

HR AT THE FRONTLINE OF THE ORGANISATION

Welcome Again to VF Inc's Business and Life Column. We have been gone for a while. We have received a number of requests asking us to return, and here we are. We are pleased to announce our return. We have started an HR Newsletter for our clients, and we will be publishing the newsletter through this Column. We will however also cover other topics, as we did previously.

The term "Frontline," has taken on greater importance in this COVID-19 era, with the focus expanding, during this health crisis, from the health professionals, pharmacies, to police service, fire service, security service, media, supermarkets, utility companies, sanitation companies. Food security is again at the top of the agenda with farmers and fisherfolk on the frontline. COVID-19 has brought us to unmapped waters. It has brought the whole world almost at a standstill with borders closed and every industry impacted. The impact of COVID-19 cannot yet be determined, however, we know that the costs will be exorbitant. Organisations have been impacted in many ways and the Human Resource Department has to be at the frontline to help the organisations and particularly the employees, steer during this unparalleled and unexplored time.

According to Alicia Barceno, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), COVID-19 will impact the region in five key areas:

1. Decline in export due to decline in economic activity of trading partners
2. Lower demand for tourism services, which could see tourism activity contracting by as much as 25% in 2020
3. Interruption of global value and supply chain
4. Drop in commodity prices
5. Greater risk aversion on the part of investors and the worsening global financial conditions.

Governor Antoine of the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank, while highlighting the scale of the impact of COVID and the great uncertainties, indicated that two scenarios considered by the Bank anticipates economic activity in the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union (ECCU) to decline by about 5% to 7%, with a sharp increase in unemployment. This forecast has to be seen in light of the previous estimate of growth in the ECCU of 3.3%. The global impact is expected to exceed that of the global financial crisis in 2008.

Companies have responded in many ways to include remotely working, layoffs, scaling down of operations, temporary closure, review of strategic direction. These changes impact people, the human resource of the organisation. People throughout the organisation are uncertain about the future. Boards of Directors and Executive Management are questioning the strategic

direction and rethinking operations. The question of survival is lurking for some, and at the forefront for others. They are also concerned about the welfare of their staff and this has driven some of the decisions taken. Management is concerned with operational changes and its direct impact on employees, as well as for their own safety. Employees are scared, concerned about their jobs, safety and family.

What then is the role of the Human Resource Officer/Manager or Department in helping employees and organisations thrive in this turbulent time? The Human Resource (HR) function is at the frontline of the organisation, and just like the role of other frontline employees, it is magnified in this COVID-19 era. The HR professional has to work at all levels, strategic, tactical and operational. Strategically, the HR professional has to analyse the possible impact on the organisational and craft strategies to mitigate the downsides for both the organisation and employees. In some cases, the strategic decision is already taken, and the HR professional has to advice on the implications and devise tactical and operational plans to execute. More than ever, the HR Professional has to be transformative, yet at the same time devise strategies to minimize the downsides for the organisation and employees.

One of the primary functions of the HR professional is employee engagement. HR has to be particularly concerned about the wellbeing of employees and its impact on their engagement to the organisation. COVID-19 has evoked fears on so many levels: fear for life, fear for jobs, fear for loved ones, especially those on the health frontline, fear of no money; fear of hunger, fear of loneliness, fear of being alone, fear of the unknown; fear of the future. HR has to analyse the impact of those fears on engagement, productivity and success and devise strategies for mitigating the negative impact. Open, transparent communication, listening ear, counselling are some of the strategies to help employees reduce the fear.

The HR Professional at the frontline in the organisation has to ensure safety of all employees, ensure legal compliance, consider the well-being and emotional health of all employees and more importantly, communicate honestly, frequently in an open, clear and unambiguous manner. The HR Professional also has to ensure the organisation complies with guidelines and directives given by the Ministry of Health, pay attention to advice from WHO, PAHO, CARPHA and other relevant organisations.

The HR Professional, especially where remote work is involved, has to consider security of information, confidentiality, accountability, technical capabilities, home environment and clear instructions with respect to the deliverables expected. Some employees may for the first time be working from home, and while there is a general sense of joy and happiness while working for home, some employees need training to ensure effectiveness. Some employees need to be guided in setting and maintaining their work schedule, especially in situations, where this may be difficult, due to conditions at home.

Some companies have realised that in planning to work remotely, there are some positions that could not be accommodated. Some companies have temporarily or permanently laid off employees. These employees may suffer from anxiety and depression. The HR Professional has

to have a plan to manage those fears and situations. The HR Professional has to also be thinking ahead to life and work after COVID-19, and while uncertainties still abound, has to develop ideas and strategies to ensure the workforce is aligned, equipped and engaged to successfully deliver on the mission and vision of the organisation. In short, more than ever, the HR Professional has to prepare a workforce that is nimble, agile and resilient, as the transformative role of HR become even more needed.

The HR Professional, however, like all other frontline employees need to take care of his/herself including his/her mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health. The mental and emotional impact on HR professionals as they serve on the frontline dealing with the human resources of the company are often ignored. Organisations need to ensure they provide the resources, including counselling, for the HR Professional to maintain good health.

I close with the words of Governor Antoine, “The magnitude of this moment presents a compelling call for shared sacrifices and solidarity at all levels: governments, opposition parties, labour unions, business, civil society and citizens.” Let us all continue to adhere to the guidelines issued, while committing our lives and nation to God. Faith not Fear is our Mantra.

We will explore “Working Effectively Remotely,” in Issue # 2. We look forward to hearing from you with comments on this article, suggestions for topics to be covered and sharing of your HR experience, especially during the COVID era.

Until next week, May God continue to Keep us in the Palm of His Hands.

Please send us your questions, comments and share your experience managing in the COVID-era at info@vfinc.org. You may also reach us by telephone; 1 767 275 0566/617 0566.