

LET'S CALL IT WHAT IT IS: A CRISIS!

A conversation with Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center



KEY TAKEAWAYS

**EMPLOYEE
EXPERIENCES ARE
UNIQUE**

**THE PANDEMIC
PRESENTS AN
OPPORTUNITY TO
SUPPORT**

**BUILD TRUST, BE
PRESENT, TAKE
ACTION**

ASSESS PROGRESS

COLUMBUS
CHAMBER
OF COMMERCE

Throughout the pandemic, the Columbus Chamber of Commerce members have been reaching out and engaging with Workforce Director Kelly Fuller on a variety of topics.

With so much disruption and uncertainty, it is not a surprise that mental health and wellness of their employees are top of mind with our business leaders.

Fuller sat down with Ohio State's Dr. Ken Yeager who provides some perspective on what employers should be thinking about, and how the pandemic presents an opportunity to improve your employee experience.

By Dr. Ken Yeager

We live in an era in which sudden and unpredictable crises and traumatic events have become the familiar subjects of everyday news. Millions of people have been struck by potentially crisis-inducing events that they are not able to resolve on their own. This is not a weakness or a failing on the part of the individual. Crisis by nature is an event or series of events that has the potential to overwhelm individual coping skills. When this occurs individuals feel trapped in uncertain times and situations. Most recently the novel coronavirus has served to overwhelm the coping mechanisms because there is no reference point within the current generation on which to build a coping approach.

Remember during the beginning of the Pandemic, did you experience heightened levels of anxiety? Were these related to going out in public, concerns related to exposure and illness? Concern over the health of loved ones, including relatives that are in advanced years, with other health conditions that make them more vulnerable to COVID-19?

All of these are normal reactions to abnormal circumstances or events. That's right - it's normal to be anxious during a Pandemic. That doesn't mean you are not functioning well. In fact, it is a clear indicator that you are paying attention to what is important: your health and the health of people you love. It is also normal to fear the unknown. Uncertainty, it turns out provokes a very powerful response. When you are concerned about shortages in important supplies that you use daily, the items are subject of over purchasing as a method to cope with uncertainty. For example, for individuals, this might mean toilet paper and for a business owner, this might mean disruptions in your usual supply chain.

To make matters even more complicated, we are inundated with news feeds and stories related to COVID-19. It seems impossible to pick up a magazine, newspaper, tablet, phone or computer without seeing information about the Pandemic. There are times that too much information can lead to heightened levels of anxiety. We often times see the news reports and think to ourselves could this happen to me? Unfortunately, the answer to that question is absolutely it could happen to you. The reality is this virus, no matter how strong or weak it may be, has taken over 150,00 lives.



The response to this has been to shut down many aspects of our workforce, while at the same time increasing the responsible of large groups of “essential” workers. For these workers there has been a very difficult question of: What should I do? Do I risk getting ill while working due to exposure to the virus? Should I not return home or interact with family members out of fear of infecting them? These and other questions are leading to social disruption. For thousands of Graduates this year they are not able to participate in the usual graduation processes, marriages have been postponed or put on hold because of social isolation. Many of us are unable to visit with our parents or grandparents because of restricted visiting hours at hospitals and nursing homes.

All of this in a time where we are struggling to cope. For many the concept of social distancing, quarantine and isolation is very difficult. Many are feeling uncertain about their futures. This is understandable as we are living in a time that calls in to question what our future is going to look like. This represents a major loss, even though many will not think of it this way. We are losing a part of the world (at least for the time being) as we have known it. This understandably is bringing out strong emotions of isolation, frustration, sadness, and at times, anger.

You may ask why this is causing conflict among peers, friends, family members, and perhaps colleagues and employees. The answer for this is everyone is approaching this from their own unique perspective. Their responses vary based on where they are with processing this loss and the resulting grief. This causes some to question why others are acting and reacting the way they are if it is different from their experience.

The Takeaway for Businesses

It is important to remember that we will all process this event from our individual perspective and through our own experiences. Everyone will have a different experience. Each of us will respond to the experience in our own unique way. The best way to approach this is to seek to understand what your peers, family members, employees and coworkers are experiencing. Remembering this is not good or bad. It is simply the individual response to the pandemic.

Even with every disruption and challenge listed above, there is good news. A more fundamental truth about the work and employee experience: even when faced with similar circumstances—many say the crisis is materially affecting their daily work lives and they are understanding people have widely varied experiences, perspectives, and outcomes.

The return phase presents an opportunity for companies to rethink the employee experience in ways that respect individual differences. This is an opportunity to support and deeply understand employees home lives, skills and capabilities, mindsets, personal characteristics, and other factors; all while adapting to rapidly changing circumstances.

The good news is that times of challenge frequently lead to advances in coping, listening and supporting each other. This is a time to improve communication techniques, to think about the impact of emotional hurt and loss while exploring new approaches that take into account a crisis response to behavioral challenges.

Companies have an opportunity to understand and hear new approaches, to consider the use of advanced analytics and other technologies, leaders can now address employee experience in a more targeted and dynamic way. While drilling down on which employees need more and varied types of support, they can also tailor actions that create widely shared feelings of well-being and cohesion across the workforce.

Here are some areas of focus:

Building trust: being open and attentive to all communication. Remembering this is not good nor bad. It simply is an expression on where individual are at this moment of time.

Being present: Listening to employee concerns, using your communication skills to allow for open communication and ongoing conversations.

Taking action: Openly sharing response plans to protect staff and to maintain business operations and what challenges you may face moving forward.

Being fully transparent: Now more than ever sharing the impact of the Pandemic on day-to-day operations and the bottom line are important in establishing trust and creating a collaborative working response to the pandemic.

Ongoing Assessment of Progress

As time progresses, think about the goals you set and your response to the Pandemic. Be aware of individual needs as well as individual challenges. It's important to state that this is not an all or nothing situation. You will likely find individuals on continuum between:

Trust vs. Cynical responses
Social cohesion vs. Social isolation
Individual purpose vs. Loss of identity

Consider responses in each area to understand individual needs and respond to each individual in a unique way to address needs. While each of the areas of trust, cohesion and purpose don't offset the experience of uncertainty and anxiety that many continue to feel, they do point to a distinct sense of confidence, trust, cohesion and purpose in their organizations. Providing a small amount of structure that is individually supportive will limit employee reacting to the current crisis situation with a fight-or-flight response.



When employers are present, transparent and supportive, they create workplaces where employees can “make sense” of difficult situations. In doing so, you have the ability to build employee resilience and social understanding and meaning. In doing so you are connecting with employees and connecting your employees to your business in deeper and more important ways. Connecting with one another and can help enhance social connection and affiliation—not just formally, but also by allowing informal and unstructured conversations to emerge, leading to greater understanding of need, challenges, opinions and seeking cohesion.



For a deeper look at best practices and how employers can create healthy workplaces, [visit this conversation](#) from our recent Retail Summit.

Employers who continue to invest in the all-around health and wellness of their teams create desirable workplaces where job seekers want to join, and incumbent workers want to stay. We are all experiencing varying levels of stress and anxiety; working together to acknowledge and support one another remains a key strategy for success.

CONTACT YOUR COLUMBUS CHAMBER

Are you a Chamber member looking for guidance and direction on your workforce strategy? You can schedule a meeting with Workforce Development Director Kelly Fuller to discuss the best ways to attract and retain talent in today's workforce, as well as ways to build a strong company culture.

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