# March Sadness: How To Boost Worker Morale In A Pandemic

Law360 (March 24, 2020, 3:25 PM EDT) -- As American workers struggle to cope with the novel coronavirus pandemic, they are increasingly fretting about bread-and-butter issues like their health, job security, personal finances and child care. Here, lawyers look at five things employers can do to keep workers' spirits up as the public health crisis deepens.

The rapid spread of COVID-19 across the U.S. after it ravaged China, Italy and other countries has left American employers facing a slew of challenges, including having to lay off workers, trying to implement telework processes that may not have previously been in place, and figuring out how to keep work locations sanitized. But one problem that has largely flown under the radar is employees becoming dejected over the unfolding and having it negatively impact their work.

Kevin Troutman, chair of Fisher Phillips' health care practice and a former human resources executive who at one point oversaw nearly two dozen hospitals in five states, said employers should try to keep workers' morale

up as best they can by regularly reminding them of the importance of the work that they do and that they aren't facing the challenge alone.

"Constantly and calmly demonstrate that we share a common mission, which we will achieve, of taking care of each other while we work through these challenges together," Troutman said.

Keep the Proverbial Phone Lines Open

Regardless of whether employees are teleworking during the pandemic or if they are among those who still have to physically show up at work, one of the simplest ways employers can keep their workers from mentally checking out as worries about health and finances mount is by maintaining an ongoing dialogue to keep them apprised of what's happening, especially if the crisis stretches out for weeks or months longer.

"Keeping lines of communication open with employees is critical at this time and as things change and evolve updating employees as to those changes is crucially important," Paul Hastings LLP employment law partner Carson Sullivan said.

Liam O'Connell, co-managing partner of Nutter McClennen & Fish LLP and head of the firm's labor, employment and benefits practice, struck a similar

tone, both as a lawyer who advises businesses on COVID-19 response and also as someone who runs a firm with numerous employees.

"If you're painting with a broad brush, employees and people generally I think respond well in times of challenge or crisis if they are made to feel, to use the oft-used phrase, that they are part of something larger than themselves [and] part of a team," O'Connell said.

While O'Connell said that specific measures employers can take depend somewhat on the industry they operate in, general steps that can apply broadly include "frequent communications with the employees, transparency about what's going on [and] a demonstrated commitment to them as individuals and their well-being."

"That was priority number one for us as a firm and certainly priority number one I think for the clients I deal with — to make sure that the employees recognize that first and foremost you're taking steps to protect them and their families," he said. "Then by extension, longer term we need to take steps to protect the business so that there's a job to come back to and the business is still going to be in good shape. I have some clients that are really going to struggle with that because work dries up and commitments for their services dry up so they're looking at really difficult circumstances."

Embrace Virtual Tech

With tens of thousands of workers in white collar industries being forced to telework — many of whom that haven't regularly done so before — employers should be on guard against those workers feeling increasingly detached as the public health emergency drags on, attorneys say.

To address that issue, companies can try using more interpersonal alternatives to phone calls and emails for how coworkers communicate, such as apps like FaceTime, Zoom or Skype that offer a visual form of communication.

"A very important thing is to keep communication lines open and along with communication goes collaboration," Sullivan said. "Using apps or other technology that can allow people to feel connected with their employees and with their managers is critical during this time."

O'Connell said that some apps can even give employees a chance to socialize as they would around the proverbial office water cooler as a way to keep people engaged with one another and maintain a sense of workplace camaraderie.

"Even some virtual social hours in some manner where people are getting together. ... We're introducing those kinds of things both as a firm and have clients that are doing that to have people stay connected with their coworkers, exchange ideas and have people stay in the loop on business developments and the rest," he said. "Those can be effective tools."

Give Working Parents Latitude

While some workers may experience a dip in morale due to isolation, those who are working parents may instead find it difficult to keep up with their job because their kids' schools have been ordered to close and many child care operators have been shuttered because of the virus.

Especially for parents who aren't used to working and watching their kids simultaneously, they might find it difficult to balance their competing priorities, putting the onus on employers to recognize the issue and move to address it.

Depending on the nature of the job, employers can potentially alleviate that stress factor by giving plenty of leeway to those who have to work while simultaneously keeping an eye on the little ones, such as by relaxing project deadlines or shifting the hours they work, according to Sullivan.

"In some cases, employers may want to think about being flexible on the hours that their employees are actually teleworking," Sullivan said. "Sometimes, especially with child care or child education continuity concerns, if it's not a job that requires the employee to be working during the typical 8:30 to 5:30 time frame, employees can be just as productive very early in the morning or later at night."

Keep Networks Up to Speed

Although COVID-19 offers no shortage of reasons for workers to feel blue, many still have a sense of urgency to do their jobs well, even if it has to be done off-site.

But if employers' internal systems aren't up to the task of handling the deluge of remote access, then workers may feel even more dejected and opt to give up. That means businesses have the responsibility of making sure their information technology systems are able to perform as seamlessly as possible, Sullivan said.

"At this point, if employers are not doing this they absolutely should," Sullivan said, referring to companies' making sure their IT infrastructure is "as strong as it can be" and that any remote systems "are functioning properly."

She noted that a good number of businesses over the past few weeks anticipated the possibility of large numbers of workers being forced to work remotely and tested their tech infrastructure, and that such efforts should continue for the foreseeable future.

"When you talk about employees mentally checking out, if the network infrastructure is not able to handle the increase in traffic, it's a lot harder for employees to get their job done," Sullivan said. "Just from a network perspective, if your employer network, if your document management system [or] email system [is] crashing, that can lead to frustration and employees checking out."

'Attaboys' Are Welcomed

Although COVID-19 has injected a general sense of malaise and worry into many Americans, lawyers say that employers can try to push back against that by highlighting any positive achievements at a time when good news seems to be in short supply. That means making sure to recognize workers' achievements and handing out pats on the back for jobs well done, regardless of whether employees are physically present or working off-site.

"Obviously, a lot of work is still going on now, and to the extent that there are accomplishments, milestones, accolades, having management send those out to their teams to congratulate on a job well done, that goes a long way," Sullivan said.

And those kinds of kudos can especially important to workers who have been tasked with extra responsibility because of COVID-19, with Sullivan citing IT workers as one example.

"Everybody's IT department is working overtime right now, and commending those folks for helping keep us online and helping us keep up with our jobs, it's always nice to see the employers congratulating and thanking the employees for the work that they're doing," Sullivan said.

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