pay for performance as an incentive to motivate employees in uncertain times like these, recognition,



empathy, praise and compassion can also be powerful underutilized motivators.

Humans are wired to be seen and understood. Truly connecting with the humans you work with can lead to deeper engagement, productivity and joy at work now and into the future. This moment calls for leaders who lead with HumanKindness. **Because if we aren't there for our teams now, why would they ever believe we would be there for them in the future?**

The world will forever be changed by this pandemic. Whether in our role as parents, global citizens or leaders at our companies, my hope is that we choose to push beyond the status quo and commit to working to build an even better workplace and world than the one we knew before. 🍀