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## **ARTICLE** **LEADING TEAMS**

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*by Timothy R. Clark*

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The Covid-19 virus has disrupted and rearranged the workplace with breathtaking speed. In the span of a week, organizations across every sector have sent millions of employees home to work remotely.

Without warning — and in many cases, without preparation of any kind — managers have been thrust into the position of leading virtual teams, many for the first time.

It's challenging enough to manage *yourself* in quarantine without face-to-face human interaction and the structure of a typical workday. Now add to that the task of managing a *team* under those conditions, especially when you've never done it before. It's daunting.

Pressurized conditions, heightened uncertainty, and an overall sense of dislocation make it even more difficult. Under quarantine, every aspect of the manager's role is magnified and complicated. You'll need to [reset expectations for how work gets done](#) and adapt your management style to a new context.

To help managers who are new to this — or even experienced managers who need additional guidance in these trying times — here are my best recommendations for supporting continued learning and the emotional well-being of your employees.

**Reset your expectations.** Most teams are socialized and accustomed to synchronous work and standardization. They work together, located in the same office, under the same working conditions, with the same work schedule. In a quarantined environment, managers must help their teams shift immediately to asynchronous work and personalization. You'll need to [reset expectations for how work gets done](#), letting go of when and how tasks are accomplished, allowing team members to accomplish their responsibilities on their own terms. This means focusing on results and offering more flexibility.

**Stay in regular touch.** [Sociometric research](#) proves that shorter communication cycle times are more effective in building and sustaining morale and engagement. Use [instant messaging to stay in regular contact](#). Don't let an employee go half a day without checking in. [You might want to hold a huddle each day](#), ideally by video, perhaps rotating responsibility for who leads it. Set the expectation that everyone be present and not distracted. Model what it means to show up as a virtual team player.

**Support continued learning but keep it short.** Learning doesn't have to stop in this new environment, but it may be more practical to use microlearning. Focus on sharing short lessons on a single topic in a five to 10-minute segment. These might cover a specific tool, behavior, or skill. Rotate the delivery of these lessons among team members and allow them to identify their own topics for training. You might ask a different team member to debrief the lesson and lead a short discussion about the application, relevance, and implications of what everyone learned.

**Assign buddies and peer coaches to add a layer of mutual support.** Attending to every team member's needs will quickly exhaust the capacity of most managers. To distribute that responsibility, organize team members into pairs with each individual assigned as a buddy and peer coach to their assigned colleague. This shared leadership model creates a second layer of mutual support and guards against emotional isolation. Ask the buddies to check in daily and assess overall

engagement and well-being. If people haven't filled this role before, [it can be helpful to give them some guidance](#).

**Interpret tone and voice as proxies for face-to-face feedback.** It's harder to read the emotional cues of your people when you aren't in the same room. Instead of relying on non-verbal data and body language, now you must rely on proxy indicators such as text, voice, and infrequent video communications. Pay close attention to: patterns in the tone of written communication; rate, volume, pitch, and inflexion of voice communication; and any physical gestures in video communication. If you know your people well, changes in these patterns will help you identify early that a team member may need some additional support.

**Model optimism and drain the team of fear.** [Optimism is contagious](#). Leaders who demonstrate hopefulness and confidence in the future are better able to help their team members find [meaning and purpose in work](#), especially under stressful conditions. And don't forget to [use humor as a relief valve](#). Remember that fear freezes initiative, ties up creativity, and yields compliance instead of commitment. Finally, consider that [constraints are often the enabling factor that sparks innovation](#). Invite your team to use the quarantine conditions as a stimulus for new ideas.

**Update even if there's no update.** Uncertainty fuels anxiety. The more you [communicate and share](#), the less chance there is to develop an information vacuum within your team. Communicate regularly even if you don't have new information to share. [Maintaining transparency](#) through a crisis with frequent updates is the ultimate expression of good faith, empathy, and genuine concern for your team.

**Continually gauge stress and engagement levels.** Make it crystal clear to your team members that your chief concern is their well-being. Take time to monitor their engagement by periodically asking each team member two quick questions. First, on a zero-to-10 scale, rate the level of stress you currently feel. Second, using that same scale, rate your level of overall engagement. Your intuitive or impressionistic sense of the individual may be wrong, so it helps to get quantitative responses.

Humans are hyper-social creatures who long to belong. And psychological safety — where your team members feel included, safe to learn, safe to contribute, and safe to challenge the status quo, all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way — is paramount even under conditions of quarantine. When you create and sustain these conditions you allow them to continue to perform and contribute, and perhaps, most importantly at a time like this, you acknowledge their humanity.

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**Timothy R. Clark** is founder and CEO of [LeaderFactor](#), a global leadership consulting and training firm. He is the author of *The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation* (Berrett-Koehler 2020).

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