



Leading & Managing in Uncharted Waters

THREE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NURTURING ENGAGED TEAMS

By Don Crocker (Published on March 26, 2020)

We are all in uncharted waters today. COVID19 presents us with challenges we have not faced – at least not of this magnitude – in our work experience. Many of us have people to care for – the clients we serve, staff who are doing the hard day-to-day work on the ground, and others who may be isolated, living and working from home.

While all of the challenges of this new environment are substantial, perhaps the biggest challenge is overcoming the fears and anxieties we and our team members face each day. For folks that serve vulnerable individuals and families, these fears include, but go beyond, the basic worries of getting sick or passing on the virus. Anxiety, confusion, anger, disorientation, and isolation can all dismantle a team’s focus and effectiveness. As leaders and managers, we will rightfully worry about communicating the right information, making the right choices (often without a lot of time for planning), and finding ways to keep our teams engaged, focused, and delivering results.

In this new reality, the “*psychological safety*” of our teams is paramount. Without it, team members may retreat and increase their anxiety. When this happens we miss out on the benefit of their strengths and the commitment we need now more than ever. *Psychologically safe teams are teams where members feel it is safe to speak up, express concerns, and are confident they will be heard, responded to, and respected.*

Two important resources that offer research and approaches to support the importance of “psychological safety” include:

- o *The Fearless Organization* <https://fearlessorganization.com/the-fearless-organization>
- o *The Gallup Organization* https://news.gallup.com/topic/employee_engagement.aspx

With appreciation for these resources, below are three recommendations for keeping our teams engaged, focused, and accomplishing good things for those we serve:

1) *Create space for team members to be heard.* Hearing from team members is more critical now than ever before. If you don't know what is on the mind(s) of your team members, it will be impossible to keep them focused and engaged.

Create multiple opportunities to hear from the team about their concerns and their thoughts about the work and personal challenges they face. Bring your teams together regularly to create a forum for concerns and to encourage the group to think through solutions and effective approaches. Most importantly, you can't assume you have - or need to have - all the answers! You can use the power of team to create and clarify solid approaches to evolving problems.

In this space of listening and "hearing," you will likely need to practice more patience than usual. Some of the concerns expressed may seem trivial, given the critical issues with which you and the team are wrestling. Your deeper commitment to patience, and acknowledgement of what concerns your team members, will go a long way toward helping your team feel cared. The result will be increased individual and team commitment to the cause.

2) *Communicate, clarify, and re-clarify expectations.* It will be important for you to communicate about and discuss the expectations in this new environment. Clarify, re-clarify, and clarify again! Ask team members to repeat back their understanding of the expectations. This process of hearing and repeating back can contribute to refining expectations, making these better targeted to what is needed in this volatile environment. Most importantly, the greater the team's understanding and acceptance of mutual expectations, the more likely each team member will be to stay engaged and carry out the important work activities with which they are charged.

We have already seen great payoff for nonprofit organizations when they communicate early, clearly, and consistently about such things as:

- > expectations about time schedules
- > updated and written roles and responsibilities
- > clarity about work locations (including working from home)
- > details about showing up for work
- > how to handling PTO, sick leave, and other time for personal needs
- > how to report if you become sick
- > information about applying for unemployment
- > clear information about furloughs and how you'll communicate during this time

You may need to “customize” or “personalize” how you support each team member. Gallup suggests that in this challenging time leaders will need to, *“Get creative, leverage their [the team member’s] strengths, and engage with their teams in different and meaningful ways. ...And because 70% of an individual’s engagement is driven by their manager, it’s crucial that leaders individualize to best support them.”*

Regular communication is more important than ever when fear, misinformation, and growing anxieties get in the way. Leaders need to plan regular communications and make sure the communication gets out to *everyone* involved. Hold tight to the understanding that communication is a two-way street. Stay dedicated to creating a process for “hearing back” from team members, other employees, vendors, and clients.

3) Ensure adequate equipment and supplies.

Reviews of team breakdowns often point to the lack of adequate equipment and supplies that hobble an employee’s ability to do good work. The question *“what do you need to do your job?”* is simple but powerful. You will need to probe with this question often and listen carefully. The feedback you receive on this front – and your responsiveness to this - can power-up your team for success.

Gallup recommends *“Expand technology support. Even your most tech-savvy manager will be dealing with a variety of technical difficulties if they are not used to working remotely. Ensure your technology team is ready to assist managers and their teams. Open all available resources to keep work occurring from anywhere and everywhere.”*

<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/296528/leading-remotely-managers-need-keep-teams-engaged.aspx>).

In summary, keep in mind, your people are looking to you for guidance and direction. But you can’t have all the answers, and a “psychologically safe”, engaged, motivated team can help you to make better decisions. Your teams will stay engaged and feel “psychologically safe” when they are heard, listened to, and responded to in caring ways.

Clear, consistent, meaningful, and accurate communication matters – even when the communication suggests hard changes and difficult choices due to the disruption. Teams will stay engaged when they have the right tools and support system to keep them moving forward.

As a leader or manager in our sector, you’ve stepped up with courage and commitment. You are not alone – you have your team. Keeping these recommendations in the forefront will pay off as you continue to lead your team forward, navigating these uncharted waters.



(Don Crocker is a Senior Fellow for the Support Center, a thriving community of nonprofit leaders and social innovators committed to organizational excellence and a shared vision for a better world, and for Services for the Underserved, a nonprofit organization that transforms the lives of people with disabilities, people in poverty and people facing homelessness: envisioning a city where everyone has a roof over their head, is healthy, productive and can enjoy the social connections that create a life of purpose.)