

## Leading Your Team During COVID-19: Tips and Tools for Maintaining a Healthy Team

### 1. Create a Culture of Open Communications

With so much uncertainty and change during this pandemic, open communications can ensure clarity, bring your teams closer together, and help alleviate some anxiety. To foster open communications, you can:

- Talk openly about the challenges facing your organization.
- Create a space where people can ask questions about those challenges and provide them with honest answers. “I don’t know yet” is an ok answer!
- Talk with your team about the process you’ll use to come up with solutions to these challenges. For example, will you consult with experts, change workplace policies, or provide staff with opportunities to submit suggestions? Be as clear as possible, even if you don’t have all the answers yet.
- Be clear about who will be making the final decisions about how to address these challenges. Will decisions be made by consensus, by the Executive Director, Board, etc.? This is especially important if staff have an input, but not decision-making power, as being clear about this upfront can help prevent potential tensions later on.
- Provide timelines when you can.
- Provide information about COVID-19, especially as it pertains to your state and locale.
- Utilize multiple mediums. Videos, newsletters, video conferencing, and individual and group phone calls can all be effective for different teams.

#### **Suggested Tool to Get You Started:**

- Schedule an organization townhall-style meeting to talk about current challenges and processes for addressing them.

### 2. Take Care of Your Staff

While we are all living through this pandemic, not all of our experiences are the same. By taking the time to understand what your team members are experiencing, you can better care for their needs and come up with organizational strategies that put them first. In particular:

- Talk with the individuals on your team to better understand their personal circumstances (e.g. are they quarantining alone, are they homeschooling children, do they live with an essential worker, do they have access to the tools needed to do their work, etc.). *Remember that under the ADA, you cannot ask employees about a specific illness (you cannot directly ask if an employee has COVID-19).*
- Check in on people regularly. This should be done individually and as a team. Remember that things are constantly changing, so regular check-ins really are necessary.
- Consider your policy for taking time off and flexible work hours during this time to accommodate staff needs, including self-care and mental health breaks.
- Look for opportunities to do special things for your teams. Examples include sending food delivery gift cards or credits, provide a subscription to Headspace, send hand-written thank you notes, make special “thank you” calls, send links to useful resources.
- When maintaining essential staff and re-opening your offices, think through the physical safety needs of your team. Clearly communicate new standards and procedures and ensure that your team has all the necessary tools to correctly follow them. Remember, one size may not fit all.

### **Suggested Tools to Get You Started:**

- Schedule a 15-minute team check in each week as a space for people to come together and just talk about how they’re doing and feeling, without any other agenda.
- Begin each team meeting with a two-word check from each individual.
- Send hand-written thank you cards to everyone on your team this week.

## **3. Provide Clear Expectations**

With things rapidly shifting due to COVID-19, it’s essential to provide both individuals and teams with clear expectations on their work, particularly if there are shifting roles within the organization due to lay-offs and/or extended leaves. Clearly outline what you expect individuals and teams to be responsible for and accomplish by:

- Ensuring that your teams understand how their work as a team and as an individual helps get the organization closer to its mission and vision.
- Outlining the expected outcomes and timelines of the work. For example, “I need this team to come up with a plan for delivering remote services by the end of the week” or, “I need you to put together an agenda for an online community meeting by tomorrow afternoon”.
- Clearly identifying the parameters of the work, including where there is room for flexibility. For example, “I need you to create a draft agenda for an online community meeting by tomorrow afternoon. Please include a Q&A section. I will have to review it before we finalize it.”

- Ensuring that your teams have the tools they need to be successful. Be sure to ask your staff what they need, don't just assume!
- Regrounding yourself and your team in your organizational values to show up for each other and for your communities.
- *Look out for unhealthy dynamics. Times of crisis have the potential to create unhealthy competition, a scarcity approach to the work, rumors, and mistrust. Be aware of this and be on the lookout for it so that you can clearly call it out and redirect. Be sure to emphasize organizational values.*

#### **Suggested Tool to Get You Started:**

- Start using a “roles and responsibilities” chart, such as the RACI or MOCHA management charts (see links below).

## **4. Adapt Often**

The world we live in is consistently and rapidly changing due to COVID-19, which means our organizations will have to consistently and rapidly change too. Adopting a mindset of being nimble and adaptable will greatly serve your organization and teams. To encourage flexibility:

- Leave plenty of room for the unknown.
- Experiment. Be creative and try new things! Encourage out-of-the-box ideas and suggestions.
- Continuously checking in with your teams on how your new strategies are working and adapt again as you make changes to strengthen them.
- Celebrate failure. Failure means you are trying and learning. Give yourself and your teams lots of grace. By trying and failing, you will learn how to make your organization even stronger.

#### **Suggested Tools to Get You Started:**

- Hold a brainstorming meeting where you ask your team what you know and what you don't know about operating under COVID-19. This can lead to rich ideas about how you may need to adapt your organizational strategies and the way you work.
- Create a team mantra that uplifts creativity as an important part of your organizational culture. Examples include “Release your inner artist” or “All ideas welcome” or “Innovation will keep us moving”.

## 5. Connect and Celebrate Often!

Finding ways to connect with one another and celebrate your wins can keep up morale for teams during this otherwise stressful time in their work and personal lives. In particular:

- Look for small wins to celebrate and feel good about.
- Celebrate team member milestones, such as birthdays and work anniversaries.
- Provide space for team members to recognize each other.
- Plan fun ways for your team to connect with one another safely. For example, plan virtual teambuilding activities such as a virtual lunch, trivia game, or museum tour.

### Suggested Tools to Get You Started:

- Create a competition for the most creative zoom meeting background.
- During your weekly team meeting, invite people to acknowledge one another.
- Plan a virtual lunch to celebrate a team member's milestone.

### Further Reading:

- [Society for Human Resource Management's "Answers to the Most Common Coronavirus Questions"](#)
- [RACI Charts](#)
- [The Management Center MOCHA Chart](#)
- [Harvard Business Review's "4 Behaviors That Help Leaders Manage a Crisis"](#)
- [Nonprofit Leadership Alliance's Welcome to Remote Work: A Quarantine Survival Guide for Nonprofit Employees"](#)
- [Kindred Consulting's "Remote Workplace Equity"](#)
- [SeaChange's "Tough Times Call for Tough Action: A Decision Framework for Nonprofit Leaders and Boards"](#)
- [The Bridgespan Group's "Beyond Survival: Five Keys to Unlock Social Innovation Amid the COVID-19 Crisis"](#)
- [The Bridgespan Group's "Be the Calm in the Storm: How to Communicate with Staff and Stakeholders During a Crisis"](#)
- [Zarvana's "How To Overcome The Social Isolation Of Remote Work"](#)
- [Bain & Company's "How to Make Your Teams Stronger in a Crisis"](#)
- [Bain & Company's "Coronavirus: How to Be the Leader Your People Need Right Now"](#)