ASK THE EXPERT

Trust and culture in the changing workplace

Building a strong workplace culture rooted in trust and community is more important than ever. A recent survey of chief executives surveyed by the Young Presidents Organization found that 96% rate building and maintaining trust with stakeholders a high priority, with 42% saying the importance they place on building this trust has increased in the past five years.

Building trust and community, however, can be challenging right now, given the uncertainty in the business environment and competing priorities that leaders must juggle. Fortunately, the effort is well worth it—and it pays dividends, such as less burnout, higher productivity, lower workplace stress, fewer sick days and higher levels of engagement.

For insight on how organizations can demonstrate transparency and trustworthiness to key stakeholders, *Crain's* Content Studio recently spoke with three experts from Goulston & Storrs about how New York City employers can best achieve that goal:

- Ayeshah Johnson, director of diversity and inclusion
- Carla Reeves, associate in employment litigation and counseling, and
- Elizabeth Levine, director in employment litigation and counseling

Here are edited highlights from that conversation:

CRAIN'S: Why is building trust so crucial today?

JOHNSON: Trust between employees and employers is a two-way street and will impact employees' ability to support and follow necessary changes to the workplace and workplace culture in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Trust creates permission to take risks toward change—there is an underlying understanding

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and faith that your employer will have your back. In a high-trust environment, employees will be more willing to accept and adhere to such changes.

Trust is the glue that holds together high-performing teams and organizations, and it brings out the best in employees. When employees feel trust, they are willing to give more energy toward their own motivation and to the motivation and vision of others.

CRAIN'S: What is the best way to build trust?

LEVINE: Employers must communicate effectively and be transparent with employees.

Employers should maintain a connection with their remote-working employees by regularly checking in with them via videoconferencing, phone or email, in ways that are inclusive and replicate the direct interactions we are used to having in the physical workplace.

Keep your employees informed of the status of the business, plans to reopen the physical workplace, and steps the business is taking to provide employees with a safe place to work. Acknowledge that information may be subject to change and continue to keep employees informed of new developments. Do not be afraid to reach out to employees just to check in, even when you do not have concrete plans or answers to every anticipated question.

CRAIN'S: Many employees are worried about their job security as they juggle family responsibilities that have mounted since the pandemic. How can employers let employees know the company is on their side?

REEVES: Communicate awareness of and empathy for the impact of the pandemic and what is happening in communities. Create space for employees to share their

needs and the challenges they may be facing because of the pandemic and quarantine.

Recognize that those challenges may include the effects of racism and police brutality. Listen to what your employees have to say and accept what you are hearing as the real and unique experiences of unique individuals. Foster an environment in which employees feel supported in speaking up.

CRAIN'S: As the country reopens for business, we're seeing more cases of Covid-19. How can employers make sure that everyone on their team is prioritizing community responsibility when it comes to infection prevention?

LEVINE: Employers and employees must work together to shift the workplace from a traditional one, in which employees demonstrate their commitment by showing up to the workplace, to one in which all employees prioritize the needs of their colleagues and the workplace community.

Employees must accept that they need to stay home if they are sick or have been exposed to someone who has tested positive, or is presumed positive, for Covid-19. To support and encourage employees to abide by these rules, try to be flexible in how you enforce your paid time off and sick-time policies. Doing so can help to minimize the risk that employees will be incentivized to put the community at risk by coming

into work when they should otherwise stay home.

CRAIN'S: Do you have any advice on how employers can best communicate with stakeholders during the reopening?

REEVES: Understand that employees will be asked to make changes that may make them uncomfortable—

such as wearing masks, social distancing, and so forth. Communicate that all employees will be held to the same standards to observe new workplace rules and protocols, including the highest performers and management-level employees. Ensure that you communicate consistently with employees at all levels of your workforce, including those that may be furloughed. ■

Ayeshah Johnson, director of diversity and inclusion

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