



Flexible, Remote and Online Working guide

Part 4: Team wellbeing

After the initial weeks of COVID-19, we seem to have moved from shock into stasis, and are settling into what is likely to be an interminable middle phase. So on top of dealing with and worrying about the changes that C19 itself has made to our lives, we are now doing so while exhausted, fragile and frayed.

This tense and tenuous space we find ourselves in makes it more important than ever to think about the wellbeing of our teams, our peers and ourselves – as we all move from asking “when will this end?” to “how will we cope until it does?”

Part 4: Team wellbeing

The organisations most committed to team wellbeing tend to be those that attract passionate people willing to go above and beyond for an org or a cause they believe in. This is often to their own detriment (and, for people in the arts or charity sectors in particular, often for disproportionately low reward).

This means that managing team wellbeing can be a challenge at the best of times. And these are not the best of times. Instead, we are stressed and preoccupied, and shut off from many of the social, cultural and creative interactions that are important for our health and happiness (not just the ones we usually find at work).

Being proactive about team wellbeing benefits everyone. Putting measures in place to reduce isolation, exhaustion and burnout will lead to more motivated, productive and enjoyable remote work environments. And as loyalty goes up when absenteeism goes down, your bottom line may start to look healthier too.

Communicate, communicate, and communicate again

Remote working asks us to communicate more often, more effectively, and in more (and more varied) ways. Even those of us who are introverts or already accustomed to working from home can suffer from isolation when our social interactions are removed (or, even more, if they are replaced with non-stop interactions with other members of our households). Extroverts and others who thrive in high-contact environments can easily slip into social deprivation and shock.

See Part 2 of these guidelines for some of the protocols, tips and effective communication behaviours to consider when working online.

Set up a one-stop-shop

Make sure to document and centralise your organisation’s processes and resources about occupational health and safety, mental health and wellbeing, and any employment assistance programs. Let people know where to find them, and where they can turn to for help.

Change the support you provide for changing times

Don't assume that the sort of support that team members needed in the past will automatically be what they need now.

Some may need to work later at night or earlier in the morning to manage their work around home-schooling or caring responsibilities. Some may benefit from being paired with a C19 buddy to have someone available to vent to. Paying team members fortnightly instead of monthly could make a huge difference, as could reimbursing them for use of their home internet, or extending or reallocating your employment assistant program.

Have a think about what you might be able to do to support your teams, and how much flexibility you can provide. Be open. Be inventive. And ask the team for their ideas too.

Set boundaries (and model them yourself)

It's harder than ever for all of us to separate our work from our home lives. But creating a wellbeing culture starts at the top, so it's not only important to encourage our teams to set boundaries, but to reinforce and model those boundaries through our own work and actions too. This may include:

- Being clear about your working hours (and sticking to them as much as you can).
- Sharing calendars and encouraging team members to keep them up to date, including blocking out their non-working times (particularly if they're working flexible hours).
 - Schedule meetings to end 5-15 minutes before the end of the hour or half-hour to build in some breathing space so people aren't in back-to-back video calls all day.
 - Schedule breaks as calendar appointments.
 - Schedule time to work on substantive projects.
 - Schedule non-working time for when you're dealing with other things.
- Using your calendar, remote working platform's availability icon and/or status message to plan your day and signal your availability to others.
- Practicing how to say 'no' or 'not now'.
- Negotiating deadlines around your working hours, not someone else's (and being open to negotiation too).

Find a new routine

A lack of routine can make people feel adrift or unmotivated. Some work-from-homers delight in being able to wear their pyjamas all day (or only wearing office clothes from the waist up). Others still get as dressed and made up as before. Finding a happy medium can help you enforce the boundary between work and home. As can getting up at the same time, going for a 'commute' around the block to start and end your day, or eating at regular mealtimes.

Focus on the facts (but not too often)

We are all currently receiving news, having conversations, making plans, thinking about and doing things that most of us would never have thought possible - at least, outside of science fiction. We are learning, absorbing and worrying at whiplash pace.

It's important to keep ourselves informed, and to do so from sources we trust. But constant news consumption (particularly when it's so speculative) can fuel rather than calm our anxieties.

Try to manage your time online. Decide when to tune in and when to tune out. Avoid getting sucked down the rabbit hole, overloading yourself with information, or exhausting yourself with unnecessary head-miles. Try to schedule some screen-free time each day.

Try to be mindful of how others may be feeling before initiating conversations about C19 too. You may even want to introduce a safe-word for when you, your colleagues or members of your household are feeling overloaded or overwhelmed. In our house, for example, 'pineapple' means 'I hear and value you, but I can't talk about this right now.'

Practice self-care (in order to care for others)

Taking care of ourselves isn't weak or selfish. It's absolutely necessary – and not just for our own benefit.

With everyone so anxious about the state of our lives and the world, the best way for us all to stay healthy and able to do whatever it is we need to do is to look after ourselves. Self-care has never been so important. This may include:

- Trying to eat well, sleep well and stay hydrated.
- Trying to get up and stretch more often than you would have done in the office. Physical movement is helpful in maintaining good mental wellbeing, but can be a challenge when our households are as busy and our movements as restricted as they are now.
- Staying connected with peers, friends and family. Physical distancing shouldn't mean social distancing.
- Trying to notice when you start to feel stressed or overwhelmed. Take some deep breaths. Go outside. Write it out. Record something you're grateful for. Do whatever works for you.
- Trying not to diminish or compare our experience to others. Everything is harder right now. Everything that was an issue before has been exacerbated. Just because there are bigger problems in the world don't make our problems any less real.
- Being kind to ourselves. Of course our coping skills are starting to fray as C19 wears on. The longer it does, the less emotional capacity we have left, and the more likely we are to leak at the seams (or burst into tears during a video call). The last thing we need when everything is so hard is to beat ourselves up for how we feel or how we act.
- Being kind to others too. We also need to remember that others may not be their best selves right now. We all need to concentrate on the things we can control, and cut ourselves some slack about the things we can't.

Call it out

Team wellbeing isn't something we can set and forget. It changes every day and with every individual's circumstances.

Keep having discussions about wellbeing, isolation and burnout as a team and with individual team members. Ask specific questions about how people are coping, and look out for visual and verbal clues (which may include dramatic changes in attitude or appearances, exhaustion or illness, lack of interest or engagement, making mistakes or falling behind).

Keep talking about the difficulties of communicating online too. The change from predominantly in-person to mostly online or text-based communication often means that things can be lost in translation. What we mean might not come across in the way we had hoped – from unpleasant or gruff to inappropriate or even bullying. Good intentions count, but hurt or offence caused by accident still hurts. We all need to help each other navigate through this strange space.

Give yourself a break (but don't take one)

Don't panic. We aren't born knowing how to work remotely. Getting it right will take some time (and some teething pains). Be kind to yourself and others as much as you can as you move through the process. Be accountable when things go wrong. Acknowledge your mistakes, apologise, and ask how best to move on. And, importantly, try and try again.

About the writer

Kate Larsen is a Non-profit & Cultural Consultant with more than 20 years' experience as a leader and senior executive in the non-profit, government and cultural sectors in Australia, Asia and the United Kingdom. She has particular expertise in the areas of workplace culture and wellbeing, online communication and communities, and increasing access for marginalised groups. This includes experience managing remote-working teams at a state and national level.

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