Considerations for HR Governance in a post COVID-19 setting

In 2020, we have been confronted with the reality of Covid-19 and have been forced to consider new ways of thinking and working. In line with turning the Human Resource (HR) function on its head to align with what stakeholders require from us in these times, we have put together a checklist for the HR Community to consider during the process of re-thinking the way things are done.

Whilst considering the more broader elements in HR, as HR practitioners, we should also be cognisant of the very practical realities that stare us in the face. To add to that, employees are looking to us for guidance. Therefore, it is advised that HR practitioners consider putting a guideline/ document in place addressing human resource governance issues in these unprecedented times.

Human Resource Governance

HR governance, as SABPP has defined it, is the act of leading, controlling and guiding people management in an *ethical, legitimate, credible* and *fair* manner in an organisation to ensure its sustainability. We consider:

Upholding human dignity,
Alignment with stakeholders' strategy,
Establishment and maintenance of sustainable relationships,
Consistent people related decision-making,
Optimisation of people performance,
Mitigation of people risk,
Driving ethical behaviour, and
Reporting on the contribution of human resources.

Checklist for HR practitioners

The intention of the checklist below is to provide information regarding governance whilst implementing new processes and approaches.

Set up and enable your wellness centre to support employees telephonically to set up home office space

in the most practical and ergonomic way.

Continuous alignment with Facility Management is critical to ensure office spaces are set up in such a way that social distancing is adhered to.

For many, working remotely, and managing teams remotely is a novelty. Provide guidance to your managers on how to connect with employees virtually, how to measure output, how to 'check-in' on an emotional basis, encouraging social zoom calls with colleagues and family members. (CHECK OUT THE REMOTE WORK TOOLKIT DEVELOPED BY THE SABPP)

The HR function is responsible to provide direction with regards to mitigation of people risk. With this in mind, it is incredibly important to address the level of 'guilt' employees experience. In recent surveys analysed, employees are self-reporting an increase in productivity, but also an inability to log off as a result of feeling guilty about it. HR practitioners can put guardrails in place to enable employees to know that it is 'o.k.' not to be working 24/7; e.g. communicate flexibility allowed to do e.g. home schooling, to not start meetings before a certain time in the day, and to not stay on line after a certain time at night. Employees should be guided to manage expectations of their clients with customised out of office reminders about turnaround time and changing their voicemail to inform clients when they can expect feedback of others.

In terms of optimising people performance, HR practitioners can provide line managers with guidance on how to ensure deliverables are achieved. We are faced with a great opportunity to change behaviour from working 'hours' to achieving outputs. However, this might require a well-thoughtthrough change management process, guiding both employees and managers to re-think the way in which performance management is positioned in the business.

During Level 5 and Level 4 of Lockdown, many employees were working completely remotely. During Level 3, more businesses and employees can operate from office. Level 2 has made it possible for even more businesses to operate form office. However, the consequence is that some employees are working at the office, whilst other employees are working remotely. Consistent people related decision making requires HR Practitioners to implement guidelines and policies ensuring a fair and equal 'treatment' of employees with regards to rotational work, hours worked, extent and quality of output required etc.

Report on the contribution of the HR function during this time – It is important to also consider reporting to governing bodies the 'reasonable accommodation' that has been put in place to support employees with disabilities now working from home in terms of 'reasonable accommodation' e.g. larger computer screens, which may have been left at the office.

Provide clear guidance to employees on the company's decision regarding reimbursement of personal data used whilst working from home – ensure there is a standard response to these queries throughout the business.

Introduce, communicate and standardise new ways of work for traditionally high touch interactions, for e.g.

Talent Acquisition Processes

Onboarding & receiving your laptop/ equipment

How to meet new team members, colleagues and manager

Induction processes

Disciplinary Hearings

Crucial/ difficult/ tough conversations

During this time, the 'grey' areas of ethical decision making may look entirely different. Whilst ethical behaviour pre-Covid19 was mostly known in all our businesses, the world of ethics should also be reconsidered. The 'obvious' right and 'obvious' wrong in terms of ethics will still remain, but as we move deeper into the new world of working, we might have to be open to guide employees and managers on the business' view of the various ethical considerations faced on a continuous basis.

If it wasn't sufficiently apparent pre-COVID19, it should be abundantly clear now, that human resource practitioners can best serve the interests of employees by best serving the interests of the balance of the stakeholders in the employment ecosystem. We have the responsibility to take care of employees, customers, society and the environment we operate within.

The impact of COVID19 now has us focused on lower order needs in Maslow's hierarchy, such as basic job-security.

Human resources practitioners can unlock job security victories by focusing on realising productivity improvements which speak directly to business sustainability.

HR practitioners are required to provide not only policy guidance but thought leadership on the need to maintain job security in these uncertain circumstances, whilst balancing that social and emotional need against the need for business sustainability.

Now more than ever before, it is essential to relegate retrenchment to a genuine measure of last resort. To this end it may be necessary for HR practitioners to engage the balance of the organisational/business leadership on methods of cost-optimisation outside the realm of employee costs, so as to postpone the impact of cost-cutting on job security.

Human resource leaders must focus on identifying and realising productivity enhancement opportunities which can help justify the maintenance of employee costs, thus delaying any potential threats to job security.

To the extent that it becomes impossible to avoid job losses, the retrenchment process should be applied fairly and equitably

Whilst this goes without saying at any time in a business, we must recognise the risk in the current circumstances that it is easier to commence a retrenchment process when one has the justification that "everyone else" is doing it; and it is apparently common cause that retrenchment is a response fit for the current circumstances.

If we are cognizant of the danger of slipping into this potential falsehood, we can lead our businesses in assessing any potential retrenchment exercise on its own merits, whist treating it as a measure of last resort, and not succumbing to the ease offered by "herd mentality".

Understand and acknowledge your HR role in your own organisation, and use this opportunity to fill the shoes (and more) of the HR role, and see these opportunities to step up, take ownership, add value (rather than ticking boxes) and use your imagination on what you can do in these difficult times. Consider ways in which you can inspire your team and the employees in the broader organisation to think outside of the box and bring ideas and recommendations to do things better and different than before.

Guidelines for Managers

To ensure the alignment to stakeholders' strategy and establishing and maintenance of sustainable relationships, it is important to not lose humanity and for managers to stay connected to their employees. This might not require a formal 'policy', but it stays important to provide managers with some guidelines to consider. These guidelines include the following:

Introduce weekly, daily meetings and reporting as required.

Propose ways of working for managers and employees such that they agree on a way of checking in – ensuring everybody is 'o.k' on a daily basis – mental wellbeing is becoming a great concern, and employees living alone might require additional support from a positive social interaction.

Encourage employees to take leave, spending the day at home, investing in themselves, their children, their broader families or spending time away from their laptops. In South Africa, April is traditionally a time when employees can take a few days leave to recuperate. As we were in the midst of Covid19, most employees cancelled their leave. Human Resources Practitioners should provide insight to the Stakeholders with regards to performance and productivity levels dropping and human error becoming more relevant due to exhaustion. Employers are starting to see unnatural levels of leave liability, and from an organisational perspective, we have to consider how to balance the sustainability of the organisation, the deliverables to our clients, and the cost of employee burnout.

Always be open to new (and very often more creative) ideas from employees to improve recommended guidelines, without bending the rules and breaking the governance protocols.

When having difficult conversations, consider making it practice to switch on your camera, ensuring the best possible human connection between you and your employee. The impact of having difficult conversations should never be underestimated, and especially when the personal contact is not possible; it is advisable that we make it as "human" as possible – do not forget the humanity in these processes.

The SABPP acknowledges that the Covid19 crisis is disastrous and is causing a catastrophic impact on

people's lives and livelihoods. The SABPP also recognises that the Human Resources community has a huge responsibility in ensuring that employees and businesses continue to function, considering the circumstances. Thus, this situation must be viewed as an incredible opportunity to really partner with stakeholders, and provide the support required. Let us as Human Resources professionals rise to the occasion and do the right thing for the sake of our Stakeholders and our communities.

SABPP supports you during this period through the following offerings:

Webinars on topical issues, and opportunities to interact with experts

Regular conferences on various topics in the COVID-19 context

The Remote Work toolkit in collaboration with OneCircle, with resources and information related to remote work.

The Support to Staff debriefing platform in collaboration with Afriforte.

Publications and blogs engaging various topics.