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**Covid-19 – Mental Health and Workplace Morale during Turbulent Times**

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As Covid-19 is sweeping the world working from home has become the new norm for many. We are all facing new challenges and financial constraints as we quickly try to adapt to the changing workplace – and the changing world. Many people have lost their jobs and those that still have their jobs are dealing with the dichotomy of feeling gratitude and overwhelm at the same time. It is difficult to change, and the routines in which we used to find comfort have been turned upside down. Many of us who never wanted or expected to work from home are now experiencing the daunting learning curve of remote work. For many this may be their first time working from home in long stretches, and even those who are familiar with working from home are now dealing with the new reality of 24/7 social distancing.

Keeping up morale has become a challenge and a top priority for many businesses and their employees. The things we used to do to motivate and support our workforce may no longer work in the same way, and the reality is that during these stressful times our teams are wanting reassurance more than ever. With the Covid-19 Pandemic changing the world it is estimated that 50% of our workforce is working remotely, and this will keep increasing as businesses adapt. Remote work from home has quickly become the norm rather than the exception. Although there are advantages to remote work there are also disadvantages. Even before Covid-19 people who worked from home often felt out of the loop, without a voice, and lonely. Combine that with our anxiety and uncertainty right now and we have a perfect storm for anxiety, depression and other mental health concerns.

So, what can we do to build morale and support each other during these times, and take care of our health and mental health? What do leaders need to do to effectively lead their teams through these uncertain times. Here are some tips on working in the time of Covid-19. Despite this new normal, there are plenty of ways to keep morale up and support the health of your colleagues, your team, your employees and your business – and yourself.

1. **Be honest and authentic.** We do not need to try to convince anyone of how well we are doing through this crisis. Quite the opposite. It would be a mistake to try lift people's spirits by being overly perky or annoyingly idealistic. We need to be real about the challenges and how people are feeling. We need to make room for grief, loss and fear. Don't be afraid of the honest conversations. Ask people how they are doing. Listen to them, and then listen some more. Then share your own challenges in an appropriate



manner. We are all in this together and if we allow ourselves to be real and honest, we can become closer and find deeper purpose through experiencing this crisis together. Humans are drawn to other humans who understand them – and this is one of the most valuable tools we can bring to the table – our genuine care and understanding for what others are going through.

2. **Be transparent in your communication.** Have regular meetings – but don't attempt to hide problems or avoid conversations when morale is low. Transparency is essential if you want to boost morale. Your colleagues and your team will respect honesty. If you are working on your own without a team find a group of colleagues who can offer each other peer support. If you are leading a team allow them to give you feedback and make room to bring their own challenges and their ingenuity to the table - work together to fix any issues. Keep your team informed about company updates, how you are responding to Covid-19, any new protocols implemented, and the feedback you are getting. We do not have time for defensiveness and egos right now. Now is the time to be humble - be honest about mistakes and adapt the learning as quickly as you can.
3. **Keep mental health a priority.** Practice your own self care and get your own support – as well as encouraging others to take care of themselves and get professional support if needed. Mental health is health, and we all are under enormous strain dealing with a worldwide health crisis. Encourage self care – but recognize that we may need additional support past yoga, mindfulness and going for walks. With this level of stress, we may need professional support to help develop strategies to manage our mental health during these unprecedented times. If your company has the ability to provide counselling support to your team that could be very helpful right now. Consider bringing mental health professionals into your trainings/meetings to lead mental health conversations if possible. At the least remove any stigma from mental health conversations and encourage discussions around mental health as a natural part of health conversations. We are all dealing with mental health strain and challenges as a result of the Covid-19 crisis.
4. **Be flexible.** For many companies the business hours of 9am-to 5pm are going to need to adjust. As coronavirus has swept in companies have quickly adjusted their operations and implemented work-from-home policies in order to put the safety of their employees first. Talk with your team and find out what kind of schedule will work the best for them. Help them understand your expectations, but also allow for creative ways for these expectations to be met.
5. **Encourage breaks.** We know that creativity and innovation happen when people change their environment. Encourage your colleagues and your team members to get away



6. from their computers for at least 5 minutes every hour. It is a good thing to grab a cup of coffee or stretch your body and move. If someone feels like a slave to their computer, their productivity, morale and mental health will suffer.
7. **Allow nature to be one of our best team members.** Encourage your colleagues or team members to find time in their day to take a walk – we know that nature is good for us – and getting out for some fresh air can be just the thing we need to replenish and come up with new ideas. Staying inside, in the same location, diminishes creative thinking and problem solving. Suggest that your team members do some of their calls and remote meetings outside. Have a walk and talk meeting outdoors that does not require sitting in front of a screen. During these outside meetings, employees can stroll around their neighborhoods, nearby parks, or even spend time in their backyards for a change in environment and some fresh air.
8. **Stay mindful and focus on purpose.** Bring virtual mindfulness, mediation and conversations about purpose into your team meetings. Stay honest about the challenges – but also set your intentions and discuss what you are grateful for and what brings you meaning and satisfaction during these turbulent times. You may want to consider incorporating some online yoga, meditation and deep breathing into your life in some manner.
9. **Stay social.** Encourage your colleagues and your team to share tips for working from home with each other. Discuss what worked well and what did not. Have a sense of humour and laugh at some of the absurdity of it all. Share pictures with each other – pictures from your walks, your work from home space, your children and your pets. Share recipe ideas, favorite books and Netflix series. Virtual happy hours and coffee breaks can also be a way of checking in with each other without the pressure of work being part of the conversation.
10. **Acknowledge each other.** Share what you appreciate about your colleagues, employees and team members. Let them know directly what you appreciate. Make it real and don't be afraid to share it. Send your team member or colleagues who have been a helpful support an email acknowledging them and their hard work. Post your appreciation for team members on social media and your website.
11. **Be kind and forgiving.** We will all be feeling overwhelmed, irritable and out of sorts at one time or another. If someone comes off sounding harsh or edgy do not take it personally. If you need to discuss someone's behaviour do so in a caring way – and do it face to face through a remote platform rather than email. Remember to expect and forgive irritability – and counter it with appreciation and kindness whenever possible. Extend that same kindness and forgiveness to yourself. Our highest priority is the safety and health of ourselves and others – and we really are all in this together.