

Coping in a crisis – the compassionate way forward

A short discussion on how the application of the Principles of Social Value could help you in leading your team through the coronavirus pandemic and beyond.

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The coronavirus pandemic is a disastrous event that is affecting people everywhere in many different ways. The high number of deaths in the lockdown leaves many families bereaved without being able to say goodbye to their loved ones in ways they would wish. Many more have suffered ill health and, for a significant number, the physical damage they have incurred will be permanent or long-lasting. Isolation and quarantine will have caused loneliness, anxiety, depression and income losses.

As the lockdown is lifted it is clear that the economic impact will be deep and devastating. Many businesses will not recover, leaving people without work or more insecure than ever before. Their social and economic well-being will suffer in the process. Such a traumatic event requires a compassionate response from employers to enable their workers to cope with the challenges they face.

How should business leaders and managers concerned with social value lead their organisations as we progress towards a lifting of the lockdown? In this leaflet we provide advice on the key features that a compassionate response with a concern for social value might entail.

The principles of social value include the need to:

- value stakeholders,
- understand, evaluate and articulate changes
- value what matters

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Priorities may change in a novel crisis situation. In this pandemic it has become clear that workers who are often among the lowest paid, regarded as low-skilled and of low value, have been keeping the UK afloat. Hospital workers (from doctors and nurses to cleaners, porters, drivers and caterers), care home workers, pharmacists, teachers and teaching assistants, shop workers, postal workers and delivery drivers, street cleaners and refuse collectors, among others, have played an essential role during the crisis.

This shows the need to value all workers, not just in a crisis, but permanently. Therefore, whatever kind of business you lead, all your workers matter to you as you find your way out of the pandemic and through the economic minefield situated ahead. Different things will matter to your organisation as a result of the crisis and some earlier priorities may have to be put on hold in order for your organisation to survive intact or to minimise the damage it is going to suffer. Job security is likely to be a key priority for your workers and is vital to their well-being, one of the principal social values we adhere to.

How might a compassionate response be followed?

- Seek to identify the challenges faced by your workers and look for ways to reduce their stress.
- Respect the importance for your workers of feeling in control and able to make their own decisions - help them to feel as though they belong and are cared for and provide the resources and equipment necessary to make their tasks and workload manageable and to do their job properly. If they need equipment to work effectively from home as required, try to provide that and find ways to ensure they remain connected and engaged.
- Workers seek voice and influence over workplace decisions and environments. They want to be trusted, supported, listened to and respected for their knowledge and skills. They seek to be able to share knowledge and ideas within teams and with supportive supervision. It is important to include them in your decision-making processes, either through using established arrangements, including working closely with trade unions where relevant, or by inviting workers from across your organisation to participate in those processes.
- For your workforce to be able to participate effectively, they require clear and transparent information so that they know fully what is at stake, what are the options, what are the likely consequences of different decisions, and why those decisions are having to be made.

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- Being clear about the roles you are asking your workers to adopt to help the organisation to survive the fall out will be essential. Support them through change with regular, positive and practical feed-back.
- Help your workers to make any big changes. If they are to be made redundant, seek to help them in finding new work, new training, preparing CVs, providing helpful references, or assist them to secure their financial needs. If they are to take up new roles within your organisation, be clear about their new role and what it will entail, give them options if possible, train them fully, provide mentoring, seek their views.
- Offer counselling and support if any of your workers are suffering. Seek to alleviate their problems if possible. Be flexible, especially if you require agility and flexibility from your workers.
- Importantly, leaders must act as role models - do the right thing and lead in sharing any sacrifices that must be made.

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Coping with bereavement, recovering from illness or caring for sick members, mental health crises, financial worries and workload stress are widespread consequences of the virus. How you lead your organisation out of the pandemic will have a lasting effect. It requires you to recognise your collective needs, your connectedness to others, and your interdependencies. Your response matters for your workers, your customers and the communities in which you operate and it matters for your long term reputation. Responding in a compassionate way will be a challenge but it will also be necessary.

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