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HR Guide to Supporting Leaders and Staff During COVID-19



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People & Business Services

Leaders play an important role in the success of Vanderbilt. Strong leadership is critical during challenging times. As we continue to lead during the COVID-19 crisis, we have experienced several other local, national and global events that have impacted all our employees and this country. These issues with the racial injustice that has become an important part of our local and national dialogue, some of us may be feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, disconnected, and any number of other emotions. It's important for leaders to know that the people on our teams are feeling these same emotions, and may now be looking to you for support. It is our hope that this guide provides a resource to leaders to support themselves and those they lead as it relates to these issues and the current remote workforce dynamic.

Table of Contents

Vanderbilt's Values
• P. 2

Today's Challenges
• P. 3-4

Build Your Action Plan
• P. 5-10

Campus Resources
• P. 10

Quick Reference Guides
• P. 11-16

Why did we make this guide?



In short, things have changed dramatically in our world, our work, and our personal lives. In spite of this upheaval, Vanderbilt remains committed to our mission of scholarship, teaching and research and we need to find new, creative ways to support this mission. As a leader at our great institution, it is up to you to create the conditions that allow your team to do their best work, and to experience the highest level of satisfaction possible. At the same time, however, you also have to take care of yourself. The purpose of this guide is to provide an understanding of the challenges we now face, both as individuals and as leaders, and some useful suggestions for how to address them.

Leading by Example Through Vanderbilt's Values:

Now more than ever, it is imperative that we lead with compassion and give each other grace while assuming good intent. Grounding our leadership in Vanderbilt's values of collegiality, civility, integrity, diversity, stewardship and inclusion assures that:

- We place honesty, integrity and the dignity of all individuals at the highest level in our work. In our conversations, we balance care and candor, to affirm respect for each individual while acknowledging their potential.
- We recognize the intrinsic relationship between diversity, inclusion and excellence.
- We strive to uphold a just community in which every member may realize their highest potential through accessible opportunities for learning, development and personal and professional growth.
- We respect the differences as well as the commonalities that bring us together and call for civility and respect in our personal interactions.
- We believe that active participation and leadership in addressing the most pressing issues facing our local and global communities are central to our mission.

Today's challenges

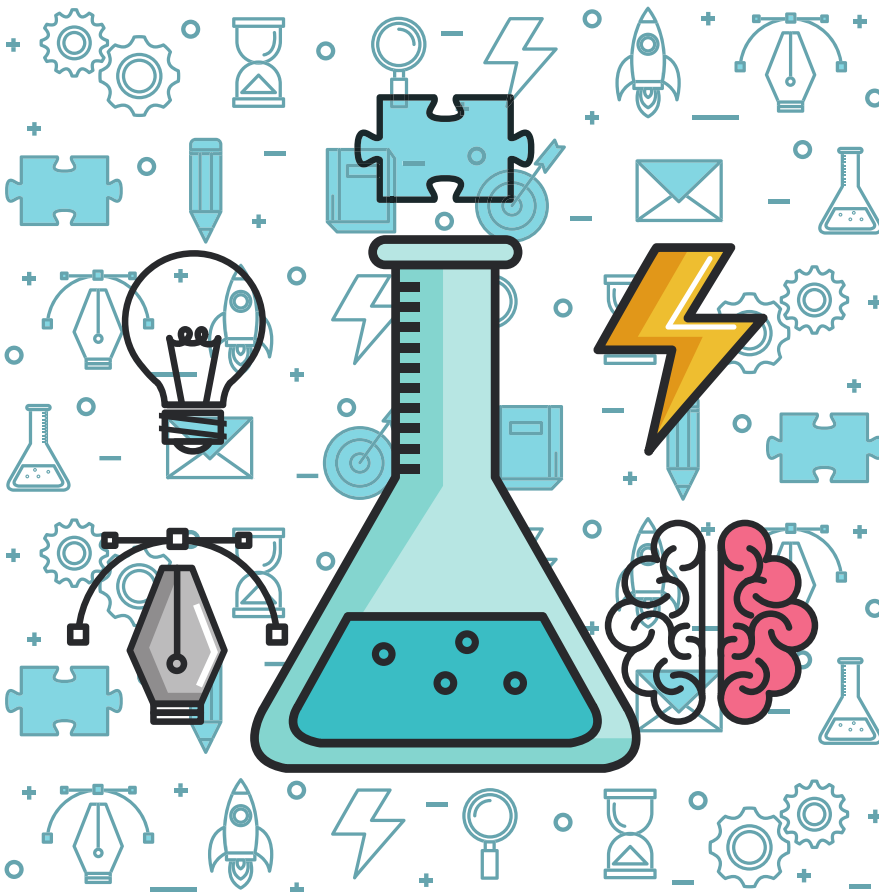
The challenge of focusing on work

Let's begin by exploring a bit of the neuroscience of this crisis:

- The uncertainty about our health, jobs, the economy, friends, family, disparities and the world in general results in an incredible amount of stress
- Risk in our environment makes us vigilant and still productive, but creativity is limited
- When that we perceive a threat is at our doorstep, we become cognitively impaired – it is even hard to read emails
- The stress levels being experienced by population at large provide insight into marginalized populations experience on a daily basis
- This creates an even heavier burden on marginalized populations

The challenge of managing a remote team

As we navigate this crisis together, a number of common concerns have surfaced. Many leaders have shared feelings of uneasiness around the following areas:



Inability to observe day-to-day workflows

Time differences

Trust

Inability to see body language

Inability to observe day-to-day workflow

This inability can cause leaders to ask “What does my employee do on a day-to-day basis?” or “Are my employees still positively contributing to the goals of my department or the greater campus?” These questions exemplify the differences between an “input” style of management vs. an “output” style of management. Not being able to see employees every day forces us, as leaders, to set strong performance goals and expectations for work outcomes vs. measuring how long someone is “on the job”. This may be a new or different way of engaging with your team, but once perfected, it will help you to be highly effective.

Time differences



It is a universal truth that it's harder to share ideas and collaborate when you don't work at the same time or run into each other in the breakroom. This is compounded when everyone on your team is juggling both the personal and professional requirements of this crisis. While technology allows us to be forever connected, it's not realistic to think that answers can be delivered as quickly as if you could pop by someone's desk to ask them a question.

Trust



It's more difficult to build trust when individuals are working in remote environments. Compound this with high stress levels and the quick action that is necessary when responding to change, and it's no surprise that misunderstandings can (and will) occur more frequently. Trust is at the heart of every relationship, and it's especially critical in the physical and remote workplace. In fact, the primary factor affecting employee turnover is whether or not there is a trusting relationship between a leader and their employees. Trust is critical for engagement, creativity, and commitment, and therefore is something we must foster in this time of crisis.

Inability to see body language

While we do have numerous tools at our disposal to “see” each other during this crisis, it isn't the same. Have you noticed that you feel exhausted after a Zoom meeting? One reason for this is that when you're in person, your eyes tend to look in the direction of one person and your brain is very good at blurring things happening in your peripheral vision. This allows your brain to translate the data in your direct line of site. In group Zoom meetings, you're not only concentrating on the one person who is speaking to you, but your brain is trying (subconsciously) to make sense of all of the data it's receiving from other participants, the chat window, the reactions, etc. All of this overstimulation can cause us to miss subtle clues that we may more easily pick up in one-on-one or face-to-face conversations.

So, with this knowledge, what can you, as a leader, do to help your team be **successful** during this crisis?

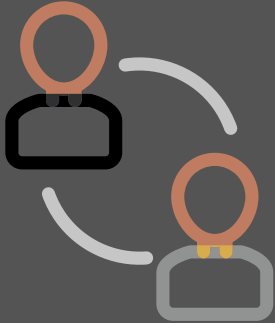
How do we as leaders, address today's challenges?

At a high level, each of us should:



Ask. Listen. *THEN* do. (Or in some cases, **listening** is enough)

Show empathy, for yourself and others while allowing for different reactions and self-care needs



Recognize that each individual has varying capacities to "perform," use this time to challenge your own assumptions and judgements

Demonstrate gratitude by asking your employees what they need to feel appreciated and doing your best to give that to them. Say "Thank you!"



Take care of ourselves, so you are able to take care of your team. Be authentic and honest, acknowledge the downsides as well as the positives. Offer grace and allow yourself and others to have good moments as well as not so good moments.

Understand that in a very short period of time we have all transitioned to working differently. The lines between work and home are blurred, there are distractions and we lack the common tools of our offices. We are navigating a new reality together and we got here quickly. Trust your employees!



Let's build your plan!

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 - Prepare to communicate | 5 - Adjust |
| 2 - Establish clear expectations | 6 - Continue to develop your team |
| 3 - Actively offer support to your team | 7 - Show appreciation |
| 4 - Set yourself up for success | |

Step 1 | Prepare to communicate

In times of uncertainty, people leaders need to communicate, communicate, communicate. You need to share information, answer questions, admit what you don't know and be transparent. This can be uncomfortable, and can be overlooked when you are being pulled in a number of different directions. Please understand, when there is a lack of information, false information often fills the void. Get ready to communicate by building agreed upon structures for sharing information. *You will also find a quick reference guide on page 15.*

Step 2 | Establish clear expectations

Your next, and most important, step is to establish clear expectations that will allow individuals to be successful and teams to successfully collaborate in this new environment. Connect with your direct reports to understand their expectations for work, and create agreements for how the team will work remotely. Work with your team to establish team norms, including dos and don'ts, to guide you during daily operations and high-stakes moments. You should also work with individuals on your team to create and agree to individual guidelines around key work outputs to ensure clarity on how each person fits into the bigger picture.

As you think about setting these group norms and individual guidelines, you may want to consider asking your team:

1. In your world, what are the benefits of working remotely?
2. How do you like to communicate? (phone, email, video, etc.)
3. In what instances do you prefer which method(s) of communication?
4. What expectations do you have of me as your leader?
5. What will be your targeted working hours?
6. How can we best keep each other updated regarding projects and development?
7. What would you like to try doing that you haven't had the opportunity to do in the past?
8. What interest do you have that I might not be aware of? Skills?
9. What concerns do you have about our remote work relationship?
10. What additional information would help me better understand your remote work situation?

Remember, in addition to setting clear expectations, it's important to recognize that especially in times of uncertainty, goals and expectations should be dynamic, not static. You should be open and flexible to adjusting goals, as necessary, to respond to changing conditions and people's individual circumstances.

In addition to building this foundation for success, there are a number of other tips available for supervising remote workers. You may consider prioritizing:

- *Reaching out* to team members, 1-on-1, more often, just to check in
- *Avoiding* interactions that feel like micromanagement
- *Celebrating* small daily progress and wins
- *Creating opportunities* for community building by hosting meetings where no work is discussed, optional coffee chats, happy hours, online games - be creative and involve the team in planning what they want to do
- *Developing* a remote communications strategy
 - Limit hours when people send and receive emails
 - Schedule sending of messages
 - Embrace asynchronous communication
 - Set crossover meeting times
- *Setting new norms*, such as creating goal-based outcomes vs. hours-based work

Vanderbilt's **Alternative Work Arrangement Toolkit and Guidelines for Success** may be a useful resource.

Step 3 | Actively offer support to your team

Interestingly, during ordinary times most people look for competence first in their leader. During periods of stress, many people start to look first for caring and empathy, and then for competence. In these unprecedented times, your team is looking to you for support more than ever. Given this shift, you have the opportunity to step-up as a leader in a few essential ways. Meeting staff where they are and acknowledging these circumstances with grace fosters mutual respect and commitment.



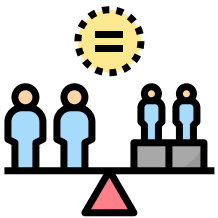
Flexible work schedules

In many cases, supervisors, managers, and their teams have the ability to update normal working hours to allow employees to adjust to this crisis. You should start the discussion with your employees about their schedule by asking what they need to be most successful. Some alternatives to consider include changing their “shift” from 8 to 5 to: early morning hours, late day hours, or working four 10-hour days. A general best practice is to reach out early and often to your HR Consultant with questions.



Time Away

Encourage employees to take Paid Time Off. For many staff members, the last three months have been intense and for our wellbeing, we must have respite.



Practice Equity

Marginalized and underrepresented communities are suffering even more right now. As a leader, you need to be particularly aware that you may have staff members dealing with these situations, and they may be reluctant to share their concerns with you.

During this time, and always, all leaders should strive to treat people equitably - in other words:

- Recognize and respond to each person's unique circumstances and needs
- Acknowledge differential impacts
- Be compassionate

Step 4 - Set yourself up for success

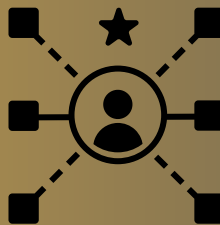
Setting boundaries may be especially important right now. Consider these recommendations:



Create routines or use objects to put your brain in "office mode", e.g. create a work playlist, remove "work" objects from sight when it is not work time.

Don't always be "on" and practice good digital hygiene by setting limits and having designated off-time.

Limit distractions, when possible.



Learn your chronotype (early bird vs. night owl) and work during your peak performance hours, while being sensitive to your team member's stated needs and chronotypes.

Set up a "Focus Sprint" consisting of 60-90 minutes of focused, uninterrupted work.

Focus Sprint Starter Pack



Block calendar time each day for your Focus Sprint



Close email and Zoom, leaving open only what you need to move your project forward



Reduce distractions in your home by suggesting that the entire family have their Focus Sprint at the same time



Use headphones, but if listening to music, use a language you can't understand so your brain can focus instead of trying to task-switch (which is the correct way to qualify the misnomer of "multi-tasking")



Write down the tasks you aim to accomplish. Use a timer if it helps.

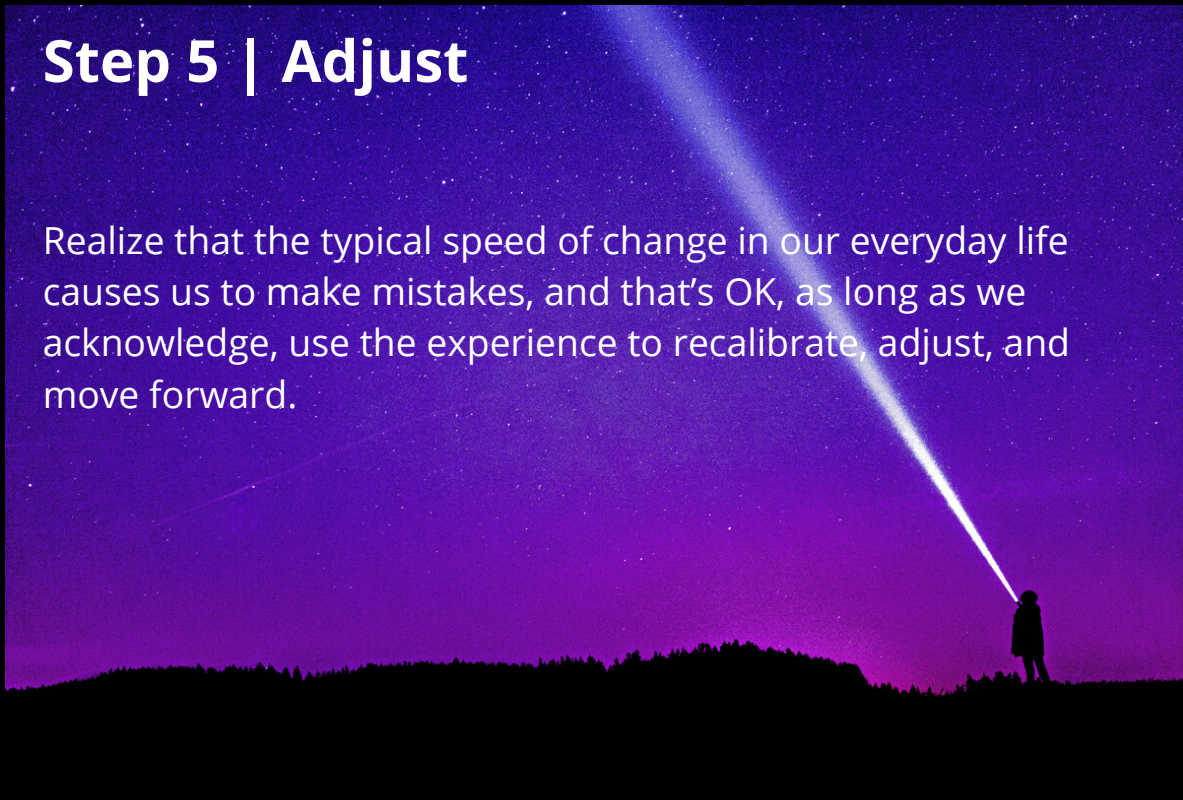
Take a cognitive break after your Focus Sprint

- Get up, move, get some sun
- Stay off social media and don't browse the internet

This allows your brain to physiologically prepare to do more and not become mentally fatigued

Step 5 | Adjust

Realize that the typical speed of change in our everyday life causes us to make mistakes, and that's OK, as long as we acknowledge, use the experience to recalibrate, adjust, and move forward.



Step 6 | Continue to develop your team



One way to show you care and to create some stability during this time is to continue to develop members of your team. Consider the resources available from:

- The [HR Learning & Organizational Development](#) webpage has links to online training and development
- HR conducts a number of workshops. To see a full list and to enroll, visit please login to [Oracle](#) and go to the **Learning** tile.
 - To view the list of HR workshops in Oracle Learning, enter "HR" into the search box.

Step 7 | Show appreciation

Another important factor in creating a successful remote working environment during this crisis is becoming more familiar with appreciation. There are a number of ways to show the members of your team that you appreciate them.

As you think about appreciation, consider the following questions

When have you felt appreciated by those with whom you work, how did that impact you?



When have you observed a colleague who did not feel appreciated, what did you see? How did it impact their work? Their team? The organization?

Make sure you consider your team's needs. By doing their job well, who on your team makes your life easier? What do they do (specifically) that you value? Commit to telling them what you value, and why, in your next one-on-one conversation. If you discover what form of appreciation resonates most with them, and provide it, you'll make an even bigger impact.

Additionally, now is an ideal time to encourage members of your team to appreciate each other. You can create forums and rituals for this to happen, such as asking for "kudos" and "bright spots" at the beginning of meetings. For ideas, resources, and support in delivering employee appreciation efforts, please contact the Employee Learning & Engagement team at employeeappreciation@vanderbilt.edu.

Engage with our Campus Community and our Resources

[Diversity & Campus Community Resources](#)

[Employee Assistance Program](#)

[Child & Family Resources](#)



Vanderbilt HR Guide to Supporting Leaders and Staff During COVID-19

This section takes your action plan to the next level. Use the in-depth, though quick reference guides for planning next steps, and for revising to refine your approach.

Taking Care of Yourself

First, check in with yourself. Are you okay? What do you need right now? Your team needs you to stay calm and grounded. Self-care looks different for everyone. Things for consideration:



- Are you getting enough sleep?
- Are you taking enough breaks through the day? Are you moving your body? Are you getting outside?
- Is there anything you need from your leader to feel more supported?

Wellness

Your priorities around self-care, exercise, work, and family have likely shifted. The same is probably true for members of your team. Help them refocus on self-care or find support while caring for others by:

- Becoming familiar with the wellness resources available on campus. A curated list of resources can be found on the People & Business Services COVID-19 website.
- Encouraging mental health days using the paid time off available to all Vanderbilt staff.
- Communicating with your team that working from home on a prolonged basis, especially under quarantine, can be a very isolating experience. Check in with your team members regularly to ensure they are doing ok, and when they are not, connect them to available COVID-19 Wellbeing Resources for Faculty and Staff.
- Remind them (and yourself) to work in a way that is kind to their body. In other words, don't spend all day hunched over a stool at the kitchen counter, take regular breaks, and make sure to stretch!

Taking Care of Your Team

As a leader, it is important to ask your direct reports how you can best support them.

- How are you doing / feeling right now?
- What is one thing I could do to help you?
 - Additional questions available in the "Establish Clear Expectations" section above

If you ask the above questions and don't receive a response, you may need to dig deeper:

- Offer a time to discuss, one-on-one, how the current situation is affecting them.
- Provide strategies for maintaining productivity.
 - **Please note:** Before providing solutions here, ask them if they would like you to help them think through these questions and what helps THEM stay productive.
- Remind your direct reports of why we are doing the work we do and how it supports the University's mission and goals; highlight some of the work they are doing, and that Vanderbilt is doing.
- Discuss personal and professional barriers or challenges that may make it difficult to perform at their best.
 - **Please note:** Again, before providing solutions here, ask them if they would like you to help them think through these questions and make the suggestions about them, not you.

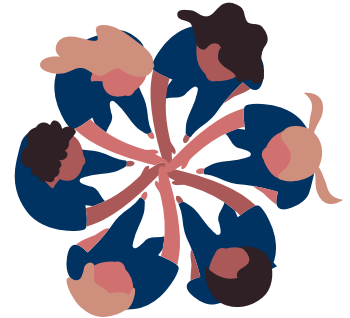


Vanderbilt HR Guide to Supporting Leaders and Staff During COVID-19: Quick Reference

Team Bonding

Use this time as an opportunity to build or rebuild relationships. Here are some ideas you might consider, but start by asking your team what they might like:

- As appropriate, allow the first few minutes of individual and team meetings for small talk, jokes, and catching up on each other's lives before jumping into business.
 - **Please note:** This is not a requirement; as the leader, create space for those to easily opt-out without drawing attention to them.
- Create informal and *optional* opportunities to connect: schedule a weekly virtual happy hour, coffee break, or lunch; make clear that the purpose is to catch-up / visit / chat or something else, not to work.
- Find a way to LAUGH with your team.
- Celebrate successes, no matter how small: Working from home doesn't mean you should forgo opportunities to celebrate the completion of a deliverable or project, wish someone a Happy Birthday, or generally find ways to celebrate the positives together.
- Consider hosting a recurring, ongoing Zoom meeting that people can dip in and out of, for example, a Zoom room that your team members can jump in and out of to create a "water cooler" spot for the team to have a break.
- Allow space to conduct deeper check-in meetings with your team members so that you can hold space for their concerns and needs.



Be Flexible and Show Empathy

Remember that people are not machines

- Many of us are feeling anxious and distracted. Many of us are scared and worried about our well-being or the well-being of our loved ones. Expect a decline in productivity and focus.
 - Gently remind people that a decline in productivity is normal during a time of crisis and encourage them to practice compassion with themselves and each other.

Discuss flexible work schedules

- Discuss work schedules with each of your direct reports. Making room for this discussion shows them that you care for their time. Be mindful that their work schedule might be different than it normally is, and may change as needs require. Be especially mindful of people who are balancing work and providing care for others at the same time.
- Leaders of non-exempt / hourly employees should give them clear direction on when to / when not to work, and remind and encourage them to take their regular breaks.
- The Alternative Work Arrangements Toolkit may be a resource.

Support caretakers

- Especially during uncertain times, encourage your employees to take Paid Time Off (PTO) to manage obligations.

Be present

- Prepare for meetings by creating and reviewing materials, documents, and agendas ahead of time.
- Don't multitask; give your direct reports the same level of respect and attention when remote that you would in a face-to-face meeting. It's difficult to create empathy and trust with your team if you are not fully present.

Vanderbilt HR Guide to Supporting Leaders and Staff During COVID-19: Quick Reference

Exchanging Feedback

Actively solicit feedback

Actively make more space for feedback. It's important that you don't assume your direct reports will feel comfortable sharing. Ask what more you could be doing to support them.

- What could help you to meet your current commitments and responsibilities?
- What roadblocks are you facing?
- What remains unclear on expected outcomes, and how might you get there?
- What help do you need prioritizing work and/or deliverables?



Actively give feedback

Provide feedback often, in quick soundbites to help your team members course correct quickly. As much as possible, feedback should be delivered over Zoom, not over email, to ensure understanding and the opportunity for members of your team to ask for clarification as needed.

Leadership

Set expectations early and clearly

Being clear with your team will keep everyone focused and working towards the same goals. Set clear expectations for:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| • work hours | • key projects and deadlines |
| • availability | • scheduled meetings |
| • communication system | • responding to email, and |
| • timely meetings | • boundaries |

Be flexible

For many employees, this will be their first time working remotely. Their current home environments might not be conducive for remote work. As a result, during team meetings and one-on-ones there may be children playing or crying, and/or noises, dogs barking in the background, etc. Please encourage them that that this is part of the remote work environment and it is okay.

Have an agenda

When scheduling team meetings and individual check-ins, be sure to put together an agenda or context verbiage and add it to the meeting invite in the notes section. This helps to ensure preparation and clarity for everyone. At the beginning of the meeting, quickly review the agenda and check to see if any pressing matters have come up that need to be addressed; adjust accordingly.

Create boundaries

Set work schedules and boundaries together to support work-life balance and avoid burnout. Show your team that you care, **trust their work ethic**, and remind them on a regular basis that remote doesn't mean that they need to be online or available 24/7. **Encourage your direct reports to take breaks.** When working from home, it can be difficult to create space to stop working. Model this behavior by taking breaks yourself.

Ask direct reports...

- What concrete directions do you need to move forward on your current projects?
- How do you feel about your capacity and workload?
- What clarity do you need on your priorities for this week?

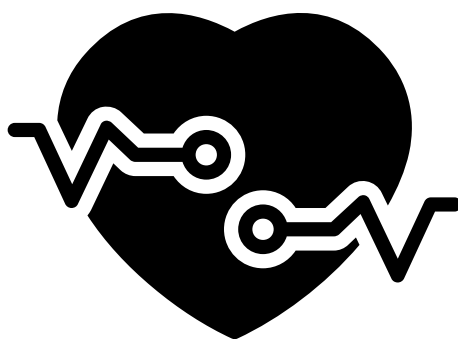
Vanderbilt HR Guide to Supporting Leaders and Staff During COVID-19: Quick Reference

Wellbeing

During these unprecedented times, your priorities around self-care, exercise, work, and family have likely shifted. Please realize the same is probably true for members of your team. Help them refocus on self-care or find support while caring for others by:



- Becoming familiar with the wellness resources available through the Employee Assistance Program. These include self-care and coping resources, wellcast (podcasts), home and work life support and resources for your peers and team.
- Communicating with your team that working from home on a prolonged basis, especially with a phased reopening of activities, can be a very isolating experience. Check in with your team members regularly to ensure they are feeling supported and that they have EAP as a resource.
- Remind them (and yourself) to work in a way that is kind to their body. In other words, don't spend all day hunched over a stool at the kitchen counter, take regular breaks, and make sure to stretch!



Use Multiple Communication Channels



Shared Online Database

- Collaborative work
- Discussion threads
- Idea sharing



Email

- Progress updates
- Non-urgent questions
- Individual or team accomplishment highlights



Instant Messaging

- Urgent questions
- Informal discussions
- Real-time information sharing



Telephone

- All sensitive or urgent issues
- Any situation where tone is key
- Real-time information sharing (brainstorming, decision-making)
- Formal discussions regarding progress or projects, development needs, and recent successes)



Video Conference

- Delivery of difficult messages (when in-person meetings are not an option)
- Formal discussions regarding progress on projects, development needs and recent successes
- Monitoring team morale
- Team meetings

Manager tip: Vary the communication style you use for different situations. For example, a non-urgent question doesn't necessitate a video conference, but you certainly want to use video to discuss difficult messages.

Select the Right Communication Channels

Instructions: Different messages require different communication channels in a virtual environment. Use this template to select the most appropriate communication channel for a specific type of communication that you will need to deliver to your virtual direct report.

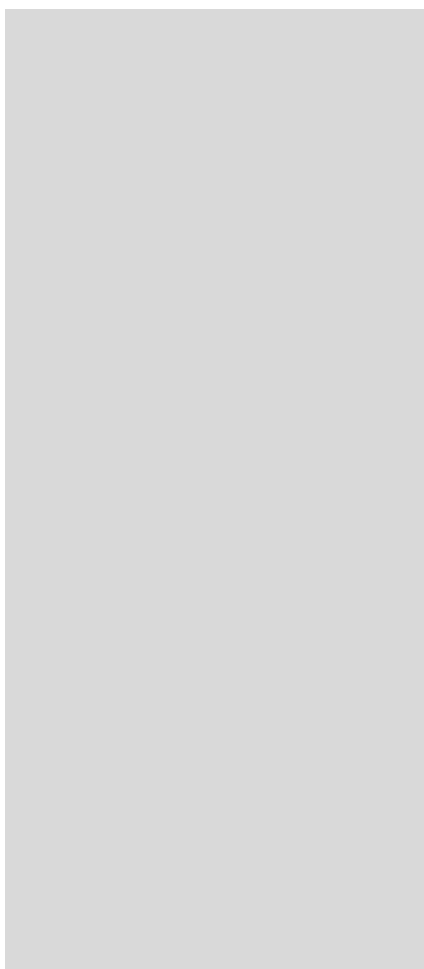
Communication Types	Importance	Frequency	Primary Channel	Secondary Channel

Brainstorm a Good Team Activity

Instructions: Think of ways you could foster a sense of team. Use the boxes below to brainstorm how you will work to build team trust for each of the following time intervals.

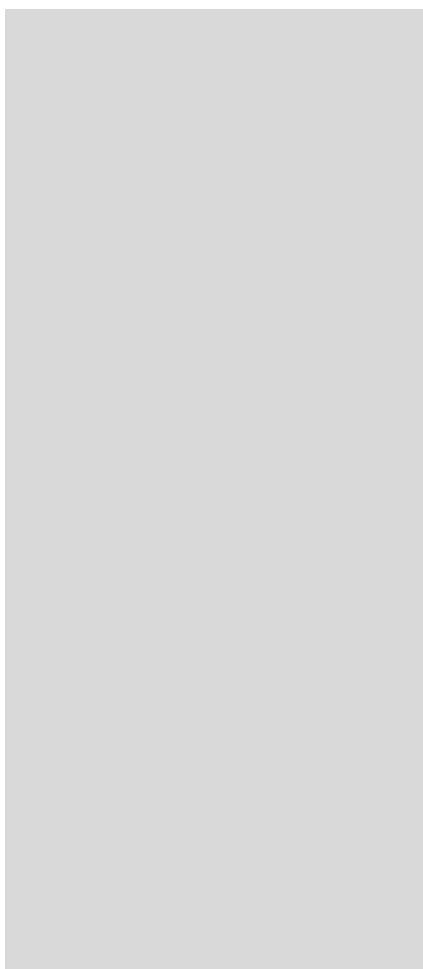
What will you do in every team meeting?

Recognizing employees on an ongoing basis helps boost engagement. How will you recognize employees during team meetings?



What will you do with every new team member?

Building the connection between new employees and the team helps get them off to a fast start. How will you work to connect your new employee to your team and virtual team members?



What will you do each month?

Describe the team activities you will run to maintain the connection between team members in different locations.

