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Skills Nonprofit Leaders Need in a Post-COVID World

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As of September 1, 2021, despite the very present threat of variant viruses, more than 80% of states have "re-opened," with customers returning intermittently to restaurant dining, travelers taking once again to air travel, sports fans returning to stadiums at full capacity, and employees returning to offices that had been vacated for more than a year. Despite this re-opening, the world is far from the way things used to be, and the work environment is no exception. "Business as usual" has undergone major, irreversible shifts.

Those businesses that survived the past year have witnessed/experienced numerous new trends. On the positive side: Work life balance in many cases was enhanced for those fortunate employees who were able to work from home and who were also able to manage the dual challenges of work and child care. Further, many employers have seen a reduced need for expensive office real estate with no significant impact to productivity.

On the negative, or more challenging, side of this past year's experience, many workers suffered feelings of isolation and depression. People who experienced loss and illness during the pandemic are now re-thinking their values, priorities and career goals. In addition, Federal unemployment support – together with other factors, such as workers not wanting to risk their health, fear of the Covid vaccine, and a shortage of trained workers - has contributed to tighter labor conditions, and has resulted in largely understaffed restaurants and businesses of all sectors.

According to the literature that has emerged during the past months, successfully managing in a post pandemic world requires the following new skills. Those managers who are able to adapt and demonstrate these skills will be best positioned to help their organizations and their employees thrive and succeed despite - or perhaps because of – the many challenges of the past year.

1. Managing from afar/Relationship management – In new remote or hybrid work environments, effective managers focus more than before on relationship management. In an environment where people do not run into each other in the hallways or grab coffee or lunch together on a regular

basis, managers must be more creative about helping their employees foster relationships. In order to care for employees' mental health and social emotional needs, managers must make sure people are focused on self-care. Again, this can be challenging when not sharing physical space and not having the ability to witness behavior. In sum, leaders must think differently and more intentionally about work hours, deliverables, project timelines, and methods of communication.

2. Fostering a new type of collaboration – While we have all witnessed the power and effectiveness of video-based meetings, many would argue that this approach has a detrimental impact on collaboration. These meetings are just not the same as having people in the same room for a good old fashioned brainstorming session. And then there are the “meetings after the meeting” when two or three people peel away to continue the discussion and move things forward. Leaders will have to find ways to encourage team members to connect with each other in new and creative ways while pursuing opportunities to enhance their own leadership and people management skills.

3. Crisis management: From 2020 to 2021, workers experienced the triple threats of a global health crisis, a national upsurge in racial unrest, disparity and discord, and an economic upheaval that resulted in a mind-boggling conflict of record unemployment as well as tight labor markets. Effective managers showed an ability to stay calm in the face of significant adversity. Through rapid change and upsetting developments, such managers exhibit transparent, accurate, timely information sharing with staff, board, funders, stakeholders, and partners. They also give staff space to express their pressure points, misgivings, and stressors in a safe environment.

4. Entrepreneurial spirit – This past year, every organization had to pivot and change their business model on the fly. Businesses had to stand up remote work environments in the flash of an eye, and those that embraced change moved forward with the least loss of productivity and confusion. Those managers that anticipate change and that flex quickly, rather than waiting for the next unexpected or unprecedented event, help to build organizational resiliency NOW. These entrepreneurial leaders are future-focused and work to identify and implement ways to diversify funding in case their primary source of funding is unexpectedly hindered.

5. Flexibility/Growth Mindset – This experience has taught us that there is more than one way to work, be productive, be effective, and stay accountable. And it's not over yet. Leaders will have to help staff adapt to a post-COVID environment as well. This goes beyond the changes that may occur in the physical workspace. For example, many organizations are moving to a “hoteling” model to reduce real estate expenses and will continue to have some portion of employees working remotely. Team members will need to acquire new skills or enhance existing skills to adapt.

Leaders must remain nimble, be open to change, and show empathy for shifting personal needs of their employees.

6. Technology – Leaders have had to be relatively self-sufficient when it comes to daily office productivity technology for many years. But now we have Teams, Whereby, Skype, Zoom, and Google Hangouts – and that's just a few of the VIDEO options!! As the new hybrid work environment evolves, leaders must be adept at using current technology while keeping abreast of emerging technologies intended to enhance productivity and communication. If team members are expected to adapt and embrace new technology, managers must lead by example by joyfully adopting new technologies and providing the necessary support for their teams to learn and implement these technologies seamlessly and with minimal disruption.

The implications for nonprofit executive search are clear: Successful candidates for nonprofit leadership roles must have the requisite skills for helping their organizations successfully and planfully operate in the new, yet ever-changing work environment.

Resources:

<https://www.ddiworld.com/blog/top-leadership-development-challenges-post-covid>

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/leadership-in-the-post-covid-19-era-lessons>

<https://olivergroup.com/challenges-for-leadership-post-covid-19/>

<https://www.aacsb.edu/insights/2021/january/resetting-the-leadership-agenda-post-covid-19>

<https://cems.app.box.com/s/6f72wtplz476t9sfc07r93ujd52kfiri>

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