



THOUGHT PARTNERSHIPS

Building effective cross-sector Communities of Practice to advance just, inclusive and non-violent societies

COMMUNITY WISDOM DURING COVID-19

Practices for Strengthening Cohesion & Creating Thriving Virtual Teams

On March 31, 2020 TP hosted a conversation to hear from its members how they are adjusting to working remotely and some best practices they have been implementing with their teams. In this document you will find a summary of the tips and suggestions crowdsourced from participants.

Embrace New Ways to Check-in

- Create more space for personal sharing during team meetings. Taking time to really listen when asking 'how are you doing' questions and hold open the space for an honest answer. Utilizing this time to get to know colleagues on a deeper level than before. In times of stress, anxiety and change, safety in vulnerability is important and most helpful when modeled across teams.
- Make time for daily team check in conversations, preferably with video so you can see one another. The expressions, demeanors and energy of a team member can tell you as much as the words themselves. Carving out a thoughtful dedicated space for the team to see one another, reinforce companionship, collaboration and a feeling of being in it all together is important and should be modelled by team leaders.
- Managers and team leaders are encouraged to set up regular and more frequent 1:1 check-ins with their team members as possible. This helps to ensure that in addition to the full team or organization wide meetings, that individuals have a separate space to discuss their own needs, hopes and concerns and also think about the ways they would like to step up and in or step back.

Shifting the Norms Around Work/Life Separation

- Allow the line between personal and professional to become more fluid by creating the space for team members to come into virtual spaces as their whole self. For those now working from home and possibly with their children or other family members the boundary between work/office and home life has been diminished. This means the team members are joining from more personal spaces and cannot always show up and just dive into business as usual. While some teams already have these practices built into their culture, not all do, and this is a time to give more consideration to it. Equally important to shifting culture in the immediate term, will be to prepare for how that continues (or not) when teams can return to in person work at offices. Setting clear expectations along the way can avoid interpersonal confusion and tension.

- Transparency is important to building a strong virtual team culture. While on one hand working virtually offers team members an insight into different parts of their peers's lives, it also creates a sense of isolation and separation which can make problems or stresses invisible. Opening spaces for sharing about work and factors that impact it often and early can help create a more collegial and collaborative environment even during times of physical distancing.
- Be open to adjusting workplans and re-envisioning new benchmarks and milestones for the work. Encourage creative ideas and new ways of working to help shift the feeling of stress and difficulty to a sense of opportunity and innovation. You never know how people and teams may find new ways to shine when given the space and permission to experiment.
- Allow team members to create new work hours and call on the team to help them maintain that. When working at home and with few allowances to leave the house amidst quarantines and stay at home orders, people can end up working around the clock with no separation of work and life as previously created by outings, social events and even your daily commute or kid's school routine. This can create unhealthy habits and expectations and also be hard to calibrate back into a more regular work schedule once this temporary situation ends.

Sustaining Collaboration & Cohesion Despite Distance

- With the boom of technology and apps, there are numerous different platforms, tools and modes of communication that can be used to build a strong virtual culture. For example participants cite using Slack for team wide conversations, Google Hangouts for informal collaborative conversations, phone calls for more personal conversations and email for regular business. Offering a mix of mediums can help set expectations around the tone and tempo of an interaction as well its level of urgency and formality.
- Allowing teams and individuals to choose which of these modes of communication they want to use and when, is also a good practice and allows for different work styles and needs across a team.
- Even when working at a distance, team members can still build strong relationships and engage in acts of compassion and kindness. Jokes, pictures, stories and care packages were all mentioned as examples of how teams are staying close and demonstrating their solidarity while introducing moments of levity amidst change.
- Setting up a block of time to work together on tasks can also help boost and maintain levels of productivity. For example you can take an in person brainstorming session online via video conference or even a conference call and a Google document that everyone can work on together. This can create some teamwork time that is different from a check-in or meeting and can help workflows continue, reduce a feeling of isolation and build collaboration.

Step In, Step Up and Allow Peers to Also Step Back

- Acknowledge that in the shifting landscape of COVID-19 that previous bandwidth of individual team members has likely also shifted. Some may be able to do more, others will need permission and encouragement to know it is okay to do less. This is a good time to encourage team members to step up and into areas they feel they can best fill without a sense of failure for those who may need to step back. Motivation for getting things done in times of deep personal anxiety require the team to demonstrate compassion, camaraderie and to have flexibility across jobs and hierarchies.
- Communicating clearly that benchmarks for success are being recalibrated based on new circumstances and assuring team members that they remain valuable and appreciated is important. It allows individuals to be honest in the needs they have to cope with the new factors of working remotely from home and can boost trust, productivity and happiness with their work and in their workplace.
- Decentralize decision making processes, especially for organizations that have a Headquarter <> Field Team model where decision making may typically come from HQ, however those individuals may not be best placed to make real time decisions in a dynamically shifting field based context. Creating more agency for teams and individuals to make decisions can alleviate stress on all parties involved.

Maintaining Individual and Collective Health, Wellness and Balance

- Keeping healthy and active while confined indoors is a reality that can impact mood, focus and productivity. Sharing ideas and offering shared opportunities to motivate one another can help alleviate this. Some ideas shared:
 - ◆ Implement a fitness challenge with your team. A steps or walking challenge could be a useful starting point. A little healthy competition to keep the engagement going.
 - ◆ Build in movement activities into your virtual meetings and sessions. For example have a meeting standing up, outside, or even start or end it with some music and movement. It can be fun and also break up monotony
 - ◆ Share links and resources of good virtual exercise routines and mindfulness practices like meditation.
 - ◆ Find activities that are fun for the whole family, like a morning Zumba routine with your kids.
 - ◆ Explore the quiet space around and lean into it. For example if you are walking your dog in the park and no one is around, sing out loud and take joy in that moment of social distance. Plus you never know if it might lead someone else at a distance to smile or sing

along.

- ◆ Find different places to exercise or engage in mindfulness, participants talked about doing more outdoors if they have access to those spaces, and making use of areas of your home that you may not otherwise e.g. the top of your house boat, your balcony, a sunny spot in your living room, a late spring snowfall etc.
 - ◆ Focus on your mental health and feelings of happiness as much as exercise and physical health. Both are important and can be equally impacted by a sustained level of living amidst a crisis or under stress. Helping each other laugh out loud can be invaluable.
- Look for short (20-minute) workout videos, if you set small goals, you can be more likely to achieve them and set up a system of asking one another about how they are doing in sustaining healthy habits.
 - Book a time in your work calendar to exercise or move around.
 - Use this as a learning opportunity to set in place practices for health and wellness that are short term and also can be sustained in the medium and long term. This includes creating or updating your crisis and contingency plans for what processes can come into effect the next time there is a similar situation.
 - Understanding that this is a hard time for everyone, and it is imperative to be flexible, as we are all juggling in this new and shifting reality. This is something that needs to be modeled and encouraged in practice every day and not just said in words or writing.
 - Managers and team leaders should also ensure they have a support system in place for themselves. While it is an important moment for them to model positive practices, demonstrate flexibility and create space, they also need a support system to ensure they are not internalizing or taking on the stress of others without an outlet as this will lead to burnout.



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