

Employee listening: it's not just for the tough times



What has the global pandemic revealed to us about our organisations? What have we learned about our people? And how will employee listening help shape our future plans?

Businesses and organisations around the world have had to adapt their operational models in response to the global pandemic. Leaders are now faced with another challenge: how to turn what was intended to be a short-term fix into a long-term, sustainable way of doing business.

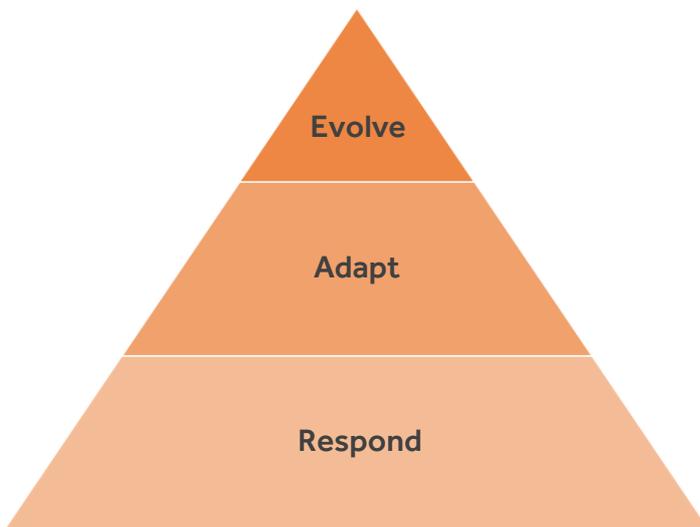
Often, it takes a crisis to reveal our strengths and weaknesses. Enlightened leaders are able to see opportunities to do things differently, to build more resilient organisations. Take the 2008 financial crisis as a case in point: the companies that bounced back faster and stronger were the ones that maintained their focus on listening to, and engaging with, their people throughout.

So what has employee listening revealed to us so far?

Employee feedback has informed HR's response to the crisis

HR has been at the centre of the action during this latest crisis and one of the [many] challenges has been to ensure that employees feel supported, connected, and have the necessary tools to do their work remotely.

We've seen three distinct phases of activity:



1. Response – dealing with the crisis response
2. Adapt – putting in place new ways of working
3. Evolve – thinking about the future workforce and ways of working

Employees' needs are complex; they have shifted at each stage of the pandemic and according to their personal circumstances.

Response – the needs of employees comes first

During the initial crisis phase, employees were focused on the basics: job security, physical safety and enablement. Those organisations that were able to quickly gather feedback from their entire workforce were able to adapt their working practices and prioritise support for those employees who needed it most.

A defining moment for brands

Throughout the pandemic, Dutch communications company [VodafoneZiggo](#) has been using Peachy Mondays to survey its 7,000 employees at regular intervals to better understand how its people are doing and how they value the way that the company is dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. [The survey](#) is quick to complete and provides instant feedback with the option to ask follow-up questions anonymously.



"It was a moment to show our people what our culture is worth and to really focus on our people to drive engagement"

Nynke Hagen, Culture and Engagement Manager



Like many large organisations, its employees have faced different demands and challenges during the pandemic. Its retail staff and engineers were regarded as key workers and remained working on the front line, whilst thousands of contact centre and office-based employees found themselves working from home, overnight.

The initial focus of its employee listening was to ensure that employees were safe in the workplace and enabled to work from home. The company's priorities were to make and communicate decisions, to be clear and transparent, and show that VodafoneZiggo cared for the wellbeing of its employees. It also made the decision to trust and enable its leaders to do what was best for their teams at a local level.

A big focus has been the wide-ranging communication and engagement programme, as Nynke Hagen, Culture and Engagement Manager at VodafoneZiggo explains.

"Keeping the message fresh has been really important and our approach to that has evolved throughout the crisis, balancing communications between information, fun, connection and inspiration."

Measuring the impact of the activities through employee listening has helped the company to understand how they can support employees at an organisational level and at a deeper, individual level.

At the start of the COVID-19 crisis the company's leaders knew that their response would be a defining moment for its brand culture and values. For Nynke, it was "a moment to show our people what our culture is worth and to really focus on our people to drive engagement."

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Gaynor Morris, Executive Director of Organisational Development



Open and honest feedback leads to meaningful action

For Newport-based **Pobl**, a not-for-profit provider of housing, care and support, the surveys have been a turning point for those individuals who didn't have the confidence to raise important issues with their line manager or another member of staff.

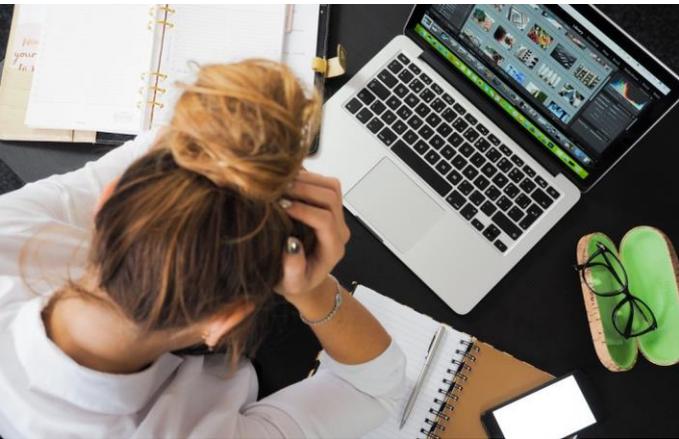
“In the anonymous follow-up conversations people were incredibly honest about themselves and the challenges they had – they would never have done so in a public forum. That's quite powerful,” says Gaynor Morris, Executive Director of Organisational Development.

“As a result, we've been able to get specific help to those individuals who were really struggling. We wouldn't have had the opportunity to do that through the normal communication channels.

“At an individual level, providing a place of psychological safety where people can raise really important things, has allowed them to get help that can be life-changing,” says Gaynor.

“Anonymous follow-up conversations have helped to build people's confidence in raising difficult issues that affect them, and we've then been able to support them in the right way. Our wellbeing coach has talked to over 1,000 people throughout the pandemic: we've been able to encourage that through the surveys.”

Adapt: keeping the organisation connected



Employees' relationships at work and work-life balance came to the fore during this phase.

While many employees embraced working from home, others loathed it.

The green light of 'available' became the new digital presenteeism.

Many of us have experienced 'zoom-fatigue', and there's evidence to back this up: psychologists have proven that seeing ourselves on screen increases cognitive load and is more tiring than in-person meetings.

Musculoskeletal issues have increased, too, as a result of unsuitable workspaces and office furniture.

Some workers have experienced – and continue to experience – social isolation. Our own insights show that 20 to 30-year-olds, in particular, have a strong reliance on work for social relationships.

But organisations have also become more agile. Decision-making has been devolved, and employees have found new ways to collaborate.

Spreading some joy to re-energise and reconnect

VodafoneZiggo has been using employee listening to monitor trends in sentiment and themes over time. They noticed that the longer the situation lasted, the less connected their people felt to one another and to the organisation as a whole.

This insight inspired the company to put extra effort into helping colleagues to be more connected, both informally within teams and across the wider organisation. So, whilst in the beginning the focus was on crisis communications, further along it became more important to have a little fun together.



Now, factual news and information are combined with more inspirational articles. Weekly newsletters focus on wellbeing topics and tips for fun virtual team meetings. Homeworkers have received fun challenges to do at home.

The company has also organised company-wide events, including online drinks broadcast from inspirational venues such as the VodafoneZiggo- sponsored Ajax football stadium, featuring Ajax football players.

Employees, too, have proven themselves to be creative; ten employees have formed a band and recorded a song together.

Looking after managers' wellbeing

Following its second pulse to employees, Pobl found that confidence in leadership had increased since the first pulse. People's ability to manage stress and anxiety was much better too.

However, they also learned that senior managers were feeling less positive than in the first pulse. As a result, there has been a heightened focus on the wellbeing of senior managers, with their managers being given support to do this. Gaynor says, "We wouldn't have known how our managers were really feeling without doing the pulse. It gave us intelligence that took us to the next level."

During this phase, we've learned that line managers and supervisors have the greatest influence on employee sentiment. Supporting managers and encouraging them to check in on employees regularly (asking after their welfare and being flexible about expectations and working hours) is having a positive impact on employee engagement, wellbeing and loyalty.

Evolve - the genie is out of the bottle

For many of us, the world of work will never be the same. There are key questions for HR leaders to address; like, what can we learn from the experience of our employees? How do we avoid sleepwalking into the old ways of thinking and working?

Through continuous employee listening, organisations are shifting their operational strategies to create sustainable change.

Building a return-to-work strategy using employee feedback

To understand how their people were feeling about returning to work, Pobl did a second employee wellbeing pulse, asking questions around employees' environment at home and whether they would be interested in working from home on a longer-term basis. The feedback revealed that many employees have found homeworking to be a positive experience and would like to do more of it in the future.

"The insights we had from the second pulse meant that we were able to put a proposal to the executive committee recommending future ways of working," says Gaynor. "We've shaped the initial reopening of our offices around respite and wellbeing. Without those insights, we would probably have adopted a first-come, first-served approach to people's return to the office. It's a massive shift."



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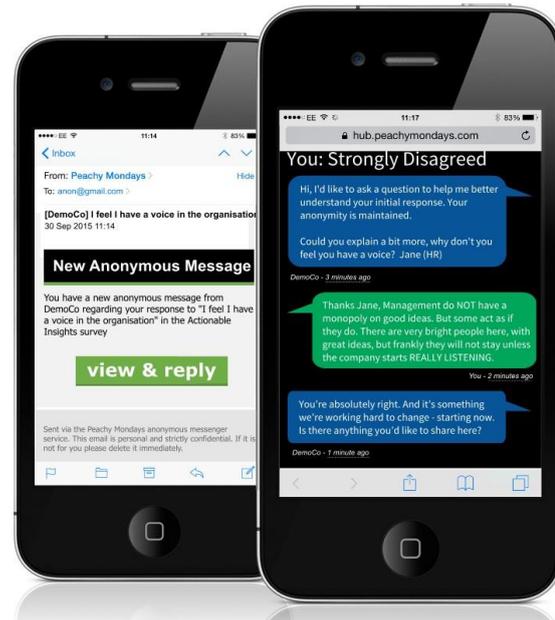
PoBl is now implementing homeworking on a more permanent basis while continuing to use employee listening to identify and support employees who aren't able to work from home.

Gaynor's final reflection is on the importance of having access to hard data. "Being able to deep-dive to really understand the data, has made senior leadership discussions ten times easier than they were before."

Follow-up conversations lead to deeper insight

VodafoneZiggo has used employee listening to monitor the impact of its communication and engagement initiatives. The insight has helped the company to understand how it can support employees throughout this time of uncertainty.

Open text comments and anonymous conversations have enabled the company to understand how its people are coping with uncertainty and respond with specific actions.



"Anonymous conversations let us drill down to get a deeper understanding of what's really going on with our people and what's on their minds," says Nynke. "For example, when we saw that customer-facing staff needed more support, we were able to dive deeper so we could take specific actions to help."

Employee listening has enabled VodafoneZiggo's leaders to guide the organisation through this unprecedented crisis, doing the right thing for employees.

Employee insights are shaping the future

HR must use the lessons learned over the past six months to inform future ways of working. Change isn't linear. Further outbreaks and crises may return us to the 'response' stage. Employees' concerns will differ depending on whether they are shielding, furloughed or continue to work.

An employee listening strategy that includes regular pulses and follow-up conversations has never been more crucial.

Ask the right questions at the right time and employee insights provide strategic insight that HR leaders can use to inform action and to test the effectiveness of their interventions.

For Pobl, employee listening provides the hard evidence to influence senior leaders and challenge the way they work. It has accelerated change significantly. "I think it has been transformational" says Gaynor.

And at VodafoneZiggo, deep insights are driving transformation. "Because we can measure the impact of our actions, we know we're doing the right things," says Nynke. "Our long-term trend of increasing engagement has continued throughout the crisis. Employee engagement has now risen to record levels."

Peachy Mondays is the ground-breaking employee feedback platform that gives you deep insight, fast. But more than that, we're employee engagement and organisational development experts.

We can help you to listen better and act faster. Contact team@peachymondays.com and start leveraging deep insights. (Please mention UNLEASH, then we'll know how you found us).

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