

# Employee Engagement During Crisis

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The entire event industry's rapid shutdown in March of this year, in response to COVID-19, came as a shock. Being unable to process what was happening at the time, I resisted the thought that we'd have to stop everything and immediately go under lockdown. I kept telling myself it was just temporary but felt lost. Initially, this is how I coped with all the unexpected change and dreadful uncertainty. As much as I wanted to be the person I usually am, the kind who supports others and stays positive, I suddenly found myself acting the opposite. Tough decisions had to be made. You know the ones I mean. The government order to close our doors backed me into a corner, reluctantly, and forced me into laying off my staff.

The job of packing up my desk and preparing to work from home felt surreal, just like the whole pandemic did when it got declared a global emergency. The move to remote working was a first for me. In its early days, I reconciled the situation by realizing I got to be closer to my family and help care for their well-being. But then the weeks passed, and I grew increasingly disconnected from my staff. I longed for the times when we talked often, laughed hard, and shared happily in each other's company. Cast away on the remote island that was my home office, tackling the postponement and rebooking of our events, I still had a group of colleagues I chatted with on a semi-regular basis. They were a big source of support for me as we all navigated the unknown, and I like to think I helped prop them up too. Be that as it may, the physical and emotional separation between my staff and me needed fixing. Since having reopened the lines of communication with them, I thought I would share some ways for you to connect and engage with your staff during times of crisis.

## KEEP THEM IN THE LOOP

For many people, being off work doesn't mean they don't want to hear about it. No matter how small, provide business updates as they become available. Let them know what you're working on and ask for their input. When the industry had come together to find solutions to never-before-seen challenges, collaboration was huge in carving the path. I really wanted my staff to know about this, industry advocacy efforts, new health and safety protocols, training programs, etc. In my view, just because they weren't working, they shouldn't be excluded from contributing their thoughts and opinions. After all, when I welcome them back to work, they'll need to get up to speed quickly with the new expectations of our clients. My staff are as much of an expert on this industry as I am, so let them do what they do best and offer opportunities to provide feedback on the future direction we're proposing to take.

## STAY SOCIAL

Work is as social a place as any. Sadly, the reality of remote work can put a bit of a wrench in your daily checkups and chit-chats. Excuses aside, we should phone or video call often, and even go as far as setting up virtual coffee breaks a few times a week. Make it a group thing, or if your schedule permits, try going one-on-one. Non-work talk is encouraged, so do your best to steer the conversation away from that subject once you've given them the latest updates. Instead, ask about family or what's good to watch on Netflix. I have made it a habit and a goal to reach out to at least three people in my network every day. Some other ideas that you might want to consider are:

- Create a closed Facebook group or online private forum to share pictures and post messages
- Schedule a weekly drop-in Zoom call, Houseparty or Happy Hour
- Raise their spirits by sharing inspirational videos and encouraging messages of support

## BUILD PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

For there to be a personal connection, you need to make an effort to build one. Simple things like remembering birthdays, work milestones or anniversaries help show your staff that you're taking the time to acknowledge them. If you're already doing this, go a step further and organize a group of colleagues to reach out with an e-card or gesture of appreciation. During the first months of the remote work, I got inspired by seeing so many drive-by birthday celebrations and porch drop-offs of goodies and wine. At our company, we usually host a picnic every summer, where people bring their families to socialize, have fun and enjoy a barbecue. Since doing that again this year wasn't possible, I gathered some colleagues together and pitched the idea of having a drive-thru lunch instead. I did this in large part because I wanted to personally engage staff and get a sense of their coping with COVID-19-related stresses. Ever since that day, my connections with staff have steadily bounced back to their pre-pandemic levels.

## SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Countless websites are offering professional development courses free of charge. Seeing that the speed of our daily work and personal lives has slowed down to some degree these days, we have a unique opportunity to shift focus towards developing our skills and knowledge. I recommended my staff stay up-to-date with the industry by taking advantage of the courses offered by LinkedIn Learning, Coursera, Udemy and others. I followed my own advice and had enrolled in several programs that have already filled the gap between my strengths and weaknesses. Even if the takeaways are not entirely relatable to event planning and management, I am a firm believer that continuous development makes us better professionals. What's more, this learning can also be a stepping stone towards attaining certifications in the future.

There has never been a time in my career when I looked around and saw no events and so few people working. Eventually the time will come to fully bring back what we once had. Until then, the gradual climb upwards must keep us thinking about the people who have contributed a great deal to our past accomplishments. All of the ideas I presented here are light on financial costs and heavy on rewarding benefits. Do what works for you. If it feels right, chances are it's going to be right.

**VP**

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