IlLUminate Blog Transcript: Liuba Belkin on How to Manage Employees Through COVID-19

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Transcription results:

ANNOUNCER: 00:02	[music] This podcast is brought to you by ilLUminate, the Lehigh Business blog. To learn more, please visit us at business.lehigh.edu/news.
JACK CROFT: 00:14	Welcome. I'm Jack Croft, host of the IlLUminate podcast for Lehigh University College of Business. Today is October 23rd, 2020. And we're talking with Liuba Belkin about her research on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected workers on the job and at home. Dr. Belkin is an Associate Professor of Management in Lehigh's College of Business and holds the Axelrod Family Endowed Fellowship. Her primary research interests focus on affect and emotions in organizational settings and the role of emotions in negotiations, trust relationships, and managerial practices. She also studies the influence of electronic communication media on employee relationships, decision-making, and performance. Dr. Belkin teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in conflict management and negotiations, organizational behavior, and managing people. Thank you for being with us today, Dr. Belkin.
LIUBA BELKIN: 01:18	My pleasure.
CROFT: 01:19	Now, shortly after the pandemic swept across the United States in March, you and your colleagues began collecting data on how it was affecting the lives and emotional well-being of employees. Thinking back, particularly on those first few weeks, what were some of the most significant changes and stressors that abruptly occurred in the workplace and at home for employees?
BELKIN: 01:46	Well, when this unprecedented event started globally in March, and when the university also switched to remote work, really, as everyone else, we were feeling the same way: a lot of uncertainty, a lot of fear. And the other feature of this pandemic was that besides uncertainty and fear related to health, it really touched every aspect of our lives, a lot of uncertainty and fear with respect to work. A lot of people lost their jobs. A lot of people didn't know how long they will have them. There was a lot of financial anxiety. And then at home, there was a lot of health anxiety. Kids were not being in school anymore. So all of this kind of this impact on our lives really-- it was such a significant event that we decided that that was the time when we really need to know how people are coping with such a major crisis. It was, so to speak, a really unprecedented experiment. Right? And that was one of the drivers to get to know how people are reacting to this event. What's happening at work? Do the attitudes towards work change? How do the behaviors change? What's happening at home? We were concerned about workers' well-being.
BELKIN: 03:19	And also since my line of research-- one of the lines of research that my colleagues and I are conducting is on positive emotions and compassion and gratitude and being able to look at leaders in this. We thought we should definitely look at that and see if leaders do play a role in helping people to survive this crisis. So this was initial ideas when we started this research. And we did three ways of data collection in the first two months, and then we recently conducted the follow up. So in these early days

and weeks of pandemic, what we saw is that people were emotionally exhausted. We saw that people were coping very high emotional demands, but surprisingly, to us, well, to come on a school of thought, I would say that on the crisis what literature tells us that when these events happen because of stress and fear and anxiety, people tend to really think about themselves, be selfish, and that's the literature on organizational crisis. What we found was completely different.

CROFT: 04:33   Yeah. I know a lot of your research has had to do with emotions in organizational settings. So it's interesting you were looking particularly-- I think in this case one of the main things was within an organizational setting, within the leadership, the role that they were able to play in making things better for their employees or potentially worse.

BELKIN: 05:01   Right. Absolutely. So what we looked at that what's called emotional management. And we all manage emotions. We all manage emotions about self, right? So for example, if we experience negative emotions that not appropriate for the workplace, we tend to suppress them like fear or anger or anxiety. Sometimes we strategically display positive emotions in work settings because we have to be nice to customers, for example. So this is called personal emotional management, but we also engage in interpersonal emotional management. Meaning, we also manage consciously or unconsciously, emotions of other. Leaders do that as well. And if they do it strategically in the right way, it can actually help employees to manage their well-being. It can also improve performance. It can decrease withdrawal. So this is really helpful tactics that we thought would be important to study during this crisis.

CROFT: 06:01   Yeah. You know, thinking back to those times and the way a lot of us felt it, and you've mentioned that there was varying degrees of fear, a lot of uncertainty, and it does make intuitive sense that if your research had found that workers were scared, distracted, and perhaps not at their best at this time, I don't think anyone would have been surprised. But instead what you found was pretty much the opposite, that there was this pulling together for the common good. This sense of we're all in this together. So what was going on there that made the results so different from what I think most of us probably would have expected?

BELKIN: 06:53   So what we thought about when we were studying this in the early stages of pandemic is that we cannot rely on data that has been collected with the respect to organizational crisis which are much more local, smaller. And they only affect your kind of working itself, right? The part of the job. This was a global crisis. And to understand what was happening, we actually looked at research on natural disasters, and what we found is that there were a number of studies when this large-scale crisis happened, for example, Hurricane Katrina, or September 11th, or refugee crisis. What researchers are finding that people who undergo this crisis, they actually cooperate way more, they help others more because they kind of have this shared identity of survivors of this crisis, and this really facilitates their social behavior. So instead of kind of thinking of themselves first, they actually help more others, even those who are not affected by this crisis. And I think that's what exactly we were finding in our data and we explain it in the way that it's not just the global crisis that led to this, but people will find a new meaning in their jobs. Right? So they interpreted what was happening differently. And there were a lot of people when it started as you know who tried to help in any way they can. Some donated money. Some tried to sew masks, help frontline workers. But what we reason is that one of the ways people

who were fully employed also tried to help is to actually go above and beyond their professional duties. And that's exactly what we found. We saw that the harder the job demands that people perceived, the more overwhelmed that they were, actually the more they were willing to go above and beyond their job responsibilities to help organization or its clients like students or customers, the more that what they were willing to help their peers. On the other hand, we also looked at what's called counterproductive work behaviors. This is behaviors that are discouraged at the organization like withdrawal or being tardy or doing some little things that distract and kind of reduce performance. And we did not find any of this. It was pretty low in our findings. So that's kind of-- that was one of the interesting results.

CROFT: 09:34   Wow. And then in terms of the role that management played in fostering this sense of morale and productivity even during such an extraordinary event. What did you find? And what were the good managers doing that is instructive for others during a crisis, whether it's as severe as this or not?

BELKIN: 10:04   What we were looking at was two types of-- two main types of managing behavior, and that's how leaders manage employee emotions. One, it's called reappraisal; when they tried to help workers to deal with the cause of the problem. And the other one is called suppression; when they just ask their workers not to show negative emotions. Just suppress them. And in normal times, what literature tells us is that reappraisal is a very efficient tactic because it tells workers that leaders really do care. They kind of try to fix the problem rather than just ignoring it by focusing on removing negative emotions. And that is why consistently what we see that when leaders and supervisors engage in reappraisal, it's much more effective in not only managing negative emotions, but it can also improve their supervisor-subordinate relationships. It can increase employee social behavior, kind of going above and beyond. And it also leads to workers higher job satisfaction. But what we found here is that as expected, reappraisal was an efficient tactic to manage negative emotions during this crisis. But what was surprising is that even suppression was very effective. So as long as the leaders try to manage in one way or another, it was really helpful in terms of increasing employee performance and going above and beyond. And again, what we achieved at this finding too is that workers were finding new meaning in leaders' behavior. So as long as leaders tried to help, maybe not the best way they could, but at least they tried. It signaled to workers that they care and they actually work harder.

CROFT: 12:04   If you could talk a little more about that idea of workers finding a new sense or an increased sense of meaning about the jobs they were doing during such a perilous time.

BELKIN: 12:18   One of the ways to explain it is that we all have kind of sense of --we all make sense of things we do, right? And in normal times, we kind of assign different meanings to different things and we go with them. The crisis like this, it was a so-called sense-breaking event. So things are different now. People start to see regular routine things they were doing before differently. In the light of this, people were finding new meaning in things they do, right? So for example, you can talk to a customer who is very distressed, and one way to interpret it is saying, "Well, this customer is just angry, it's a nasty customer." The other way to interpret it is saying, "Well, he or she is probably doing with a lot of issues right now. We are in this crisis. It's my job to help this person. Maybe, I can do something for them." So that's the example of in terms of how when you see someone's behavior or doing a job, you can assign new

meaning. And in times of crisis, people changed the way they see things. So that's kind of-- that was the theorizing behind our findings, and we think our data support this. So again, employees assign new meaning to their jobs and also to leaders' behavior. So instead of thinking, "Well, my manager's telling me 'do not show your anger, anxiety. Well, probably she doesn't care.'" Instead, it was, "They're really trying to help. They're also in this crisis." So that's one of the reasons. And what we found as well is that the trust, the preexisting trust to the leader or supervisor really made a difference, especially by reducing counterproductive work behaviors. So this means that if leaders and their subordinates have established good trust relationships, it really helped them with managing their workers emotions, so employees were more willing to engage in extra-role behaviors, go above and beyond. And at the same time, curb their counterproductive behaviors.

CROFT: 14:32

Right. So building trust with your employees if you're a manager in regular normal times sets the stage for more productivity, more effectiveness, more sense of meaning for the job even when things get incredibly difficult.

BELKIN: 14:55

I would say it's absolutely critical in times like this. So it really matters. And there is emerging research on the importance of trust and trust and relationships at work. But it's even more important when there is crisis to encourage workers so workers actually-- first of all, to provide new meaning for workers and deal with their problems as well, but also to ensure that workers do follow the way you tell them, for example, how to do the job or they listen to you and ensuring their productivity and also ensuring their well-being.

CROFT: 15:36

Okay. Now you also were looking at some other questions. And, one, that a lot of people experience was this almost literally overnight, people who had gotten up and left the house and gone to work for, in some cases, decades, suddenly were working from home. And the entire work environment for a lot of us changed. And what did you find in terms of how workers responded to suddenly being thrust into what for-- some people have had the option of working from home from time to time, but so many were thrust into a completely unfamiliar work environment now, in terms of their routine, the conditions of their employment? How did workers respond to that?

BELKIN: 16:31

Well, we did an unrelated, separate project on this, and what we looked at was job control and loneliness. Why? The reason was that there were two distinct features when the COVID-19 pandemic started was that because of high uncertainty in terms of crisis severity reached duration, health and economic outcomes, there is a sense of lost job control. And the other one was because, as you mentioned, almost overnight everyone started working remotely. There was a high degree of isolation imposed because of remote work, but also at the same time social distancing. So these two factors, they really contrasted to basic human needs. There is need for control and there is need to the lonely, right? So when people are out of control, they tried to gain it in one way or another. Otherwise, there is a lot of anxiety. So we looked at how feelings of job control affected employees' emotional exhaustion, work-life balance, counterproductive work behaviors. But also we looked at their variables, kind of personal variables, in terms of depression, insomnia, and financial anxiety. And we also looked at work-related loneliness. It's a very kind of up and coming research area in my field that-- well, before this, there was work in social psychology saying, "Loneliness kills." Literally in medical field, right? So people who are lonely, they have more stress. They have heart attacks. They just don't live long. But what

recently has been discovered in management field is that there is this phenomenon that's called workplace loneliness, and it can be absolutely independent from the loneliness in your personal life. So COVID, because of isolation in the remote work, really affected negatively the perceptions of connection to workers. And what we found was that every single variable in our study was negatively impacted by loneliness, and by the way, work-related loneliness. Right? So you have firstly strong and detrimental effect on all of the outcomes we looked at. Emotional exhaustion, it was higher. It was lower work-life balance. It was high depression, high insomnia, and higher financial anxiety. And it's actually increased counterproductive work behaviors. And what's interesting was though we-- as a side note, we analyzed looking at whether people had spouses at home, children, their living situations. And that was completely separate. So that tells us that even when people have kids and partners and spouses work greatly, work-- I'm sorry. Workplace loneliness really is detrimental, even if you have support at home, even more so if you don't.

CROFT: 19:44   Right. And some of the-- I know you got some comments from people who participated in the surveys. And some of them are just heartbreaking, and I think they will resonate with a lot of the listeners. There was one participant talking about exactly what you were just talking about, "Isolation has caused my anxiety to become more severe. Anxiety attacks significantly reduced my productivity. These periods can last hours to days."

BELKIN: 20:16   Right. We actually had a lot of comments talking about how COVID affected all aspects of their lives. And there was a lot of talk about isolation. And again, not just in social lives, but also in terms of not being able to see co-workers everyday, not being able to chat. So even though we have Zoom, it's really did affect the well-being of workers as well as their productivity, and also job control. But that was a different animal, so to speak. So job control was really a personal perception of how much control they have over job assignments, and what we found is that people who felt that they actually have flexibility allowed by the department or by their leaders, they felt much better. So for example, again, because everyone was affected, so a lot of people had small kids at home who could not go to kindergarten or school anymore. They sometimes, some people used others babysitters or people who help them clean the house and they couldn't invite them anymore. People have relied on their grandparents maybe to take the kids once in a while so they can work. It was not an option anymore because of safety concerns. So people who were dealing with a lot of things and when their managers allowed them to actually take breaks during the day, right, to be more flexible in terms of timing, they were more productive and they felt better. Right? Because again, everyone's situation was different. But there were so many other factors for some people that affected their productivity.

CROFT: 21:59   Now, it seems that there are likely some practical implications for organizational management in terms of the lessons you've learned from-- some of the lessons at least from the way that workers have responded during the pandemic. And I'm wondering how much an organization needs to pay attention to the kind of basic psychological needs of workers, not only in a time of crisis, but also in the way that working remotely is designed at a company.

BELKIN: 22:39   So this interesting-- that's a very interesting question, Jack, because I think in some way when you said technology was always there, but this was kind of a serendipitous event. Right? It's just pushed everything, maybe speed up like 5 or 10 years from now

we're putting everyone to work remotely. And even though we're not out of the crisis yet, and there are a lot of questions to be studied-- the lesson learned-- there are certain things we already know. For example, people do need human interaction. Right? On the other hand, people can also be efficient working remotely. In fact, we ask our participants in the end of this survey to indicate when crisis is over, how would they like to work. Would they like to stay remote completely, or would they like to go back to the office? And what we found out is that 94% of workers actually indicated that they would like to have at least one day to work from home. So it was probably for a lot of people, even given that they probably were engaged in a lot of other things at the same time managing kids or other things at home, they still felt that they were pretty productive. They would like to have at least one day. Only 10%, though, indicated they would like to be remote completely, which tells us that people still like to have human interaction. So the majority kind of said that they would like to go back to office, but would like to have one or two days a week, the availability working from home. So this tells us that workers need flexibility, and managers need to pay attention to that-- flexibility in terms of where they do the work. And again, technology allows this currently. And also flexibility in terms of hours as well. As our prior work to COVID, my colleagues and I, we did research on how email and this constant availability affects our well-being, our productivity, our spouses' well-being. What we found is that this idea that if you think-- you need to be available constantly, so instead of working 9:00 to 5:00, you work 24/7, it really negatively impacts your well-being and also marital relationship.

BELKIN: 25:04   So going out of the crisis, on the one-hand flexibility in terms of allowing people to work from home, but also allowing people to work certain hours and not expect them to be always on a call or on email. They're both applicable here. Right? Because if people are working from home, sometimes managers think, "Well, then they should be available any time of the day." But that's not the case. So flexibility is number one. Number two, when things like this happen and everyone has a different situation, it's the job of a leader to make sure that the workers are-- to understand what is going on in their lives. So if it's all remote, it's pretty easy to schedule a routine five-minute call, not to talk about work, but just ask how they're doing, what is going on in their lives. Even if you cannot see them in the office, it really helps to maintain this connection, which in the long run, of course, increases worker commitment to the job. It may increase, again we didn't study this, but it may increase also productivity and kind of again going above and beyond what they doing because to work is the signal that my manager cares, my leader cares. So that's another important point.

CROFT: 26:26   And again that would seem to go toward what you were talking about in terms of building trust with employees that you're not only hearing from your supervisor when they want something from you, they're actually interested in what's going on in your life.

BELKIN: 26:42   Absolutely. And we did another study during COVID, but we did actually experimental work with that. And what we found out is that people who reported their managers really cared about them especially during early stages asking how they're feeling, trying to help them find some products that were out of shelves, these people were more committed to work, and they were more creative. They were actually suggesting ideas and raising concerns when businesses were in trouble. So that's another-- related to COVID study but not something I was talking about today but also shows us how important this personal connection to your workers. Right? Just explain

some compassion, and workers do remember that and the literally not just perform their jobs, they go above and beyond because to them it signals my manager cares and my work matters and that kind of goes back to the work meaning. Right?

CROFT: 27:41 Yeah. There's a lot I'd like to ask, but I think I'll wrap up with this question which is I know you've continued to collect data throughout the pandemic. And I'm wondering have you seen any changes in behaviors and attitudes? I'm wondering how workers are handling what is called the new normal today compared to, say, six months ago?

BELKIN: 28:07 Right. We just actually finish this follow-up data collection. And we just have preliminary results. But it's very interesting because now everyone is talking about COVID fatigue, right, so to speak. Because we all tired. Right? So at the beginning, we were scared, but it was so new. We didn't know how long it will last, probably a couple of months. Unfortunately, it lasted longer and still we don't know when the end is in sight. And because human resources, physical, and mental are limited. You get tired dealing with everything that's happening. So we were not sure what we'll see. But for now, kind of supporting this pandemic fatigue notion, we do find that people report much higher emotional demands at their jobs than we saw six months ago, which is quite interesting because that was this shocking crisis. Right? And people were very overwhelmed, but they even more overwhelmed now even though we kind of got used to this new normal, but we just got tired. Right? So it's just one part.

BELKIN: 29:14 On the other hand, what we also are seeing is that people still perceive very high meaning in their jobs and people who do again go above and beyond their job responsibilities. In fact, what they reported is significantly higher than what we saw in the early stages of the pandemic. At the same time, the counterproductive work behaviors did not increase at all, which to us means again people are exhausted, they are dealing with a lot of demands, but they are still finding meaning in their jobs and they are still going above and beyond their expectations.

CROFT: 29:53 Great. Well, I think on that optimistic note, it would be a good place for a stand. So thank you again so much, Dr. Belkin, for what's been a most interesting conversation about something that affects all of us.

BELKIN: 30:07 Thank you so much for inviting me today. And we're hoping to collect more data when it is one year from the start of the pandemic. So we would like to confirm our findings and hoping for some new insights that will help us all manage situations like this and organizations and especially their leaders. We hope our findings would be interesting to how to really adjust their work environment to ensure that workers are healthy and happy and dealing the best they can with the crisis, but also that organizations flourish and survive during the times of crisis.

CROFT: 30:46 Well, let's hope by that one-year mark, things are looking considerably brighter than they do now.

BELKIN: 30:53 Absolutely. [laughter]

CROFT: 30:54 Okay. I'd like to once again thank my guest, Liuba Belkin. Her research has been published over the years in such prestigious academic journals as The Journal of Management, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, Journal of International Business Studies, and Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes. It also has garnered considerable media attention

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