



POSITIVE PATHWAYS

BUILDING *HEALTHY WORKPLACE* RELATIONSHIPS

**LEADING TEAMS REMOTELY
IN TIMES OF CRISIS**

7 STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

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In these uncertain times your team will need reassurance from you. The way that you lead them right now will be crucial to your success going forward.

Unpredictability is bad for team morale and for your business. Not only does it impact your bottom line but more importantly it has a massive impact on the well-being of each member of your team.

Right now, they are having to juggle their own emotions and those of their families. They may also be having to deal with monetary concerns. The impact that this has on peoples' relationships, both personal and in the workplace, cannot be ignored.

Your role as a leader is to monitor your own well-being and behaviour before you even look at the team's. You are their role model, even more so in this current climate where people are feeling lost and scared.

Every conversation you have will contribute to the morale of your team and they will need you to show empathy, compassion and understanding if you are to help them feel engaged, motivated and empowered.

The following strategies will enable you to build and maintain healthy workplace relationships in the craziness that COVID-19 has unleashed.

Strategy 1.

How can you lead and support your people remotely during a crisis?

- Have a well thought out plan based on your knowledge of your team and their existing needs. If you have a large team brainstorm ideas with your senior managers, otherwise ask your team what support they will need in these uncertain times. You might be surprised by what they come up with.
- Ensure staff have access to everything they will need in order to do their job to the best of their abilities e.g. laptops, extra data on their phones, login details, access to shared documents, individual contact details etc.
- Have clear expectations about the tasks that each person is responsible for. Discuss who else may be involved. Tell them what you need from them. Ask what they may need from each other and what they may need from you. Discuss delivery times, information portals and project deadlines.
- “Out of sight, out of mind” can certainly apply to those who are not in the office. People need to feel connected more than ever right now. It’s easy for remote workers to feel they aren’t heard at the best of times, and it can be difficult to collaborate with people who aren’t physically present. So by ensuring that you are there for them you will help your team feel more connected.
- If you have a group huddle every morning in the office, ensure you have a check in at a designated time to discuss the days tasks and how everyone is coping. Try to replicate best practice.
- We all have a preferred way of communicating. If you don’t already know, ask each team member whether they prefer to communicate via text, zoom, email, telephone. Also let staff know how you prefer to be communicated with too.
- Leadership teams and managers also need to ensure they’re collecting feedback and tapping in to how everyone is feeling. Being aware of their pain points and being able to provide constructive feedback is crucial to maintaining morale and creating an environment that prioritises open communication and support.

What else can you add to the list?

Strategy 2.

Working from home can be quite isolating. How can you ensure this doesn't become a problem?

- Some people get a lot of social energy from just being at work. For those who are extroverts, check in with them more regularly than the introverts on your team. Just make sure that you *do* check in with the introverts in your team too.
- Have a Zoom, Skype or WhatsApp call with the team first thing to start off the day and establish that work has begun.
- Create a sense of normality to the day. Talking with everyone is a great opportunity for any matters to be raised. It's also useful to get people motivated to get started with their work, otherwise it can be easy to fall into lounging in bed and working.
- In order to help maintain your team's mental health you need to keep things as normal as possible. They will very quickly become disengaged and feel disconnected if they slip into lethargy.

What else can you add to your list?

Strategy 3.

You're probably used to measuring output through visibility. How can you handle this when everyone is working remotely?

- The amount of time someone is at their desk has nothing to do with the quality of their output. Let your team know that as long as they deliver what you expect from them on time, it doesn't matter whether they take four or eight hours to do their work.
- Also ensure that your team understand you need to be informed beforehand if something might crop up that will prevent them from completing their tasks on time.
- If you have a large team do what works best in the office. Make sure that you and the team leaders, if you have them, check in regularly with your teams. e.g. create a WhatsApp group so that the whole team is in touch with each other, including you. Set up a time to have a group call with your managers at the start and end of the day. This prevents nasty surprises from happening.
- Some team members may have children at home, as may you. Time frames need to be relatively flexible, however your team are still technically at work.
- Let your team know what you expect from them individually, and as a team, in terms of supporting each other. Ask your team what they expect from you. Give individuals plenty of feedback and also ready access to you. Some will need to use it more than others, but if they know it's there it *will* level out.

What else can you add to the list?

Strategy 4.

People often congregate round the water cooler or have lunch together. How can you manage this lack of social contact?

- Think about how time is spent in the office and how you would normally communicate with your team. If you have an informal office environment or often have impromptu meetings, ask your team what will work best for them. You could use Zoom or WhatsApp to have meetings.
- The key to connection is through conversation. It's essential whilst people are self-isolating and also ensures that everyone remembers they are still part of the team.
- Finish the week on a high by having a virtual get together. Get your team to celebrate what they've achieved in the week. Get them to come up with a Joke of the Week. In fact do anything that will energise and engage your team.

Strategy 5.

How can you manage your team's emotions?

- Everyone has feelings of uncertainty and they feel disempowered and scared. Let them know that you understand it's a difficult time for everyone, yourself included. Acknowledge how they may be feeling and let them know that they can contact you directly if anyone has anything pressing that they need to discuss.
- Working remotely may feel a bit 'clunky' to begin with but emphasise that you are all in it together. Ask them for suggestions of how to make it easier for everyone to cope with their feelings.
- Your people are probably used to having ready access to you. Working remotely, especially under these conditions can make them feel disconnected and isolated. This often leads to feelings of being dis-engaged, demotivated and demoralised. If this happens their mental health will suffer and their productivity will flag.
- Make sure you are checking in with individuals regularly. You *cannot* overcommunicate in these times. A quick text to say "how's it going?" or "how can I help?" will make someone's day and could be the difference between despair or hope.
- Be aware that some staff may need more face to face time to keep them engaged, motivated and productive, especially the extroverts in your team.
- Working from home presents its own problems, especially if there are children at home. Always bear this in mind before you think of admonishing anyone. Show compassion and be kind. Now is *not* the time for being heavy handed. A gentle reminder will often suffice.

Strategy 6.

How can you manage your own emotions?

- There is a reason why cabin crew on aircraft tell you to ‘put on your own oxygen mask’ first. Trying to dumb down or ignore your emotions leads to dis-ease and in the current crisis, this is inadvisable.
- If you are finding it difficult to cope, either with your own or your team’s emotions, seek outside help. Having an external sounding board to help you gain new insights and see things from a different perspective can be the difference between you just surviving or thriving.
- It’s only by looking after your own well-being that you will be able to help those around you to maintain their emotional and psychological well-being. Your team are relying on you so model the behaviours you want them to display.
- Make a list of all the things that will help *you* to deal with your own well-being. Ask your team to brainstorm what *they* can do to look after themselves.
- Encouraging everyone to share their ideas creates a feeling of support and ‘we’re all in this together’. Share with each other which ones you’ve each tried and the results.

What else can you add to this list?

Strategy 7.

There may come a point that it might be critical to tell people to just stop and look after their family. How can you communicate this?

- This will change with every day that passes.
- Ensure everyone keeps you regularly updated about their situation. Ultimately you need to do what's necessary depending on the situation.
- Think about different eventualities and the 'what ifs' and work out how you would deal with each one. You may never have to use anything from your list however if you have the need, you can rest assured that you will be prepared.

Treat each other with kindness, respect and compassion and you will all come through this, stronger than you started.

N.B Your team needs you to be strong for them, but don't try to be super wo/man. Give yourself a break. Take one day at a time and you *will* get there.

I hope these tips prove useful and make your journey easier as you lead your team through these uncertain times. And please do get in touch if I can support you in any way.