

the ADVISOR

RESOURCES FOR SUPERVISORS, MANAGERS, AND HUMAN RESOURCES PERSONNEL

COVID-19: The Workplace Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the world of work. Some companies have had to furlough or lay off staff, while others are busier than ever. And virtually every business, regardless of what industry it is in, is coping with a large number of staff working remotely for the first time.

While the specific issues that companies are facing may differ, some common questions that managers are asking include:

- ▶ How do I keep my team on track and help them stay focused on their work?
- ▶ How do I maintain morale and foster collaboration in a virtual workplace?

- ▶ How do I provide support to my team in these uncertain times?
- ▶ When will things be back to normal? Will they ever be?

The constantly changing situation we find ourselves in makes many of these questions difficult to answer, and even experienced managers may struggle with knowing the right path forward. If you are feeling uncertain, keep these points in mind:

- ▶ **Focus on performance.**
If your staff is working from home, it may require an adjustment in your mindset. Measure productivity by work output, availability, and timeliness of responses to inquiries. You may not be able

to “see” your team working, but you can measure it in the progress they make on projects.

- ▶ **Set clear expectations and reasonable deadlines.**
Clearly explain both day-to-day tasks and larger organizational goals. Set appropriate deadlines for completion of work.



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► **Communicate.** In these times of uncertainty, your staff will want answers. Provide as much information as possible about what is happening and any plans the organization may have regarding staffing or schedule changes, projects that have been put on hold, or when people will be expected to start working from the office again. If you can't answer a question, be honest and say you don't know. Let staff know you will follow up with them as soon as you have more information.

► **Provide regular feedback.** Collaborating by phone or video conference makes it

difficult to read body language and non-verbal communication. It's more important than ever to provide specific feedback, such as: "I really appreciate how you handled that situation" or "Great work on that project." Be clear and direct when asking questions or making requests.

► **Be supportive during an illness or family crisis.** If an employee falls ill, provide support and encouragement. Some people who contract COVID-19 have reported feeling a sense of social stigma regarding the disease. Avoid implying that the infection was the employee's fault or that if

he or she had been more careful, it would not have happened. Remind those coping with an ill family member or other personal crisis of any resources the organization may offer to assist with personal challenges.

► **Lead by example.** Eat healthy meals, get sufficient sleep, and follow the recommendations of public health officials regarding hand-washing, cleaning, and social distancing. Emphasize the importance of good self-care.

► **Be compassionate.** Employees may be coping with a number of extra stresses, including worries for their own or a loved one's health, financial pressures, or difficulties with managing child or elder care. Employees who live alone and are engaging in social distancing or isolation may struggle with loneliness or fears about not having access to support should they fall ill. Make sure your team knows you care about them, not just the work they do.

► **Seek help.** LifeMatters is available to provide emotional support and practical suggestions for managing your team through periods of social distancing and uncertainty. Call 24/7/365.

How Do I Say That? Maintaining Morale

After several weeks of working under difficult circumstances due to COVID-19, your team may be getting restless. While some people may enjoy working remotely, others may struggle with the isolation. In addition, essential workers who must interact with other people may be coping with increased stress and worry.

If you sense that your team is struggling, these steps may help:

- 1. Consult with Human Resources.** Ask what resources may be available to help address any concerns your team may have, both in terms of work and with regard to managing family, financial, or health issues. In

addition, the LifeMatters Management Consultation Service can offer helpful suggestions.

- 2. Schedule a meeting.** Depending on the situation, you may want to schedule one large meeting, or plan for smaller, one-on-one chats or video conferences. It may be helpful to have employees break off into small groups where they can share concerns and provide support, too.

Sample language: “I know this is a very strange situation, and many of us are not used to working in these conditions. I wanted to see how everyone is coping.”



- 3. Listen.** Focus on what people are saying about their current work experience or the problems they may be encountering. Ask open-ended questions to learn more about concerns.

Sample language: “Tell me how things are going. What’s been working well? What challenges are you running into?”

- 4. Offer solutions.** Brainstorm ideas for sorting out difficulties. Look for simple, practical workarounds for problems.

Sample language: “This is a frustrating situation, but I’m sure we can figure out a solution. Can you think of another way to do this with what you have on hand?”

- 5. Encourage community.** If your team is now physically separated, look for clever ways to continue workplace traditions. For instance, if your team meets for lunch once a week, try having lunch together by video conference instead. Start an email chain where people can share book or movie recommendations, pet or family pictures, or positive stories.





6. Remind employees about LifeMatters. Let your team know that LifeMatters offers resources to help with loneliness, family concerns, financial stress, fear of illness, and many other issues. Help is available 24/7/365.

Sample language: “Everyone is coping with extra challenges right now. LifeMatters is available to help by phone or online.”

7. Stay in touch. Keep checking in with your team, either individually

or with larger meetings. Look for ways to help your team grow closer, even when working apart.

Sample language: “Let’s plan to meet regularly. If you have ideas for how to make things easier during this unusual time, please send them my way.”

The LifeMatters Management Consultation Service is available to help you sort through your team’s new normal. LifeMatters can also help your team cope with furloughs or layoffs. Call 24/7/365.

Management Consultation

LifeMatters is available to help with:

- ▶ Confronting an employee about performance issues
- ▶ An employee’s personal problem
- ▶ Suspected drug or alcohol use on the job
- ▶ Interpersonal conflicts between team members
- ▶ Establishing clear, attainable expectations for performance
- ▶ Addressing crisis situations, such as a violent incident, the death of an employee, or a natural disaster
- ▶ Your own personal concerns
- ▶ Any other work-related issue


LifeMatters offers professional management consultation when you need it, as often as you need it. Call anytime.

Call the **LifeMatters®** by Empathia Management Consultation Service toll-free anytime. **1-800-367-7474**

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