

Question:

I'm concerned about my employees: they seem very stressed and worried because of COVID-19. I know I'm extra stressed, too, but I really want to be there for them. How can I support my team through this very difficult time?

Answer:

Leading a team through a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic can feel overwhelming. Here are some best practices to help you provide your team with the vital guidance and support they need at this time, mainly adapted from Stanford University's "[Leading through COVID-19](#)" toolkit:

1. Find and maintain an inner sense of calm, composure and stability

Given the complexities, uncertainties and seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic it is completely normal to feel anxious or have [stress responses](#). In order to be a calm and stable presence for your team, you first have to feel calm and stable yourself. Under our current circumstances this is tough! The key: remember that you will at some point lose your sense of calm and stability. You just need to be able to recognize when it happens – with kindness toward yourself, as you would feel toward a dear loved one -- and then take action to regain your own internal sense of calm and stability. Steps you can take:

- Become familiar with the [common signs of stress](#) .
- Know how to relieve your stress: keep things in perspective (such as by taking breaks from reading about the outbreak; get the facts from dependable, accurate sources; practice healthy self-care habits; pay close attention to your body, feelings and spirit; and take time to relax, talk about your feelings and remind yourself of the many important and positive things in your life.
- Focus on what you can do to be prepared and protect yourself.
- Know when to get help – when you're having difficulty coping and it's getting in the way of your daily life at work or at home, call the EAP to get started with support.

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2. Confirm goals and priorities

Provide clear, steady guidance. With your team, concentrate on business-critical priorities, reexamining what is essential in light of COVID-19. As needed, clarify who is responsible for what, what to do vs. what not to do and where employees can turn for help. Determine and regularly repeat key messages to provide a sense of stability and confidence.

3. Establish new ways of working

In response to COVID-19, some or all of your team may be working from home, for a short time or longer term. This may be a new way of working for many. Your role is to help your team adapt to the “new normal” work environment so they stay connected and productive. Ideas you can implement include: take some time for team members who work remotely to show/share their home workspace; revisit and adapt meeting practices to make use of available technology; discuss with the team now to keep focused on individual and team performance goals; and regularly ask for input about what is working, what should be changed and how to address challenges.

4. Engage during times of uncertainty

During times of crisis, energize and inspire your team by reconnecting to your mission and goals and focus on the possible long-term potential and opportunities of working together in new ways. Ideas to engage include: without denying any of the difficult realities your team is facing, hold the vision that you will all emerge through adversity stronger and more capable than before, and explore together how you might turn challenges into opportunities; spread a sense of calm and reassurance that you will get through this tough time together; regularly make time for team members to engage in personal interaction and connection; and in 1 on 1s ask team members open-ended questions like “What’s on your mind?” and “What can I do to help right now?” to help bring hidden thoughts and emotions to the surface and show your caring.

5. Lead with empathy

During times of profound difficulty and uncertainty, your team wants to feel your caring presence and know that you understand each of their realities and are making decisions from a place of deep empathy and concern. Check in regularly with each team member and give them opportunities to safely express their emotions. Take time to listen to understand each person’s unique circumstances, perspectives and struggles. Make sure the team knows that you’re still available despite the crisis and how and when to reach you. Make a strong effort to be visible, which communicates that leadership is managing and everything is under control. Finally, model how you’d like your team to behave: remain calm, communicate transparently, be fair and available, and act with kindness and caring.

If you’re feeling overwhelmed or would like to talk through your specific circumstances, don’t hesitate to reach out to the [EAP](#) for consultation and support.

