

WHITEPAPER

What HR Should Focus on in the Face of Geopolitical Unrest

Guidance for Organizations Dealing
with the Crisis in Ukraine

KINCENTRIC A Spencer Stuart Company

During times of crisis, fluidity, inclusivity and inventiveness are required to ensure that leaders and teams can successfully respond to change, remain resilient and take the steps necessary to vitalize their business. Understandably, the challenges companies face in the current geopolitical environment will differ across locations and industries, as will their responses. However, during a time in which organizations are forced to react “here and now,” each should consider its actions across five perspectives.

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1 Situational Management

The decisions that organizations make will be of great importance, not only for the company's market image but for how it may affect the sense of pride and identification employees have with the organization, their unity around the company's values and the atmosphere of cooperation among teams. Additionally, these decisions may either strengthen or weaken trust in senior leadership, managers and HR as well as impact the energy level and efficiency needed to maintain business operations.

Recommended actions:

- Establish a management group (e.g., crisis management team, PMO, steering committee) and a rapid decision-making process for such things as:
 - Will we hire refugees? What will be needed to facilitate their onboarding? Will we support employees in their individual volunteer activities? Are we going to revise performance goals? If we support fundraising, what kind? How do we approach planned company-wide initiatives?
- Provide the organization with an ongoing cascade of decisions and guidance, along with their underlying rationale.
- Identify current and anticipated business challenges, ensuring they are on the agenda of senior leadership and translated into priority HR initiatives.
- Map the challenges that may arise as a result of the company's position, either locally or globally, and create a plan for communicating this position to all stakeholders, including employees, customers and investors.

2 Care and Support

In times of crisis, people experience anxiety, a decreased sense of stability and information overload, often feeling overwhelmed. This is a significant “moment that matters” for the organization and their employees. Leaders must be nimble and inclusive and demonstrate increased levels of care and concern, as this moment can either build or break employee engagement.

Recommended actions:

- Identify those who may be directly impacted by the current situation, whether it is an employee, their partner, extended family or friends. Reach out to them individually and freely offer any necessary support – financial, psychological, legal, material – and remember that their situation may change dynamically from day to day.
- Provide a variety of support – for example, psychological or financial counselling, a day off for volunteering, an employee hotline, etc.
- Host an educational session on how to support colleagues from Ukraine, how to best talk about and deal with the situation, to mitigate issues that may result from incorrect assumptions and uncertainty about how to react.
- Create and maintain a communication hub with updates on the situation, relevant information and links to available resources. An alternative is to launch a joint corporate initiative or fundraiser for a mutually agreed-upon goal.
- Conduct an anonymous survey, pulse check or focus group to listen to the different voices in the company. Employees may hold divergent views on the need to respond and help in light of the current situation in Ukraine. It is necessary to react to negative emotions or conflicts against this background.



3 Resilience and Energy to Act

When faced with a crisis, people tend to focus on immediate action without thinking about possible long-term implications. This can lead to frustration, exhaustion and a reduced sense of agency. To counteract this, it is important to consider the impact the crisis may have on employees today as well as tomorrow and into the future, and to take measures to create a sense of stability and normalcy where possible.

Recommended actions:

- Focus attention on the importance of caring for people's energy over the long term.
- Emphasize that it is OK to take care of yourself. Consider hosting a short webinar to provide tips and tools on building and preserving personal resilience to educate people around sources of energy and sense of influence.
- Continue to observe positive rituals when possible (offsites, celebrations), and search for additional opportunities to come together to build a sense of community. We can all use a boost of positive energy from time to time, and the sense of belonging and support we get from being part of a group is an important source of resilience.
- Whether at work or outside, we will function in a significantly more intercultural environment, which can serve as a source of inspiration but may also create tension. Starting today, it is worthwhile to educate and sensitize managers and all employees on differences – just remember to present them from all perspectives.
- Verify the “calendar of HR processes” in concert with people managers to decide which actions should continue as planned because they will provide a sense of stability and influence, and which should be postponed. Be sure to clearly communicate with employees around any plans to stray from normal procedures to avoid creating feelings of destabilization, panic or even suspicion that the company wants to use the crisis as an excuse to, for example, postpone the process of promotions or raises.

4 Support for Managers

It is important to understand that managers themselves may be experiencing the same tension, insecurity and exhaustion felt by their employees. However, without their dedication and fluidity to quickly adjust to the new situation, it will be difficult to meet the challenges facing the organization. Be sure you are providing them with the tools and support they need to manage effectively.

Recommended actions:

- Deepen managers' understanding of the business challenges facing the organization now and in the near future so that they can take decisive action to mitigate impact.
- Summarize the available support options that the company offers, educating managers about the needs and challenges of employees they see "close up." This applies in particular to managers leading people from Ukraine, Belarus and Russia.
- Provide information and resources for managers that include practical tips and guidance regarding the current situation – e.g., empathic communication, engaging leadership, leadership in times of uncertainty.
- Prepare managers to talk sensitively about the delivery of business goals. They face the added challenge of ensuring the stability of their teams' operations and reconciling the needs of the business with the need to provide support and assistance to their teams.
- Train managers on how to effectively lead within an intercultural environment, manage conflicts and defuse tense situations, such as using neutral language, speaking softly and slowly, acknowledging emotions, and referring to company values, which should serve as the foundation for discussion and commitment around how the company operates, what is acceptable behavior and what is not.



5 Visibility and Direction From Senior Leadership

When faced with a crisis, employees need a consistent course of action and clear communication as well as engaging, caring leadership from organizational leaders.

Recommended actions:

- Create a safe and open space for senior leadership to discuss individual points of view, values, views, cultural differences and business perspectives – a space that will allow them to align on strategy and actions.
- Ensure leaders understand and acknowledge the needs and expectations of employees. They should remain highly visible and in regular contact with employees to provide direction, stabilize emotions and express concern for people.
- Be as transparent as possible around the potential business, economic and social impact of the Ukrainian crisis, and share any preventive or responsive actions that are being considered or undertaken.
- Provide senior leaders with individual support – e.g., psychological support, executive coaching in dealing with crisis situations.

We all learn how to adapt to a new context on an ongoing basis. You will not be an expert in every discipline, but you can initiate the necessary actions. Also, do not forget to use the support you provide or enable for others, yourself.

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About Kincentric

Kincentric, a Spencer Stuart company, helps organizations unlock the power of people and teams to ignite change and drive better business results. With decades of experience and specialist expertise in areas such as culture; employee engagement; leadership assessment and development; HR and talent advisory; and diversity, equity and inclusion, we use data-driven insights to architect solutions that add value, enhance agility and increase organizational effectiveness. For more information, visit kincentric.com.

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