

Guide

Maintaining Social Cohesion in a Time of Social Distancing

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HOT TOPIC

Maintaining Social Cohesion in a Time of Social Distancing

Social distancing is noted to be an effective strategy for stemming the progression of Covid-19 in countries including China and South Korea. In Italy, new confirmed cases are finally beginning to drop in response to social distancing. But social distancing can lead to social isolation. Social distancing means physical distancing, it does not mean social disconnection or breaking social bonds. In fact, in times like these social connections and community solidarity are particularly crucial. To be effective, social distancing relies on social cohesion. Social cohesion is defined as the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with one another in order to survive and prosper.

Social distancing will test our ability to put our own interests and priorities behind those of other members of our communities, including people we don't know. Providing employees with transparent, reliable and credible information is one of the most important things employers can do to ensure employees understand the scientific rationale for social distancing and work-from-home policies. Provide your employees with direct access to accurate and up-to-date information. [The Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) and [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) are ideal sources of information and safety guidance on the virus as there are many conflicting messages being sent across the major cable channels and on social media platforms.

Individuals play a critical role in protecting not only their own health, but also the health and wellbeing of their communities and society overall. Below are actions organizations - and individuals - can take to support one another and build the social cohesion needed to see us through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Acknowledge and address inequities

Social distancing will amplify already existing inequities and hit certain employee populations the hardest. Not all employees will have the same access to high speed internet, dedicated work spaces, or childcare. Employees in lower income groups may not have FaceTime or Skype or minutes on their phone to support connecting socially through technology.

Take this time to acknowledge and address inequities by focusing on social cohesion and building connections with your employees. Understand how some employee groups will be feeling the impacts differently, and make the needs of those employee groups most at risk a priority focus. How your organization responds to the crisis and the steps you take to support your employees during this time will define your brand and reputation for years to come.

Culture@Work, a division of Working Mother Media, developed a trademarked platform to capture employee input virtually and anonymously in a safe, engaging and solutions-oriented group experience. [Employee Voice Sessions \(EVS\)](#) capture the "voice of the employee" at scale to develop a deep and richer understanding of sensitive and hot-button topics in the workplace.

For more information about EVS contact Shane Nelson at shane.nelson@cultureatwork.com or visit their website at cultureatwork.com.

Researchers at [Northeastern University](#) found that community connections were the driving force behind recovery efforts in post-Katrina New Orleans, rather than the government or economy. The study concluded that the success of resilience and recovery rests upon the internal characteristics of a community and the strength of connections between its members.

Provide links to employee assistance and support

Humans are social creatures and we place high value on our relationships and interactions. Disruption of those connections can lead to adverse physical and psychological effects and further exasperate public health concerns associated with COVID-19. According to a 2018 survey of 20,000 adults in the U.S, nearly half reported they sometimes or always feel alone. Forty percent also reported they sometimes or always feel that their relationships are not meaningful and that they feel isolated. According to a study by researchers at Brigham Young University, lack of social connection heightens health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or having alcohol use disorder. The study found that loneliness and social isolation are twice as harmful to physical and mental health as obesity.

Take steps to understand the impact of social distancing and self-isolation on your employees, in particular, those employee groups that are most at risk. Employees who already experience problems with depression, anxiety, loneliness, substance abuse, or pre-existing health concerns are particularly vulnerable and will be hit harder by policies to social distance and self-isolate. Employees from underrepresented and marginalized groups, such as an employee with a disability, or member of the LGBTQ+ community, may have a more limited social network and be more at risk for social isolation.

Make sure employees have access to a wide range of mental health resources and supports, including telehealth options and community-based mental health centers. Here are a few places to start.

[Health Insurance Providers Respond to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#). A list of insurance companies and how they are supporting their customers through this time.

[MentalHealth.gov](#). A general guide to resources for different types of mental health issues.

Demonstrate your commitment to supporting employees by establishing a hotline or support platform to connect employees with resources, including professionals they can talk with. For example, Cigna is providing free resources to help individuals and communities manage high stress and anxiety. The company has opened a 24-hour toll-free helpline (1-866-912-1687) to connect people directly with qualified clinicians who can provide support and guidance. Additionally, the company will offer a webinar to the general public raising awareness about tools and techniques for stress management and building resiliency, along with the ability to join telephonic mindfulness sessions. More information can be found at www.cigna.com.

[PTSD Coach](#) is a free application developed by the Department of Veterans Affairs. It contains coping and resilience resources such as exercises for deep breathing, positive imagery, muscle relaxation and other strategies to offset depression and anxiety.

Make sure employees are connected and engaged

The workplace is an essential component of an individuals' identity and the place where many employees find fellowship and social connection. During this unprecedented time, employees will now face a vacuum.

Maintaining social relationships is key to physical and mental health and well-being. Make interconnectivity a priority. Reach out and check in with your employees regularly and make sure they can access discussion forums and social networks. Remind them to stay connected and to make time for social interaction. For example, your organization can promote and foster virtual lunch and learn forums to share information and brainstorm strategies and tips for navigating through the crisis, convene virtual social hours, or arrange virtual book clubs.

BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLES

MongoDB is hosting virtual lunches and coffees to stay connected as well as virtual on-boarding for their new employees to ensure that they feel as connected as possible during this time.

FINRA's Parents Network and their wellness-focused ERG are offering special virtual meditation sessions to relieve stress.

Boston Scientific's ERGs are taking the lead in connecting people by moving many of their events to virtual events. Some are doing email chains to inspire each other and some are joining some of our work streams to serve as an additional communication outlet, with specific outreach to field employees to ensure they remain connected.

At Working Mother/DBP, we recently launched Friday afternoon virtual 'lunch and laughs' to provide our colleagues an opportunity to connect and share their latest Netflix binge or a favorite new book, or just decompress and share some of the challenges they encountered during the week. At one of our recent get togethers, several colleagues confided experiencing 'phantom symptoms' like feeling feverish without a fever, and feeling a recurring tightness in their chest. Being able to share these concerns helped alleviate them and also helped deepen our empathy and understanding for one another and the stressors we are all experiencing.

Tip: Employee resource groups can play a crucial role in sustaining and building the connections people need. But not all employees have robust networks of colleagues, friends and family members. These individuals will be the hardest hit in an environment of social distancing and self-isolation. The work of ERGs can be ramped up during this time to provide outreach and provide a point for social connection for members and employees that need support. Call upon these networks to expand their scope to include other individuals who may benefit from an outreach.

Additional Tips:

- **Create safe space** for connection and check ins
- **Allow for the first 10 minutes of each meeting** for personal interaction
- **Ensure face to face** (cameras on) every now and then
- **Don't just text or IM;** pick up the phone and have a conversation
- **Managers should reach out** on a regular basis even if just for just five minutes
- **Leverage technology for relaxation** (e.g. create a virtual book/movie club, encourage virtual art and/or yoga classes the group can do together)

To make up for the loss of in-person interaction, ramp up virtual communication channels

We are fortunate to live in a time where technology can connect us across distance. Make sure all employees, particularly those that may be more isolated, have access to chat, video and conference systems to communicate with each other. Engage your IT department to provide resources and develop tips for connecting and working remotely. Use chat boxes to create an opportunity for all participants to interact and provide feedback and input during meetings.

Encourage authenticity. Creating fellowship requires an emotional connection on a very real and human level in every interaction—and especially in a crisis. At Working Mother/DBP, like many other businesses, we have been holding virtual meetings and town halls. We are noticing that our attire has become much more casual and relaxed - more reflective of who we really are. We are patient with interruptions. Our discussions are more unplugged, and we are proactive about making time for each other. Our last sales meeting ended with family members, partners and pets being introduced via our 'virtual offices'. The opportunity gave us a more authentic glimpse of the work-life challenges many of us are juggling in the current situation. We also realized that some of us are working from home alone and may be facing different challenges in a time of social distancing and self-isolation.

Provide opportunities for shared purpose

In times of crises, having a sense of purpose can increase our self esteem and make us feel good about ourselves. Engage your employees in your organization's purpose work to provide employees with opportunities to engage. Giving back through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) can build social cohesion through collective action to support communities, particularly those that are disproportionately impacted by COVID-19.

Encourage employees to get involved in their own community relief efforts. Remarkable stories of local, neighbourhood-based aid groups are popping up all over the internet. Share these stories with your workforce and encourage them to start their own initiatives. Think creatively about ways your organization can support them. Capture and post stories about how your employees are helping each other and their communities.

Tip: Consider a virtual community service project. An ERG can take the lead to organize employees to rally around one particular cause or community-based organization and send out updates on their progress whether it be funds raised or supplies collected or other services employees are able to provide while social distancing. This establishes another way for employees to feel connected to the larger organization and to their communities while saying safe.

- Offer drop off meal services
- Pick up groceries or prescriptions for elderly or people with disabilities
- Facetime with senior citizens
- Write letters to hospitalized patients
- Donate supplies to healthcare workers.
- Buy gift cards from local small businesses and donate to communities in need or essential personnel

It is a basic human need to feel productive and useful. Creating opportunities for social cohesion in a time of distancing allows us to connect and collaborate around purposeful work. Unifying provides an opportunity to take back some control while making a positive difference in the lives of others. The current situation presents us with an opportunity to look more deeply at the type of organization we are, and how we support our people and our communities.

Poem: Pandemic

*“Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another’s hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.”*

By Lynn Ungar

Additional Tools/Resources to Support Social Cohesion

[Use Activity Creativity to Drive Remote Team](#)

Culture : Virtual Work Insider has some great ideas to drive trust, fun and inclusion across remote teams.

Netflix Party: Netflix Party allows groups of people to watch movies or television shows together in real time, including a chat function on the side of the screen to encourage interaction. Consider setting up a lunch time or end of day group watch of a specific episode of a television show to get people talking and/or laughing.

[Seven Videos to Recharge Your Mind and Body](#) :

Short on time? Use these short videos (all less than 10 minutes) as a jumping off point for connecting employees during a coffee break or end of day virtual gathering.

For more information about Diversity Best Practices and to access additional resources, please contact Donnice Peterson at donnice.peterson@diversitybestpractices.com.