

Get Ready for A Changed Workplace

The U.S cannot go through the current pandemic without experiencing permanent changes in the workplace. WW I, WW II, and 9/11 all changed our world, so don't expect it will be "business as usual" once this pandemic has passed. You and your employees will have changed when people start returning to work. So, the question becomes, what are some of the likely differences that will occur in your business and how will you and your employees adjust to these differences?

More Virtual Employees

Now that many more employees have become virtual out of necessity, a lot of these employees will have decided that they prefer the convenience of working from home. They have enjoyed not having to drive in traffic, dress for work every day, and put up with office politics as they did when working on-site. Some employees who may not have wanted to work virtually will have changed their minds. They may have discovered that they work more productively because of fewer interruptions and at the same time actually work fewer hours.

As a leader, you will need to decide if you will allow this change in your workplace and to what degree you will allow it, especially if you have never allowed virtual employees before. For those supervisors who have never managed virtual employees, it will be a different managerial experience. These supervisors must be trained to work with employees who become virtual in order to maintain the work chemistry that they enjoyed when they saw the employees every workday.

For virtual employees, clearly established and well-defined productivity goals will be a necessity. Some examples of this are finishing a report by a certain deadline or having weekly deadlines to meet monthly goals. Other examples are making a certain number of service calls or having to balance the books by a certain deadline with sub goals leading up to a monthly closing. Some employees may feel that this is closer supervision, but they will also have much more freedom to meet these deadlines.

Some companies who have had virtual employees require them to attend a staff meeting in-person once a week. Another option is to use any of the virtual meeting tools available such as "Zoom" in order to see each other virtually rather than just talking over the phone. Some managers make a habit of asking for the virtual employees' opinions more often to show they are more valued.

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In any event, managers who have never been virtual supervisors will find this a new challenge. Do not assume that your managers will easily adjust to this change in the workplace. You also need to be prepared that some employees who request to work virtually may decide over the long term that they do not like this new work situation, which of course will be another change in your work environment.

Employee Loyalty Will Have Changed

The definition of loyalty will shift from its current meaning. It is one thing to sell your company or have a layoff of some employees due to a recession or market change. It is another issue to close your business for two months or so and not be able to afford to give severance pay or health insurance benefits to your employees.

Another reason that will change the definition of loyalty is some of your employees may have been temporarily placed on a furlough and don't know if they will have a company to work for in the future. This is a frightening thought to live with for weeks at a time while worrying about how to buy food and pay rent. This alone will change the definition of company loyalty.

When employees return to work for you, they may have the attitude that you owe them something for all the uncertainty and insecurity that YOU have caused them. Some employees may want their work environment to be just as it was before the pandemic. But there will be changes in your company's workplace through no fault of their own. In the back of some employees' minds they may be wondering if this pandemic will happen again. It actually could occur if COVID-19 resurfaces. This development alone could have even more devastating changes to the definition of loyalty in your workplace environment.

Traumatic experiences change people. We have seen family deaths and divorces change a very valuable employee into one who is distracted and has low moral or low self-esteem. Losing income and possibly benefits can have the same negative effects as these other challenges. Your managers must be very aware and look for changes in their employees' productivity, loss of interest, or if a new family issue has surfaced because of extreme financial stress at home.

It is imperative that you insist your supervisors talk and listen to their employees. If necessary, management should recommend that the affected employee consult with a Counselor or Minister to address these personal challenges. On another note, if these emotional changes occur with some of your employees, your supervisions must continue to hold your employees to the same work standards as before the pandemic. Your supervisors must ensure your returning employees understand that because they have not been working for two months or so, it is now time to return to a regular work schedule with accountabilities.

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Managers must also know the difference between the definition of sympathy and empathy. Sympathy is “I understand, and it’s okay not to do something.” Empathy is “I understand, but you still must meet your work responsibilities.”

More Mergers and Acquisitions

Some larger companies who have had more staying power than your company during this pandemic may come out of this economic downturn with enough cash to acquire smaller competitors. You need to consider now what you would decide if you receive an offer to buy your company.

There are some dangers in selling your company at this time after it has taken years to build your company:

- You may be artificially more willing to stop being a business owner after this national crisis. You should be cautious not to make an emotional decision when your mind may be biased by this very negative experience.
- Consider what you would do professionally in the future after you have been your own boss for years. Are you actually ready to work for another person?
- Do you have the capital as well as the energy to start another business? Remember how much hard work it took to launch your current business.
- If you sell your company now with reduced sales, the selling price most likely will be much less than before the pandemic.

You should consider taking time to rebuild the revenue of your business so that you can sell the company at a more realistic price than it would have brought before a steep decline in sales. If you are offered a wholesale price to buy your business, the acquiring company is confident they can bring back the sales you had. They wouldn’t be interested in acquiring your company if they did not think that. If they can increase your sales, why can’t you?

It is critical that business owners, managers, and supervisors realize that their workplace will be different after the worldwide pandemic subsides. If you do not forecast these changes and adjust accordingly, your competition can beat you in your marketplace.

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About the Author



Emory Mulling

Emory Mulling is a nationally recognized HR Consultant and Executive Coaching expert. As Founder and Chairman for the Mulling Corporation, the Mulling family of businesses is headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia. The firm was founded in 1986 and is a leader in HR consulting for small, medium and large companies.

A former Vice President of Human Resources, Emory's background includes 16 years of corporate Human Resource experience with three Fortune 500 companies. He was the youngest VP of HR at PepsiCo with 20,000 employees falling under his domain. His tenure in Human Resources gives him a wide breadth of knowledge in every aspect of management and critical policy and procedures. His longevity in the industry allows him the foresight to pinpoint key trends to keep his clients on the pulse of workplace issues in any economy, in any situation.

A prolific writer, Emory wrote a nationally syndicated column for five years entitled **People Smarts** for the *American City Business Journals* giving management advice to employers. He has been quoted in dozens of national publications including: *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Fortune*, *Kiplinger's*, *Entrepreneur*, *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*. Emory has hosted a timely and provocative radio show for Georgia Public Broadcasting entitled, "**At Work with Emory Mulling**," where his show received the "Gabby Award" for the Best Non-News radio show in Georgia. Emory is author of "**The Mulling Factor: Get Your Life Back by Taking Control of Your Career**." This book contains The Mulling Factor©, an insightful, science-based, assessment tool used to identify a person's ideal boss and work environment.

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