

Managers' Playbook during a crisis

*Supporting a culture of connection and healthy
teamwork*

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Effects and Purpose

Effects

As a result of the current COVID-19 outbreak, we're in uncharted territory and this creates uncertainty. The IRS needs as many healthy, able and willing employees as possible to support critical operations and ensure the government remains funded.

Employees and leaders are naturally anxious and fearful about their health and the wellbeing of their families. As such, employees and managers will have difficulty focusing on their work and teams while they're balancing their life needs.

As happens in most crises, we must be prepared for productivity to dip for a period of time. We'll need to be more patient and accepting of these temporary new world realities. The IRS uses telework and other flexibilities to the greatest extent possible to help us acclimate. These flexibilities help, but it'll take time for us to adapt to these changing conditions. We'll need to learn to pace ourselves. We'll also need to be especially astute to the environmental facts in each employee locale so we can be sensitive to their concerns and support them in discerning the realistic effects.

During a time like the COVID-19 pandemic or during any other crisis, **maintaining team connections and sharing information is critical** in promoting a sense of hope and compassionate caring. We want to make sure our employees don't feel isolated, abandoned, forgotten or neglected. We want them to feel valued, appreciated and respected. Reaching out on a regular basis, both individually and collectively, will help reassure your employees and help revitalize our IRS family community. You'll also have established a way to communicate with your team when IRS allows employees to return to work.

Purpose

This Managers' Playbook will give you helpful information on how to listen and respond to your employees during a crisis. It provides recommendations on how to connect with your team on a weekly basis (along with a sample agenda), how to detect and address concerns you hear from your employees, and resources that will be helpful for you and your employees.

Please note that while much of this Managers' Playbook discusses COVID-19 related issues, you can use this guide to help manage your employees through most any crisis we face as an agency. The COVID-19 outbreak presented the IRS with operational challenges. We must smartly, nimbly and creatively find ways to quickly and smoothly reset our daily operations to achieve our ultimate mission and vital goals for the American public. **When information is known and made available, people feel safe. When there's uncertainty, fear resides.** Despite any fears, we must stand strong together.

While we're motivating and helping our employees to get the job done, we must also ensure that we're supporting our colleagues with healthy, safe, and equipped work environments. We want our IRS employees to understand the importance of their contributions while addressing their individual concerns.

This Managers' Playbook provides you with recommendations and important steps to help all IRS leaders support themselves and their employees during these difficult times. Every effort to connect will bond your team closer together, and ensure we're still accomplishing our mission.

Managers' Playbook for Connections

An important first step is for you to be aware of how a crisis (like COVID-19) might be affecting you personally. Leaders need to be diligent in taking care of themselves and creating healthy downtime away from work. Being attuned to your own reactions will allow you to create the balance you need and demonstrate a healthy example for your team. Addressing your own concerns first will help you connect better with the needs of your team.

Connect the Team on a Weekly Basis

Teams and individuals have different needs for contact and connection. Each leader can determine which of these recommendations is best suited for your employees individually and your team. You're their leader; you know them best.

We recommend connecting once a week to establish consistency and assure your team that you're there for them. A standard agenda provides a regular cadence for meetings and builds trust with your team. We recommend the following approach:

- Beginning as soon as possible, you should establish weekly calls with your team to connect and check in on them.
- From there, you should meet with your team regularly, as determined by the needs of the team.
- Be available. Accessibility doesn't stop because you're not together in the office. Try establishing virtual "open-door" hours for your employees through telephone calls, instant messages, Skype calls, etc.

You should schedule calls with **all** of your team members, regardless of their reporting status, including those who are on weather and safety leave.

We realize this will create an added administrative element for time reporting; however, the benefits of including the entire team will outweigh the recordkeeping burden as your team will feel included and valued.

There may be some hesitation from employees unfamiliar with the rules of weather and safety leave, but employees are only on this leave when they don't have work. These meetings are team-building activities and therefore employees should attend. This is your opportunity to help maintain your team connections, share information and ensure employees don't feel isolated or neglected.

Sample Agenda: Weekly Team Check-ins

Anticipated meeting time: 1 hour - depending on size of team

- Welcome & Check-in
- Solicit Needs, Questions & Concerns
- Inform of Work Activities: Organizational and Team
- Acknowledge Contributions

Topic	Purpose
<p>Welcome & Check-in</p>	<p>Give all employees an opportunity to share how they're doing. Consider this your team pulse check.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes it helps to start the call with your own personal update. This serves as a model for the team. <p>Here are some questions to get the ball rolling:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are you doing? • How are you feeling? • What are you noticing? • How's your family? • How's your community? <p>Employees may want to know how their teammates are doing and likely will feel better just hearing their voices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow the conversation to flow freely. • Some employees may not feel comfortable sharing – don't push them; they'll share when they're ready. • Once you open it up for others to share - be patient with the initial silence and resist the urge to jump in and fill the void. <i>Something to consider:</i> The silent moments may be uncomfortable for you at first, so when you feel the need to talk, count to three before interjecting. Your team may surprise you chiming in.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The conversation could be a great opportunity for teammates to exchange tips and ideas for how they're coping in these challenging times. Ask if they have any tips to share. • Include some questions that let folks celebrate bright spots, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What's inspired you in the last week? ○ What made you laugh out loud? <p>Thank each person after they've finished as a way of acknowledging their willingness to share. <i>Something to consider:</i> Keep comments neutral or consistently positive so you encourage people to participate.</p> <p>Allow enough time for each team member to share if they want. Don't be concerned if you devote your early meetings to this one agenda item. It'll be important to give your team members this platform to share their experiences, concerns and ideas.</p> <p><i>(Note: For COVID-19, employees may have friends, family, or work colleagues who've been affected by this virus. You'll need extra time and care to support team members in their time of grief.)</i> Leaders should refer to EAP resources for guidance and support. (See the resource section of this document)</p>
<p>Solicit needs, questions & concerns</p>	<p>Part of the value of the pulse check is to provide you with an early indication of your employees' needs and concerns.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees who are focused on their basic needs will not be prepared to effectively focus on their work responsibilities until/unless they feel their basic needs are being met. • You'll be able to assess how employees are coping and balancing their work/life priorities and can support the team members to share their healthy and creative ideas/activities for coping. • Don't feel like you must be the sole problem solver when it comes to individual's personal concerns --- it's most important for you to provide the space/platform for your team to share what's going on with each other and provide support to one another in a way that's most comfortable. • You'll be an important source to help clarify facts about processes, procedures and available resources. For example, we update the COVID-19 page and FAQs

	<p>regularly, so you'll want to stay informed to help guide your employees. Misinformation can feed employees' fears and anxieties. When you share the facts, you'll help quell their fears and put the situation in a better perspective. (See the resource section of this document)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take notes and document the issues, needs and concerns that employees raise. By elevating concerns and issues, you show your team you're listening to them and that you care. • Let your employees know that you'll follow-up on their open issues. It'll be very important for you to circle back with your team to update them on their open issues.
<p>Inform of work activities</p>	<p>Employees may be interested in learning about the effect a crisis like COVID-19 is having on Servicewide activities. <i>Something to consider:</i> Don't try to address each of the topics below. Instead, pick the ones that relate to your specific team. Perhaps pick new topics each week.</p> <p>Here are some suggested topics:</p> <p>Share the following about the IRS as a whole</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share the bigger picture of what's going on. • The current organizational & program priorities. • The IRS is concerned about the safety and health of all the staff. • The IRS is trying to be judicious as it identifies critical work streams and essential employees to invite back into the offices. • The organization is committed to supporting proper physical distancing in the workplace. • The IRS is focused on ensuring regular cleaning that provides hygienically disinfected work areas and facilities. <p>Share the following about your team</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The current status of the team operations. • Specific work priorities and/or how priorities might be shifting on the team. • That you understand they'll naturally be distracted, unfocused and likely less productive, and that you'll be there for them to work through it. Your team needs to know this is a normal reaction under the circumstances.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage your team to take the time they need to take care of themselves. • Some team members may be asked to take on new or different responsibilities to help the organization and country. Make sure they feel comfortable and equipped to accomplish their assignment. Find out what they might need to help them acclimate --- tools, training, time to acclimate. • Some of your team members may find that they're out of work and feel guilty or anxious about it. Let your team know they can also use this time to do their "wish lists," rainy-day projects, or to increase their own knowledge and skills by taking available online training. This can also be a good time to organize computer files and inboxes. • Have your team share what they're working on and accomplishing. • You may also want to ask: <i>What's a challenge for you in having to work from home?</i> A follow up question to engage the rest of the team could be: <i>Have others found a way to overcome that challenge?</i> • Ask what else they might need to support them with their work assignments (as applicable).
<p>Acknowledge contributions</p>	<p>In these difficult times, everyone's doing the very best they can to cope with and manage the scope and range of their responsibilities.</p> <p>Ask your team to acknowledge teammates who have gone above and beyond.</p> <p>Try acknowledging two or three of these with the group – highlight different ones each week:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For employees who may be home caring for their children, their parents and/or sick family members – let them know that you realize they are doing the best that they can. • For employees on weather and safety leave – let them know that you appreciate their patience and understanding during this time. • For employees working at home – let them know that you appreciate their contributions in helping to fund the government. • For employees who are asked to come into the office, let them know that we are taking great care to provide them with a safe work environment and that the

	<p>American people are benefiting from their brave, dedicated actions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• For employees who are performing acts of kindness to friends and neighbors – confirm the value of their actions.• Express your gratitude for your team’s continued focus and contributions to our country.• Thank the team for continuing to stay connected and supportive of one another. <p>Confirm – this is not a permanent state. While this may go on longer than any of us would like, we will get through this and be able to return to the office and our regular work schedules at some point in the future – yet to be revealed.</p>
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Detecting and Addressing Concerns (during or after team meetings)

If you are hearing or experiencing	Then you can say/do
<p>This is really scary.</p> <p>I'm afraid I'm going to catch it.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to understand their fears. • Acknowledge their fears. It's completely natural for all of us to feel fearful about this virus and its effects. • Encourage them to assess and take stock of their current situation. Do they feel they've been following the guidance and practicing social distancing? If so, reassure them. • Ask them to reflect on their own self-talk and consider if it might be contributing to their feelings. We all can control our self-talk and help improve our perspective and outlook.
<p>Every time I turn on the TV, all that's on is news about COVID-19.</p> <p>I feel like I can't get away from all this Coronavirus news. It's broadcasting everywhere.</p>	<p>Listen to their tone of voice: Do they sound enthusiastic or anxious?</p> <p>Acknowledge that it's being readily broadcast on our media --- TV, radio and social media.</p> <p>Ask if they feel they have the information they need.</p> <p>If they're getting over-saturated with the information, have them explore what alternatives they might have to reduce their exposure. The team might be able to join in and brainstorm options.</p>
<p>I feel like I'm getting sick.</p> <p>I'm not feeling well.</p>	<p>Express your concern. Encourage them to contact their doctor to share their symptoms. Let them know that you will follow up with them individually.</p> <p>NOTE: you will want to check in with them daily</p>
<p>I was just diagnosed with Coronavirus.</p>	<p>Express your concern. Ask if there's anything they need. Let them know you'll need to report this to SAMC and that they'll follow up with the employee directly.</p> <p>NOTE: you will want to check in with them daily</p> <p>Contact SAMC to notify them of the employee's situation. If needed, SAMC will make sure the office building is cleaned and will notify employees who may have come into contact with this individual.</p>

If you are hearing or experiencing	Then you can say/do
<p>Situation: During a team meeting, an employee expresses anxiety/concerns that everything is changing; nothing will ever be the same again.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Acknowledge that things are definitely changing right now. ■ Let them know that this will likely not be a permanent change – things will adjust back again at some point in the future (to be determined). ■ Have the team discuss what is not changing in their life and work world right now. ■ Have them consider whether any of these changes are a good thing. <p>Note: If their anxiety doesn't dissipate, follow up with them individually and provide them with a referral to EAP.</p>
<p>I know you've asked me to start working on XX (something new/different). I'm just feeling out of sorts and unsure about what I'm supposed to do and how I'm supposed to get it done.</p>	<p>Ask them if there are any obstacles getting in their way. If so, try to address them.</p> <p>Check to see if they're still trying to get acclimated to the new work and encourage them to take their time adopting their new habits to get up to speed.</p> <p>Ask if they might need a desk guide/job aid or any other tools to support them.</p> <p>Refer them to any training materials that might be available or to a peer who may have some expertise and be able to serve as an on-the-job instructor.</p>
<p>I've completed all my work. What should I do now?</p>	<p>Check to see if you have any additional work to assign them. If not, ask them to consider their career learning plan and have them go into Learn and Lead to identify training that they can take to move forward with that plan. If you don't have additional work to assign and if they don't have any training needs to complete, then you may need to put them on Weather and Safety leave.</p>
<p>Situation: I have an employee on Weather and Safety leave who is not dialing in for the weekly calls.</p>	<p>You'll want to call them directly to check in on them and make sure they're okay. Encourage them to dial in for the calls. These weekly connections are an important team building element. As team members, they need to attend.</p>

If you are hearing or experiencing	Then you can say/do
<p>Situation: I have an employee who attends the calls and never chimes in during the calls.</p>	<p>Call them directly to check in on them and make sure they're okay. There may be something going on that they're reluctant to share on the call and may only want to discuss with you. Encourage them to continue to attend the weekly calls so they can stay connected to their teammates and informed about activities.</p>
<p>My child lost their job and they don't know how they're going to pay their bills and put food on the table.</p>	<p>Give them the number for EAP. EAP offers free, confidential financial guidance and support for IRS employees and their family members.</p>
<p>Situation: An employee's friend or family member died or is ill from Coronavirus.</p>	<p>Express your condolences. Ask if they would like you to inform the team? If so, would they like to share their address so team members can send them a note? Refer them to EAP for support as they grieve this loss.</p>
<p>Situation: A team member or office co-worker is affected by or dies from Coronavirus.</p>	<p>Contact EAP. They can provide specific grief counseling and support to the team.</p>

Resources for Managers & Employees

COVID-19 Information –

For the most up-to-date guidance, please bookmark the [COVID-19 iManage](#) page and the [COVID-19 IRS Source](#) page. Encourage your employees to read the information on the IRS Source page (including Frequently Asked Questions) before submitting any questions.

Employee Assistance Program –

Employees may be experiencing increased isolation and fear during the Coronavirus pandemic. The safety of the workplace and comfort of one's work friends has changed, leaving many employees feeling unsteady. Because of this, additional challenges may present themselves, leaving employees vulnerable or exposed. These changes may lead to stress, anxiety, and depression, particularly for those who found work to be a shelter in the storm of our everyday lives.

This IRS sponsored benefit offers confidential help and support 24 hours a day, 7 days per week, at no cost to you or your immediate family. The EAP ComPsych Services - Guidance Consultants phone number is **800.977.7631 (IRS112)**. **This is a dedicated IRS line where immediate help is provided.** You may also download the GuidanceNowSM app from any mobile device or go online at [Guidance Resources \(ComPsych EAP Provider\)](#). **Organizational Web ID is IRS112.** It takes about 3 minutes to setup an account.

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is here to help. EAP not only provides someone to talk to but offers a wide variety of resources and tools as varied as the challenges of our people. You can find [comprehensive COVID-19 support resources](#) including help locating assistance such as food pantries, help with rent, prescriptions, utilities and more.

The Service wants our employees to be safe and healthy. The EAP is here, no matter the situation.

Supporting Employee Resilience –

Remaining resilient during the COVID19 crisis can be challenging. Encourage your employees to let their creative juices flow. There are many things that people are doing to keep a positive attitude and perspective.

Several business units have designed virtual meeting spots where employees can hear the latest news or swap stories and ideas. They cover topics such as book reviews, employee voices, fun Friday, business unit chatter, motivators and pick-me-ups, and photos. Employees can share positive interactions including helpful tips they may have for parents working at home with kids who are distance learning or sharing new recipes

they've tried. You can use this type of tool and best practices to help employees navigate the challenges they're experiencing.

Other related articles from various sources:

[How To Maintain Employee Engagement And Productivity During COVID-19](#)

[Gartner Lists Six HR Initiatives To Help Maintain Employee Engagement During COVID-19](#)

[How to Boost Employee Morale During COVID-19](#)

[5 Ways to Engage Remote Workers During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

The [Engagement and Retention Office](#) offers a variety of engagement resources for employees and managers. In addition, see the [Engagement Job Aids for Leaders](#) located on the Employee Engagement site.

On-line Training –

Managers and employees may be experiencing down time and may want to brush up on their skills. The new [online training and resource site](#) is a one-stop repository of e-learning tools and resources. From this site, you and your employees can access online training resources, articles, toolkits and best practices to help balance personal and professional changes during unprecedented times. You'll also find new and upcoming information on virtual work, well-being and leading in crisis.