

Solutions for Supervisors

Spring/Summer 2020

LEADING DURING TIMES OF STRESS AND ANXIETY


A tidal wave of stress and anxiety has accompanied the Coronavirus pandemic, gripping people across industries with a host of concerns about how to cope during such uncertain times. Leaders are on the front lines, keeping their operations afloat in uncharted waters while tending to the needs of their employees. This is no easy task. What follows are four helpful guidelines for leading during heightened uncertainty:

1. Practice Self Care

Now is not the time to cut corners on sleep, exercise, or nutrition. Sure, initial pandemic response may have necessitated long hours focused on crisis management and rapid response procedural changes that offered little time for self-care, but the adrenaline that initially fueled you is not sustainable. It's time to shift your approach from a sprint to a marathon: pace is important. By investing in yourself, you're investing in your capacity to show up tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. Drink water. Eat good food. Move your body. Limit screen time before bed. Exhale. The pandemic will eventually end. Until then, be kind to yourself and the people around you. In doing so, you'll lead by example and model the behavior you want to see in your staff.

2. Communicate Clearly, with Confidence

Employees are hungry for information, and it's your job to communicate it clearly and calmly. Information is powerful: it reduces emotional distress caused by the unknown; it provides tactical guidance; and it demonstrates that you are a knowledgeable, reliable leader. Inform yourself first, then express in black and white terms how employees' work priorities should adjust. If certain non-essential tasks are too difficult to pull off in current conditions, take them off the table for now. When you don't have all the answers, it's okay to say so. You may not be able to completely reassure



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HELPING EMPLOYEES OPEN UP

Especially when workers are under stress, asking open-ended rather than closed questions may help to elicit useful information. Closed questions tend to force a 'yes' or 'no' response. "Do you understand the changes to protocols?" is a closed question. Open-ended questions, in contrast, solicit fuller and more detailed responses. "How are you feeling about the changes we've implemented so far?" is an open-ended question. It is more likely to elicit an accurate and thoughtful response. Here are more open-ended questions you may consider:

In what ways have you been impacted by the pandemic so far?

How are you feeling about the changes at work?

What is the most challenging part about this experience?

workers about what will happen tomorrow, but you can paint the big picture and follow up often with updates communicated through multiple channels.

3. Focus on Flexibility

These times require everyone try new ways of operating. If part of your work force is currently working from home, recognize that typical work hours may need to be adjusted to accommodate competing demands. Supervisors should ask employees what challenges they face and – when possible – allow staff to choose their own best windows of time to get the work done. If your team is working on a time-sensitive project, have employees clearly articulate their availability so that everyone knows when to expect responses. Back-to-back meetings all day long may not be realistic in this environment, so explore alternatives: move more work to email or other platforms, reserving meetings for decision-making only; and plan for shorter meetings, allowing for breaks in between.

4. Demonstrate Empathy

Many people are feeling isolated and worried about their health, their families, their finances, and their future. Your job as a leader isn't to make these worries go away, but you do need to acknowledge that times are tough. You might consider giving employees opportunities to connect with each other, offer support, and listen. Check in more often than usual. It goes a long way to simply ask someone how they're holding up (see sidebar). Be prepared to listen and—when appropriate—make work-related adjustments based on what you're hearing. If someone tells you they're really struggling, suggest they reach out to the EAP or other resources available through your organization.



Work Force EAP offers executive coaching and employee training on Managing Stress with Resiliency and Navigating Change, among other topics.

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