

# Three Specific Actions for Managing Teams During Covid-19

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This document outlines three specific actions we recommend team leaders do now, as their team members are migrating to working from home.

## The Need – Context for Taking These Three Actions

- **Work Change Stress:** We have people now working from home, many of whom are accustomed to the structure and community of being “at work.” That, alone, is a “shock.” But it doesn’t stop there.
- **Personal Stresses:** Many of these people now have additional stresses and demands placed on them in addition to adapting to the change in how they work – some have children attending school from home, family members and friends moving in, and spouses also working from home. Some have friends or loved ones in at-risk categories or working to deliver healthcare on the front lines. And all happening under “shelter in place” orders where they are in close physical proximity with one another.
- **Pandemic Stresses:** All of the above stress is in addition to the worries, fears, and anxieties nearly everyone is experiencing to one degree or another due to Covid-19.
- **Team Member Impact:** The impact on team members is they are doing their best to work from home without the structure and community they once had, they are doing that under the general stress of Covid-19, and they have very specific personal challenges. Many people are afraid, stressed, and distressed, yet trying to perform and function for work.
- **Manager Impact:** The impact on team managers is they have all the same going on as their team members, in addition to being responsible for the welfare and performance of their teams... who are now all working from home under all the stresses and strains above.
- **Intentional Adaptation:** Lastly, there is a tendency we all have to not proactively adapt to a new reality – instead, we attempt to make our old ways fit the new reality. We are encouraging managers to *intentionally adapt* to this new reality and not wait for things to go (predictably) bad.
- **Recommendation:** We offer three ways of proactively, intentionally adapting to this new reality. These are three things to focus on, at least initially. Also — and this is important — you as the manager will likely need to identify things you will stop doing in order to attend to these “higher-order” management demands.

## The Three Actions

Action 1: **Help Each Team Member Make a Successful Transition to Working from Home**

Action 2: **Nurture the Mental + Emotional Needs of Your Team Under Stress**

Action 3: **Adapt and Optimize the Way the Team Works Together**

The following pages contain some detail for each of the above actions. What follows is not intended to be exhaustive but illustrative. If you think of this as a checklist of things to do, you will miss the mark. It is more important that you get the “spirit” of the three actions.

## The Spirit of the Three Actions

The spirit of the three actions is for you to realize that your job as a manager just changed. The *outcomes* your team must produce may be the same. But your team’s *capacity* to produce those outcomes probably has changed.

The primary role of management is to create an environment where people can produce great work together, so people can flourish, and the company can thrive. The *outcome* of which is that *short-term results* (the year’s targets, metrics, objectives, etc.) are produced and achieved *with predictability and order*.

**So, you will need to change.** You will need to change what you *do* (such as doing these three actions), and you may need to change yourself, your *mindset*. How you see and think about yourself, your job, the team, this world.

The bottom line? **Your primary job right now is (a) to help your team members *feel safe* and (b) to make a successful transition to working from home.**

**After attending to this — which is simply triaging COVID-19 — you may need to envision a different future, prepare them for *not* going back to business as usual, and co-create that new future together.** This is leadership, as leadership is about *transformation*. This topic is outside the scope of this document.

**This document is about the first order of priority – *stabilize and preserve the core*.** Which by definition includes as a first order priority attending to our people. That's management. That is what is needed now. Safety, security, and stability ideally should be *sufficient* before moving into the leadership aspect referred to above. Solid, intentionally adaptive *management* prepares the foundation from which a new future can be created, together.

### Action 1: **Help Each Team Member Make a Successful Transition to Working from Home**

- Do not assume each team member will make a successful transition to working from home.
- People are afraid, stressed, juggling, and many of us are not thinking clearly, and we don't realize it.
- **See it as your primary role to help each of your team members to make a successful transition.**
- Do not assume each will move at the same speed and will need the same help. Every team member has different capacities for change, different levels of demands on them, different stresses, etc.
- Work with each team member *separately* on this. Track where each is in terms of reaching optimal effectiveness and well-being while working from home. Agree on what the next step is, and support them in taking the next step, and the next, until they are high functioning in their work from home.
- Some team members will need the structure of you asking helpful, organizing questions such as:
  - “What are the three most important things you need to accomplish this week?”
  - “What challenges could you expect to have as you accomplish them?”
  - “How is your workspace working for you?”
  - “Are you feeling focused and organized?”
  - “How are you doing meeting your productivity measures?” (see below)
  - “How are things going with the people you are communicating with?”
  - “How are you feeling, and how can I help?”
- If a given team member does not have 1—3 clear productivity measures, help them develop those. If they are clear on what they need to produce, if they are producing and meeting those standards, they are *winning*. Winning feels good and engenders feelings of safety, security, and contribution.
- Set an initial time budget for this – an hour per person per week until folks settle in, maybe. This is about you as the manager being *realistic* about the time required to do this, getting it on your calendar, and...
- Identify how you will free up the time and energy to do this – what will you *stop* doing to do this?
- Do not view this as a “burden” on top of all your other work.
  - If you view it as a burden and experience it this way, this feeling will become part of *the shadow you cast*. Your people will feel it as them being a burden to you. That does not engender *vulnerability* on their part, which is required in order for them to tell you what you need to know in order to help them.
  - Instead, see this as part of your purpose or higher calling: that this isn't a burden, but an opportunity for you *to be of service* to others during a time where people are overwhelmed and fearful.
- *The focus of this action is about helping people feel safe and secure through structuring for success.* Take them by the hand. Lead them through to the other side, through the “fog of war” that has dimmed so many of us without us knowing it.

## Action 2: Nurture the Mental + Emotional Needs of the Team Under Stress

- The first focus area above is *structural* and requires *clear thinking*. This second focus area is *psychological* and requires *caring and compassion*.
- At least once a week for one month, have a team meeting that focuses on nothing other than attending to the *well-being* of the team members.
- Research tells us that high performing teams *acknowledge one another's emotions* and in so doing create a sense of safety and security sometimes termed *psychological safety*. This has never been more important.
- *See it as your responsibility to be the proactive cultural architect for your team during this challenging time.*
- The purpose of this meeting is for each person to answer a question like “What is on your heart and mind?” and therefore be able to directly care for and support one another.
- Tell the team what you are trying to do – to give everyone on the team a safe place to lay their burdens down, to care, connect, and support.
- Explore guidelines together about how to make it “safe” for people. What agreements do you need to make with one another? You might provide and co-develop some basic guidelines like this:
  - **Don't try to make the person feel better**, such as telling them they shouldn't feel that way. Instead, focus on supporting them in clearly expressing their feelings. That's what is most helpful.
  - **Acknowledging the emotion each person seems to be feeling if they aren't expressing it.** We typically avoid asking people about their emotions when we sense they are emotional. Here, we are saying, “Juanita, you seem quite sad today. Are you, and if so, what's going on?”
  - **Feeling compassion and caring for one another in the meeting.** Such as, when someone is talking and clearly struggling, holding well-wishes for the person such as “May you be safe, may you be healthy, may you find courage, may you not be overwhelmed by fear or anxiety.” People will pick up on this “felt sense.”
  - **Do share ideas with one another regarding how to overcome the challenges.** However, do not let the rush to problem-solving displace the person being able to “empty their cup.”
- **When it comes to actually doing this meeting, you will need to lead by example – being real, authentic, open, and vulnerable.** And acknowledging others when they've followed suit.
  - As the manager, go *first*. Share first. But it isn't just about being the first to go.
  - Be vulnerable. Real. Drop the mask and the façade, if you normally “wear” these.
  - People around you don't feel *safe* having a relationship with a mask or façade.
  - Showing a stiff upper lip or acting as if you have it all together is nowhere near as powerful as you sharing what's really going on for you, as challenging as that may be, while at the same time holding forth the “in-the-bones” feeling that we can and will get through this together. Authenticity, combined with courage, is what helps most people feel safe.
- **Unfortunately, there is no formulaic way to do this.** Each manager is different, each team is different, each team member is different. Hold the intention to meet the mental and emotional well-being needs of your team, and to do it together. Include the team in mapping out the *how*. And continually adapt the *how* as the team and you gain experience, grow, and evolve. You've got to be a little bit like Luke or Rey Skywalker – following your *feelings* while holding a clear *purpose* and *intention*.
- And... don't leave out the option for virtual happy hour! Some teams are already doing this. Virtual happy hours at the end of the week, for example, aren't to replace the above well-being meeting, but can (based on the personality of the team and their interests) be a very nice complement.
- *This focus of this second action is about helping people feel safe and secure through feeling cared for.* Whereas the first focus was “take them by the hand,” this one is “tend to their heart.”

### Action 3: **Adapt and Optimize the Way the Team Works Together**

- This focus area is about the meta-view – including the whole team in adapting how the team intra-operates with one another, and inter-operates with other teams and functional areas.
- **Once a week, have a focused meeting called an “oil change.”** The meeting agenda is very basic:
  - Each person shares, from their viewpoint, the single most important thing that is working well or is starting to work better. Everyone goes. Manager goes last. Someone is scribing this online for all to see.
  - Each person shares, from their viewpoint, the single most important thing that needs to be fixed for the team to perform better. *Do not evaluate or discuss at this time – get all the cards on the table.* Everyone goes. Manager goes last. Someone is scribing online for all to see.
  - Manager asks the group to vote on what the single most important item is for the team to troubleshoot together, now. Manager goes last.
  - Pick an item and work that one item together until it is resolved or the path for resolution is clear. Time-permitting pick up the next most important item and work it. Continue until the meeting time is just about up.
  - In the last 10 minutes, ask each person to share (1) how honest and candid they thought the conversation was, and (2) whether psychological safety was attended to well. *Psychological safety* does not mean it always felt *comfortable*. It does mean that we had one another’s, the team’s, the company’s, and the people our organization serves best interests at heart.
- *This focus is about rapidly adapting and optimizing workflow, processes, procedures, communication, and relationships for the “new reality.” More than just “adapting,” this is also about making breakthroughs that may not have been possible in the “old reality” for whatever reason – inertia, entropy, resistance, fear, etc.*

### Closing Thoughts

- **Now that you’ve been through the illustrative detail re-read the “spirit” of the three actions on page 1.** If you “get” the spirit or a *feeling* for this, you can start with the above and feel your way forward. You will need to improvise over time, as the new reality emerges, and as you learn more about yourself, your teammates, and the duration, intensity, and impact of the pandemic.
- **This is a new world for you, too, and embrace it as such.** Don’t expect your team to adapt if you aren’t. Lead the way. This includes acknowledging that some of the things you were doing in the “old reality” simply aren’t as important as some new things – such as the above – that you need to be doing in the “new reality.” Let go of the old. Embrace the new. And allow your team to see you struggling with, sometimes failing at, and ultimately succeeding with that.
- **Prepare for a new world on the other side of this.** There is no guarantee that we will pick up with work and life as it was when we range in the new year on January 1, 2020. In fact, maybe that would be ill-advised. Maybe in this crisis we have an opportunity to envision a better future for us all. This is more a matter of *sensing* possibility than thinking we know.
- **If this is true – if a new reality will be dawning – you will, at a minimum, need to be prepared.** As will your team. Further, more than preparing for it, there is the possibility of intentionally and actively engaging in that new emerging reality. My greatest hope is that attending to the three actions outlined in this document will serve as steppingstones for you and your team as you weather this storm and prepare for – or actively engage in – a new dawn.

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