



BOSTON COLLEGE
Center for Work & Family
CARROLL SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

Supporting Managers in a Time of Crisis (COVID-19)

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This information brief is intended to assist managers dealing with the psychological, logistical and practical problems they encounter during the unprecedented challenges presented by the Coronavirus pandemic. It covers a number of relevant topics including managing in a crisis, dealing with stress during a crisis, shifting to and managing a remote work situation, and managing employees who are designated as essential.

Managing in a Crisis

[4 Behaviors That Help Leaders Manage a Crisis](#) (Chris Nichols , Shoma Chatterjee Hayden and Chris Trendle, *Harvard Business Review*, 4/2/20)

As the authors point out in their opening, “The roles and responsibilities of business leaders have dramatically changed in the past few weeks. Before COVID-19, CEOs and other executives in high-growth companies were focused on fostering innovation, driving revenue, and gaining market share. Today, many of those same leaders must make rapid decisions ... [while encountering] unforeseen roadblocks — supply chain issues, team shortages, and operational challenges — that drastically alter the scope of their roles and priorities. All the while, they and their teams are navigating health and safety concerns, working remotely, and supporting their families through the pandemic.”

This crisis presents a host of problems - personal, professional, family and societal. In light of these, what behavior will help us navigate the crisis effectively? The authors suggest four:

Behavior 1: Decide with speed over precision. Since the situation is changing by the day, the best leaders quickly process available information, rapidly determine what matters most, and make decisions with conviction.

Behavior 2: Adapt boldly. Strong leaders seek input and information from diverse sources, are not afraid to admit what they don't know, and ask for other's expertise

when needed. Just as important as deciding what to do, is to identify what you will not and can not do during the crisis.

Behavior 3: Reliably deliver what you commit to. The best leaders take personal ownership in a crisis, even though many challenges and factors lie outside their control. They align team focus, establish new metrics to monitor performance, and create a culture of accountability. It is often helpful to create a simple, documented plan of what the deliverables are and who will own them during the crisis.

Behavior 4: Engage for impact. In times of crisis, no job is more important than taking care of your team. Effective leaders are understanding of their team's circumstances and distractions, but they find ways to engage and motivate, clearly and thoroughly communicating important new goals and information. Leaders need to reiterate new priorities frequently to ensure continued alignment in this time of constant and stressful change.

Managing Stress (Yours and Your Employees) During a Crisis

[Coping with Fatigue, Fear, and Panic During a Crisis](#) (Tony Schwartz and Emily Pines, Harvard Business Review, 3/23/20)

As the authors point out, at present we are dealing with two contagions — the virus itself and the emotions it generates. Negative emotions are every bit as contagious as the virus, and they're also toxic. They discuss three modes we can be in during times like these: the *overwhelmed self*, the *survival self*, and the *adult self*. It is understandable why when we are overwhelmed, we go into survival mode, but they offer three steps one can take to move into the adult self frame, which is the most helpful at these times. It allows us to step back, widen our perspective and make better, more rational judgements based on the facts that confront us rather than the fears and misconceptions that may be clouding our judgement (or those of our people).

Managing Remote Workers

[Adapting to a Remote Workplace](#) (Brad Harrington, LinkedIn, 3/23/20)

This piece is intended to help both managers and employees adjust to the new reality of working remotely. The piece includes links to our Executive Briefing on

Creating a Culture of Flexibility as well as *tips sheet for working remotely and managing employees who are doing so.*

8 Ways to Manage Your Team While Social Distancing (Timothy Clark, Harvard Business Review, 3/24/20)

1. **Reset your expectations.** Most teams are accustomed to synchronous work and working together at the same office. In a quarantined environment, managers must help their teams shift immediately to asynchronous work.
2. **Stay in regular touch.** Research shows that shorter communication cycle times are more effective in building and sustaining morale and engagement.
3. **Assign buddies and peer coaches to add a layer of mutual support.** Organize team members into pairs with each individual assigned as a buddy / peer coach to their assigned colleague. This will distribute mentoring and connections. Have them check-in with one another daily.
4. **Look for cues from tone and voice as proxies for face-to-face feedback.** It's harder to read the emotional cues of your people when you aren't in the same room. Listen more carefully for cues of how people are doing and use video communications whenever possible.
5. **Model optimism whenever possible.** Optimism is contagious and leaders who demonstrate hopefulness about the future help team members find meaning and purpose in work, especially in stressful conditions.
6. **Update even if there's no update.** Uncertainty fuels anxiety. The more you communicate and share, the less chance an information vacuum will be a source of stress within your team.
7. **Support continued learning but keep it short.** Learning doesn't have to stop in this new way of working, but focus on sharing short lessons on a single topic in a five to 10-minute segment.
8. **Continually gauge stress and engagement levels.** Make it crystal clear to your team members that your chief concern is their well-being and take time to monitor their engagement periodically.

Managing “Essential Workers” During a Crisis

[Employee Engagement for Workers who Fulfill Essential Roles](#) (Katherine V. Smith, BC Center for Corporate Citizenship 3/31/20)

It is critical to maintain morale and productivity for essential workers during an operational crisis. If we think of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, we know that in a crisis, people's psychological needs change dramatically and we move from lofty needs (for recognition or what Maslow termed “self-actualization”) to much more fundamental concerns - will my loved ones and I be safe, will I be able to find the basic necessities, will my income be secure.

With that as a backdrop, here are some things we can do to make sure those that are essential workers feel safe during this distressing time:

- **Make sure most basic physiological needs are met.** Provide food/beverage, adequate facilities/opportunities to eat and rest for workers, especially those working extreme or overnight shifts..
- **Make sure workers feel safe.** Provide adequate safety gear, sanitation, health screenings. If possible, overstaff and use shorter shifts to avoid errors and minimize risks. Provide care for dependent children and adults, including facilitating communication with loved ones.
- **Create a sense of belonging, connection to purpose.** Ensure that workers understand objectives of the mission, why their work matters and the impact they are making. Engage remote employees as volunteers or support systems for front line workers.
- **Publicly praise teams, privately praise individuals.** Leaders and co-workers should support and communicate the work of frontline heroes to help sustain energy and morale of workers, who otherwise may feel isolated. If possible, leaders should visit sites to hear concerns and how workers might benefit from additional support or resources. Access to telehealth and EAP for all employees and families regardless of status or whether they are on medical plan ([Aramark](#), [Lowe's](#))

[How to talk to essential employees during COVID-19 Crisis \(Feedstuffs 3/28/20\)](#)

- **Over-communicate** - in short, measured bursts, simple and direct, push and pull strategies
- **Incorporate new platforms** - text messaging apps for hourly workers, private page on website which houses all relevant COVID resources
- **Provide extra support** - help them navigate personal circumstances, e.g. childcare
- **Clarity is critical** - clarify employee expectations, benefits and personnel matters during crisis, e.g. what happens when they fall ill, PTO, sick time, and absentee policies
- **Do the little things** - feed workers on site, provide crisis bonus
- **Focus on health and safety** - implement and communicate additional safety precautions with ongoing input from workers
- **Reinforce values and long-term vision** - ensure a sense of belonging and greater good, that uncertainty will end and future remains in focus

Additional Resources

[Company Survival Guide to Care for Staff during the Coronavirus](#) (Forbes 4/1/20)

[US Chamber of Commerce Coronavirus Response Toolkit](#)

[CDC Guidance Documents - Interim Guidance for Business and Employers](#)

[CDC Communication Resources](#)

[A List of Essential Workers that We Should Thank and Support during the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)

Relevant CWF Resources

[Emergency Leave during COVID-19 \(March 2020\)](#)

[Remote Work and COVID-19 \(March 2020\)](#)

[COVID-19 Emergency Leave \(March 2020\)](#)

[Flexible/Remote Work Communications during COVID-19 \(March 2020\)](#)