

Fear and trust in the evolving world of work

27 May 2020

Image

Image not found or type unknown

Susan Clews, Acas Chief Executive

Acas Chief Executive Susan Clews has worked in Acas frontline operations and as Director of Strategy and Chief Operations Officer.

I wanted to write this blog around the theme of fear versus trust; but was stopped in my tracks by the thought that talking too much about fear might add to already high levels of stress and anxiety. The findings from an [Acas-commissioned YouGov survey](#), published last week, made me have a rethink. The survey found that:

- 43% of employers have experienced issues affecting their employees related to stress, anxiety or mental health difficulties in the previous 12 months, but **only**
- 22% of employees have spoken to their manager about stress, anxiety or mental health in the last 12 months

If we want to help our staff manage their mental health in the coronavirus pandemic, we must empower them to speak up about concerns. And as leaders, we must be open and honest about our own levels of stress, anxiety and, yes, fear.

One of my personal fears is that people at work will not feel able to raise their concerns, whatever these might be. [Research by the Centre of People, Work and Organisational Practice](#) looked at the attitudes of operational workers, including those in manufacturing and construction, and highlighted significant issues around employee voice which already existed before the crisis. It found that the 'command and control' structure of many operational roles led to a 'culture of verbal abuse and management structures' which did not encourage employees to raise concerns without fear of reprisals. We simply cannot let this happen at a time when people may have legitimate fears for their safety, and when the issues they raise could literally be a matter of life and death.

The new comfortable

[A recent poll of 1,000 working adults](#), conducted by YouGov for the CIPD, found that 44% reported feeling anxious about the prospect of going back to work because of the health risks posed by COVID-19 to them and those close to them. The survey also revealed that 31% of workers were anxious about commuting to work.

Getting people back to work in an environment where they feel safe and comfortable will take a lot of talking and consulting. Acas advisers know from experience that this is always time well spent. And the issue for discussion is not simply addressing health and safety issues.

As Hubert Joly wrote in the [Harvard Business Review](#): "Safety is essential, of course, but it's also important to address higher-level needs such as the want for truth, stability, authentic connections, self-esteem, growth, and meaning in the context of the crisis."

My greatest hope? It is two-fold. That we can make a safe transition back to work, that accommodates the needs of individuals as well as the business. And that longer term, we can build new workplaces based on mutual understanding and trust.

There is an old Nordic saying that 'trust arrives on foot and departs on horseback'. It may seem a long process to get back to a 'new comfortable', but trust can grow and strengthen at the pace of a brisk walk if we hold true to our promise to look after the mental and

physical health of our staff and listen to and act upon their concerns.

Same storm, different boats

One of the greatest challenges that any significant and rapid change presents to organisations is trying to avoid the 'us and them' mindset that can so easily set in. For example, there may be one group of staff on furlough and another still working; there may be some staff working from home and others working in the office or on the factory floor. And if you dig deeper, into the extremely wide array of individual circumstances people are facing, then you will have some who are highly vulnerable to COVID-19 and those who are not; those who are shielding vulnerable relatives at high risk, and those who are home-educating children for the first time; and so on. And so, the lines that potentially divide multiply.

There are also deeper societal concerns about the impact of the pandemic. The [Institute for Fiscal Studies](#) has pointed out that "groups that are vulnerable to poor health are likely to be hit hardest ... and evidence is emerging that the economic repercussions of the crisis are falling disproportionately on young workers, low-income families and women."

The gist of what many charities and stakeholders are saying, notably in the recent [report from the Mental Health Foundation](#) that makes the link between financial inequality and mental wellbeing, is that although we may be in the same storm, we are not all in the same boat.

Understanding and accommodating as far as possible these individual and group needs and priorities will be the basis for building trust, as more of us return to the workplace over the coming weeks and months.

Bridges to the future

It is undeniable that the experience of the pandemic has been very different depending on a host of factors, such as where you live, who you live with or care for, the job you do, and so on. But it is also undeniable that there has been a sense of camaraderie in which kindness, empathy and humour have helped many of us deal with isolation, loneliness and fear.

As we start to build our bridges to what comes next in the world of work, I believe that we need 3 things:

1. Clear guidelines for our safety and security

These should be flexible enough to take account of the different concerns we all have. Both the [government](#) and the [HSE](#) have published guidance on working safely. I am very heartened to read that the government guide advises "consulting with your workers or trade unions"; and the HSE guide clearly states that managing health and safety is a "two-way process". This is something we must all be involved in.

2. A new psychological contract at work

Many people will have had changes to their written terms and conditions in recent months – perhaps around changes to working patterns or being placed on temporary leave – but isn't it time we rethought what the unwritten psychological contract should look like? The pandemic will mean many of us will now have new sets of values around work and home life that need to be acknowledged and understood.

3. Trust built upon a reinvigorated approach to joint, collaborative working

After the last recession, [academics from Bath University asked the question 'where has all the trust gone?'](#) At that time people felt let down by many of those they felt they should be able to trust – particularly those in positions of authority. Now we need to rebuild trust in the working relationship, and this can only be done by finding effective ways of working together.

Employers in every sector across the country are rightly concerned about how to get their business back up and running. But let's not

lose sight of what will get you there – only through genuine and meaningful collaboration with your workforce can you begin to properly rebuild confident, engaged workforces and productive workplaces.