

Transcription - Working With A Negative Team Post Lockdowns

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. We're looking at some topics that we're revisiting from our 20 questions series in 2017, seven years ago, we have been doing this for such a long time. I keep finding things to talk about. None of you will be surprised that Fulyana finds things to talk about. I have known her for over 40 years and I'm never surprised that she can find something to talk about.

I don't want to take all the credit. It's a team thing.

It's interesting because today we're going to talk about teams. One of the issues that we talked about briefly in our 20 questions series was about dealing with a negative group atmosphere at work. Now obviously in 2017, we were talking about a group of people in the same physical environment. As we all know, our work situations have changed somewhat since then. But what we thought we would do today is talk about the fact that it may well be a negative environment for the team because they have had to come back to a single physical environment. Perhaps there is some underlying feeling of resentment that they have to do that, that they feel like they're not trusted to do work from home. I know that all of those years that they did work from home, their input is not as valued as perhaps the effort that they put in. I know for a lot of people, working from home made them work harder because they could be more organized, more focused, you know, less travel time.

They balanced their lives differently, they were happier because they were able to do other things apart from work and the associated things that happen around that. For the most part, I think people that I have interacted with gave their all to that period of time in working from home and found that that worked for them.

It didn't for everyone. So you might well have a team where some are happy to be back in the physical environment and others are not. You have to deal with that negativity or the potential negative in that for the team as well. So let's talk about how you deal with that negative group atmosphere when you are the team leader or the executive in charge.

Obviously, the thing we are going to say is you have to find the root cause, find why people are being unhappy or why there is this negative environment and address the elephant in the room about yes, we all have to be here, that is the decision that has been made. Do you go through the exercise and get everyone to write down why they are unhappy and get it out in the open? Or do you just, as the leader, do you just say, OK, I know that these are the things that you might be feeling. So let's just put them on the white board or on the wherever, let them sit there. We acknowledge that these are the things. What are we going to do to ensure that we, as a team, bring ourselves back to being a cohesive unit rather than lots of individual contributions? I shall leave my comments there.

I agree with all of that obviously, but I also want to add a couple of things. I want to talk a bit about being in charge of a team in that situation. As one of the team members it can not be pleasant to be part of a situation like that. So at the end of the day, after you do everything, I think it would be helpful to also talk about the positives. Yes, we're back in the office. Yes, that has its downfalls compared to what you've been doing before. I can hear it. I feel it myself. But what about the opportunity for us to actually do things that we couldn't do as well when

we were working from home, particularly the social interaction and stuff like that. Just bringing them to the table as well, so they don't just see the downside of coming in to the office, but they can see it and then talk about what else have we learned from that and what will work for us in this environment for now. When should we review it? Yes, we all hate the idea, but we've got to do it, as you said. Can we at least put somewhere that we can look at it again in X months, so that people feel like it's not just being forgotten. I think that that would be helpful as a team member.

It's very, very hard sometimes because you might not agree or you do agree, but you just want to get on with it. You don't want to be talking about it continuously and this negativity. So what do you do in that situation? You acknowledge that you feel that way and then just keep changing the subject to the topic that you're there to discuss rather than let's have another five minutes complaining about the negative aspects of being back in the office in this scenario.

It goes back to how you came back to work as a team. Did everybody come back at the same time? And if they didn't, is there resentment about when people came back in, if it was a staged return? It's also about recognizing that perhaps the team wasn't as wonderful before you went to the working from home experience and looking at some of the make up of the team which might have changed as well. Certainly people's outside life will have changed in that period of time because we're now talking for a period of minimum two years and probably three years, that people have not worked in this team in a physical environment, in the same place. A physical environment, in hindsight, we look back with our rose colored glasses. Perhaps it wasn't as good. Maybe another exercise is to say, well, what did you like about being in the team here before we went into the lockdown series? Is that still here and actually just call out the things that they think are not right, rather than have them say, you know, just that constant complaining. Involve them in that looking back, in that review of what was it like before 2020? Why is that different now? It's different because the economic environment has changed, the work processes have changed, because perhaps a lot of system-wise stuff has been introduced that wasn't there before and so there was the opportunity, as you say, for more social associated interaction. Physically, they're probably not all sitting in the same desks as they were. It's just about that basic physical environment they're not as comfortable with. Perhaps they've got other solutions or other suggestions about that sort of thing. I think it's about not just taking on board that it's negative now, but looking back to see what it was like before lockdown and being realistic about that and looking at how you can regain that atmosphere. If they think that it was a great atmosphere, then that's what they're missing. And if it's not, if it was just when they look back and they say, yeah, it was okay. Well, that's not positive and so you have to recognize that perhaps it's not as negative as you're feeling or they're saying, because it wasn't roses beforehand.

It's also about revisiting some of the team building exercises that we used to do in the 80s and 90s, the 1990s, last century when we did training. Actually bringing people back together as a group. Don't just expect that because they used to work together and now they have to work together again, that it'll just pick up where they left off. If you've got friends that you can do that with, you understand how valuable that is and that it is not the norm. For the most part, if we know people well and we don't see them for three or four years except electronically, we can't, when we're in the physical environment, pick up where we left off. Now, I'm very fortunate in that whenever I see Fulyana physically, we hit ourselves up for a

meal and so we have that common ground that we can work on. But that said in jest, it is a valid way of engaging the group again, making them recognize one another again. Perhaps, as I said, in a physical environment, you've got people sitting close to one another who weren't close previously and time has passed and so they're older and they've got different experiences. They have the opportunity to bring other things to the table that might have been unknown, pre-lockdown series.

You've got so much range that you can draw on to bring people together, focus on that. Don't just say, okay, well, everyone's back in the one room now, we're going to do something to make them feel like they're a team. You have to be committed to making them a team if you want them to be a team. Maybe that's the other thing that you need to look at is, do I need them to be a team? Is this a long term environment where they will all have to interrelate and work with one another and are dependent on one another for their part of a process? Look at it far more broadly than just bring the team back together in the physical environment because absolutely everything has changed.

To that point, nearly every organization would not go back to how it was anyway because they've either grown as an organization because of the period of time, they might have mergers, acquisitions, so they're working with someone else. It's very, very important, back to the leadership responsibility of communication and the purpose and the reason for doing that.

The other thing is, even within your part of the organization, there are people who started while we in lockdown and working remotely, that nobody knows other than seeing a picture or on a team meeting. We never really met them in person and it is valuable to have that connection. One of the things is our team has grown or we had to measure redundancies, now we've got this. Explain that background, the reason, again, even though you've done it so many times already, and how us being back in the office, the purpose, the reason, and the expected outcome of us being in the office. Also who are the new players that we have started since the time we didn't come physically together. The team building activities would be perfect, as you said, because now there's new people that know each other, people that know each other less and there is people that are new to the game altogether. What best done is to do it now and get them to know each other, even if you reviewed it and don't really need them to work as a team.

I find very, very rare situations where that applies because somebody always depends on someone else. You're either starting or receiving it, or part of the process. So you need to work with each other.

In terms of those team building exercises, I know there's a wealth of them out there, they are all valuable in some way, and they've all been designed to help you and help teams build. Look for the ones that are going to actually make people work as a team, rather than theoretically, this will build a team. Look at things outside of the survival style ones because that puts people in unrealistic situations in my mind. I won't use the survival type exercises. I won't use the trust exercises because once again, that's a step too far for this initial exercise. I really am a fan of the outdoor exercise. The one that I use the most is having groups fly a kite. Individually, it's something that they think they can all do, but what it does, more than anything else, is encourage communication and encourage storytelling because people talk

about when they first flew a kite, or when they first made a kite, or they might have some other knowledge about the wind because of the activities they do outside of work that relies on wind, whatever else it is. It gets people talking about things that are not work, but about an activity that, in essence, they all share knowledge of and so everyone's on a sort of level playing field before they start the exercise. I know Fulyana's been through this exercise, where I've done the kite exercise. At the time that she was there, it was a very disparate group who were not good at communicating with one another or with management at the time. I think what it does is, every time I've used it, it has encouraged people not just to get outside and do something, whether they physically can or not but it's about that communication and that's what it's for, because the basis of any good team is communication regardless of whatever else happens. Once they've been through that exercise, they fall back on that experience each time and they have, each of the individual in this, feels like they've got a little bit better knowledge of everybody else. If they've got nothing else that they can talk about, they can say, oh, I was windy out there today, they would have been a good day for the kites. Just a simple comment when they walk past someone's desk, reconnects them and keeps them connected with that one strand of shared experience.

I definitely agree with that kite exercise, certainly our group got a lot out of it and yes, definitely the communication. It's sort of like you're assuming that someone knows but they don't and you are assuming you know and you don't.

We've probably given you some ideas about how to deal with those situations. It's very much a case of don't expect it to be like it was and remember that the team all has something that they can give to the team and to one another. We, once again, value your input into how you are dealing with those situations where you're bringing a team back into a physical environment where they haven't been a team or haven't been in the physical environment for some time. What I've found, over the years, is when we can share those experiences of other listeners, it just adds to the value that Fulyana and I can give to these sessions, so please let us know what your feelings are about dealing with that negative group environment when you're back in a physical location.

For now, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.

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