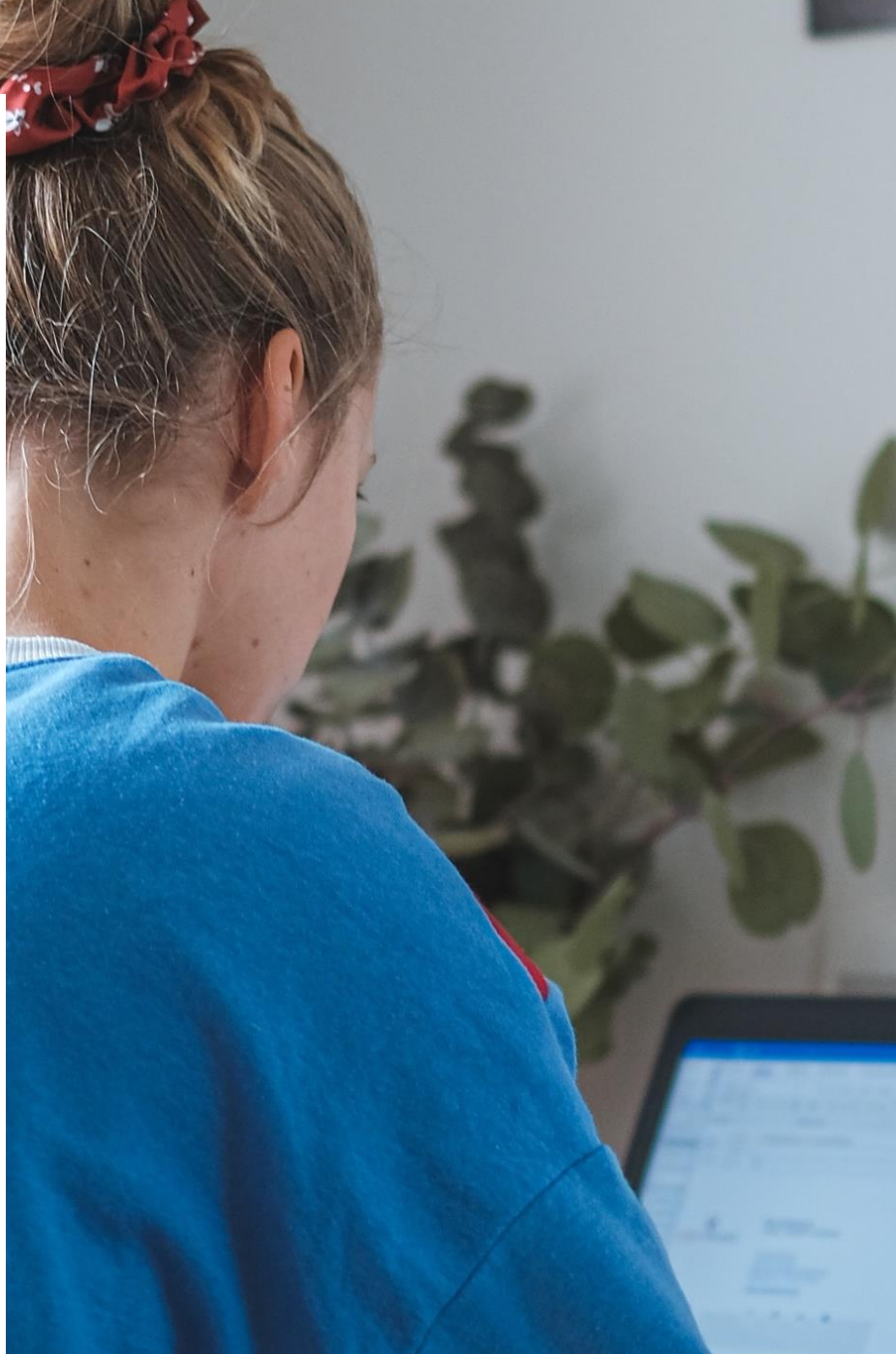


COVID-19

Once the Logistics are in place, think about how you will intentionally strengthen your workplace community.



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Tentpeg Consulting Ltd
Jill Garrett

tentpeg
consulting

Last week, the UK the focus was largely working out the logistics of how we work together in this crisis. Now is the time to start thinking about maintaining – even strengthening the workplace community...

- It is very important that people have the tools and equipment to be able to work from home – that is largely in place now – or at least you are getting there!
- Now the task is to maintain community, to keep building engagement and to be investing in the emotional, social and spiritual or community wellbeing of your team!
- This is vital because it is the right thing to do as a human being, and because good leadership requires you to strengthen and sustain your people, to build resilience into your team and your business!

Over the past few days, I have been reflecting on how we do this and below are some thoughts and ideas I've come across. I'd love to hear about and share your ideas.

Be human and let others see this in you!

- Demonstrate your concern for the very real fears and anxieties that your people are experiencing, not only professionally and economically, but socially and personally. Even though you don't have answers to all their questions, don't let that keep you from listening to them and connecting with their fears.
- Leaders need to show vulnerability (this is not weakness), be prepared to share your own concerns with your people. They want to know that they can relate to you and that they are not alone in their concerns.
- What you should avoid is seeming cold or impersonal in the name of "business as usual," or being absent or inconsistent in the name of "giving people space," or being afraid to try something new. These strange times call for us all to go outside our normal comfort zones, to stretch and learn and be even more vulnerable than usual. I believe that in six to eight months from now, you'll look back and be glad you did.

Be persistent in your communication

- Think about how you communicate – a phone call is welcome when people are lonely and often preferable to an email! Email works well when people need to retain information, a phone call or video call is warmer and goes some way towards making up for lack of human contact during the day.
- Let people know when you are going to be available so that they can contact you and expect your attention. This is not a time to hold back. Send people updates and regular communication, even if there is not a lot of new information and the message is largely personal.
- I doubt if anyone will reflect on this time and say, “Jill, my manager was so annoying with all the encouraging e-mails, phone calls and checking in on me.” When people are isolated, over-communication is more important than ever.



Reassure your team when the outlook is uncertain!

- Choose to be transparent – even when the news is not good.
- Pause, breathe and focus so that you can put yourself in your team’s shoes. Think about their concerns, their likely questions and interests. Are there issues where they will need an immediate answer? Try to anticipate these things so that you can address as many of these concerns as possible and then they will be in a better place to listen.
- Seek out credible sources of information, and read fully before distilling it into clear, concise language.
- Confidently express doubt or uncertainty, whilst being credible. For example, “Reports are still coming in, but what we understand so far is...”



- Communicate often, even if there is little to report, so that people know you are actively engaged, aware of and following the issue.
- Always try to provide tangible things they can do. “Here are the steps we are taking,”/ “Here’s what you can do”. Somehow it is empowering to know that there are actions you can take!
- Choose to be transparent – even when the news is not good

Acknowledge fear

- Don’t deny your fears.... Denying you are afraid undermines trust and you need trust to work and pull together: explain specifically what is difficult for you e.g. uncertainty.
- It is unhelpful to say don’t be anxious – do surface anxieties and help people to voice these... when they can voice anxieties you can begin to confront them and look at what they can and cannot realistically control
- Help your team to see that they do have control over some things. They have control over whether they choose to show care and compassion towards someone, and about how they choose to behave towards others. Encourage them to see that they can choose to be (even more) kind to one another as they work remotely.
- Acknowledge the difference between the possible and the probable – and look at what is probable. Anxieties soar when people focus on what is possible – rather than what is probable! It is possible that all our loved ones will die – it is not probable!



Build camaraderie ... just because your team are working in isolation – they don't need to be lonely!

- We are connected in this together – we can connect to the suffering, frustrations and emotions of others in this situation and through this we deepen relationship.
- Conveying empathy and compassion remotely is possible: many small companies have worked remotely for years – look at their good practice and learn from this.
- Talk on the phone regularly, remember birthdays, family events and achievements. Share ideas for coping in this crisis.

Provide structure amid uncertainty.



- There are some excellent Harvard and MIT articles on organising remote working and during the crisis– these are free to use. Do have a look through these.
- Have regular planned video team meetings so that there is a check-in routine. If video can't be available – then audio only can work.
- Work out times that provide structure, have an agenda and a clear time limit. A team video meeting that is longer than an hour is hard to keep everyone engaged and involved. If there is work that can be done by one or two people outside the meeting – task them to do that.
- Plan breaks if meetings need to be longer than an hour. Having coffee and together is something people will miss so try to build it into an online team session! This might be the time to have prepared a team quiz or game – fun is good for us all!

Try new things to bring the team closer and to energise them in their new working situation... this is a time to be creative!

- It is unlikely that anyone will complain that you worked too hard to maintain and deepen community during this difficult time.
- Be creative and try new things. Call video meetings that enable the team to share films they have watched, ways their families are using extra free time. Get them to share games and other activities that they are finding to be helpful with their families.
- Ask your team to tell stories about what is going on in their worlds. Crises can provide a great opportunity for people to come together in new ways and to get to know one another in new ways. Won't it be wonderful if one result of this crisis is that people come to know one another better and build bonds and depth of friendship that will last long after this is over?
- One idea a client has shared with me is virtual pizza parties – where you order pizza to arrive at each team member's house at a similar time and you eat



together: sharing life online will be a novel experience. A team leader I know has written cards that they are posting to team members to encourage them and to remind them about why the team values them so much. Another client is planning fun on-line

games sessions, a friend and I have started a virtual business book club, another friend is starting a film club – social interaction at work cements teamwork – do work hard to maintain this.

- When you hear good ideas – share them with your contacts. It will be wonderful if we have built richer communities when we reach the other side of this crisis!

Recognise the range of situations people are working in... especially working parents with young children who cannot be in school!

- Get parents with children at home to share good practice about how they are managing home working and being with their children.
- Be realistic about the best times for team calls – especially where team members have small children who need supervision.
- Ask working parents to read through *“How Working Parents Can Prepare for Coronavirus Closures by Stewart D. Friedman and Alyssa F. Westring March 10, 2020”* - Remember that all of HBR’s Covid-19 articles are free and can provide good shared reading and then shared discussion points for the team.



Plan to come through this crisis with even stronger and deeper team relationships and camaraderie than you went into it with!

- Wherever and however we can, let’s choose to be human and humane – to be kind and bring light and kindness into these dark times.
- It would be wonderful if a legacy of the crisis could be a kinder and more human workplace – and together we can choose to build that!

It would be wonderful to hear from others about what they are doing to strengthen workplace communities in this crisis. Wouldn’t it be fantastic if we could come through this having make the workplace a place where even more people can thrive? Do share your ideas with me at jill@tentpegconsulting.com and I will pull them together and pass them on. Here is to building stronger relationships at work!

