ENGAGING EMPLOYEES THROUGH COVID-19

Tips for Moving From Chaos to Success

"Change is the only constant - Heraclitus

The coronavirus pandemic has been classified as an unprecedented crisis. Not only because of the impact on the health and safety of our society but the fallout of businesses and the economy. COVID-19 has left many organizations feeling hopeless and unsure where to begin. Dealing with change and facing the unknown can be extremely stressful for everyone—in some circumstances it can feel a lot like grief.

But what happens after we've acknowledged this crisis?

Developing a crisis management plan helps organizations provide a systematic response and communication to employees, managers, and other important stakeholders. Crisis management is defined as the process of preparing for and managing any disruptive or unexpected emergency situations that affect your business.

Your employees are still important. But this pandemic has had and will continue to have a strong impact on your workforce. How do you stay focused and human?

In this guide, we'll provide you with ways to make it through this crisis, including how to:

- Identify your organization's current stage of crisis
- Mobilize your organization to make important adjustments and progress
- Clearly communicate, boost engagement, and prioritize performance

STAGES OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Dealing with the impact of COVID-19 is overwhelming for everyone involved. And the path to recovery and success from the aftermath will likely be a rocky one. A key factor in making sure your organization is successful on the other side is focusing inward. No matter how challenging, we must listen, respond, and act on our employees' concerns and anxieties with empathy.

We've outlined 5 stages that your organization might be experiencing. The goal is to understand where you are so you can identify issues or roadblocks you're likely facing and what you should consider to continue moving your business forward.

However, every organization is different. These phases can be linear or cyclical, but most likely you'll find yourself jumping around at times, and that's okay. Keep looking forward and know we're in this together.
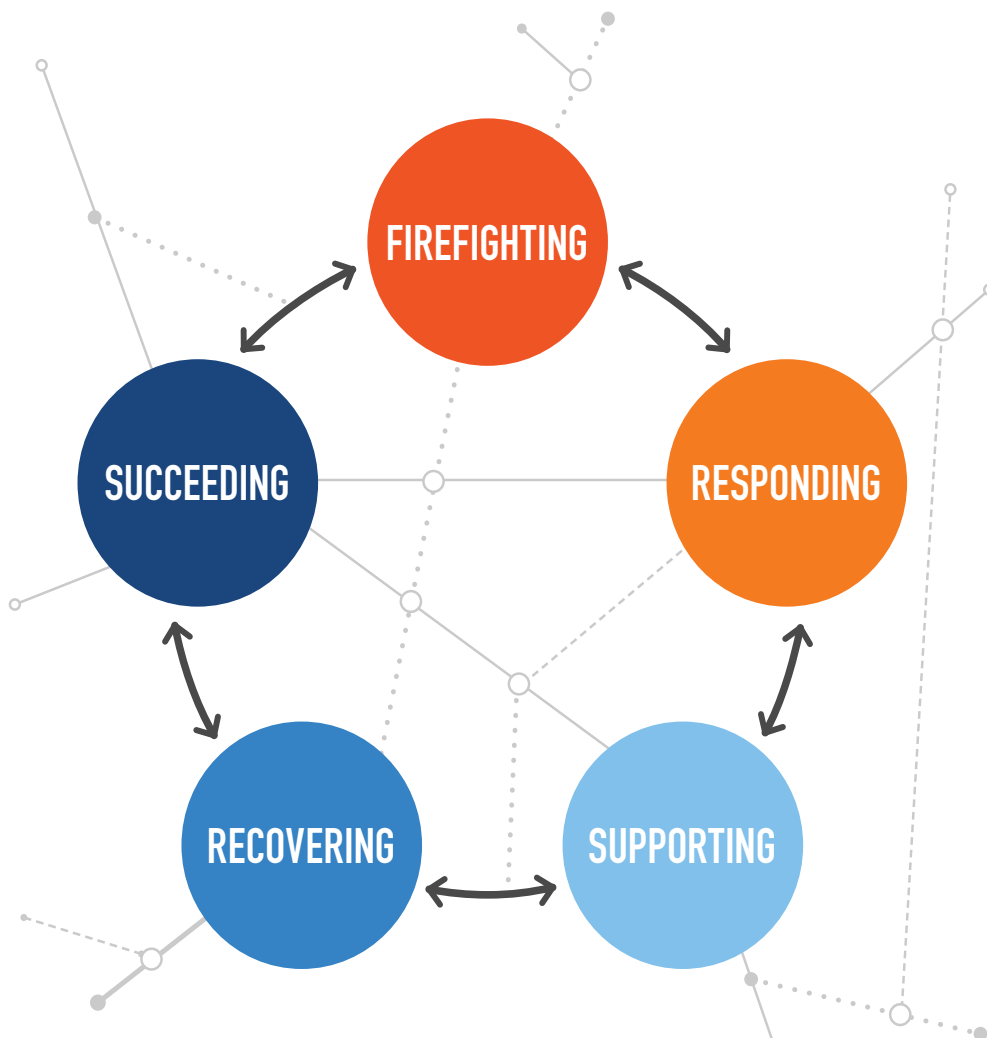
Where You Are: Chaos

In the midst of a fire, your first instinct is to put it out. But right before you make the decision to grab a bucket, you likely are thinking *how did this fire start*? When facing a problem that impacts your employees and your business, you may find yourself wanting to find the culprit while navigating chaos.

You may be facing the reality of reductions in force, having to take your full business online, or supporting essential employees as they continue work. No matter what—before you start searching for solutions—you need to pause.

You need to understand what's going on in your business and with your employees. Take account of employee needs, understand your performance processes and what might need to shift, and commit to a strategic plan that works for your organization.

What To Think About Next: Understanding Needs

You've likely heard of Abraham Maslow in your undergraduate psychology class—and his model for human physiological needs has stood the test of time. So why is this important?

We define employee engagement as the strength of the mental and emotional connection employees feel toward their places of work. Our research has found that in order to feel this connection, and ultimately be successful, employees need:

- The right information
- The right resources and equipment
- Managerial and organizational support

FIREFIGHTING TIPS

Take inventory.

More than ever, you need to have a good understanding of your employees' needs. Listen to their feedback and collect information about how they are coping so you can recognize and respond to their needs in a timely manner.

Make sure you're also checking in on how they are doing emotionally. Mental health is just as, if not more, important than providing the right resources. With a new work environment, social contract, and performance expectations it's important to see how employees are handling the change.

Be accountable.

While you might be thinking about pausing many of your engagement and performance initiatives, consider the impact that maintaining a sense of routine could have on your organization's success.

By taking ownership over the effect you can have on your employees and the support you provide, you can help your organization move from chaos to calm much more smoothly. Keep the basics intact, such as encouraging managers to maintain regular 1-on-1 meetings just to check in with employees.

Think about your processes.

In the unique way that your business might be feeling the impact, your employees are experiencing a lot of change. They might be getting used to new work environments or tools if they've never worked remote before.

Consider their remote work environments and identify any gaps in communication. Take time to understand their new reality to determine how to bridge any inconsistencies. Make sure they are well-equipped with the fundamentals to work efficiently while remote.

FIREFIGHTING REFLECTION

1. Who and where are my essential workers?

2. What are our main priorities as an organization in the short-term?

3. Do we have a team in place to handle this crisis?

4. Who is in charge of communicating different critical messages?

5. How can I support managers and their teams? What information do they need? What resources or training can we provide?

Where You Are: Misconceptions

Now that you have a good understanding of how your workforce and workplace is handling things, you need to take time to pause and respond appropriately. How you respond to this crisis will likely impact the success of your employees and your business down the road.

By asking for your employees' opinions, you have a lot of information at your fingertips that you need to respond to and act on. You want to own the narrative because you don't want employees to make assumptions about what's going on or fill in the gaps on their own. Because you asked, they are expecting you to respond—if you don't you'll send the wrong message.

Additionally, employees are likely feeling a lot of fear, anxiety, and lack of clarity. They might be worried about losing their job or may be struggling to survive in a completely new work environment. It's important that you are crystal clear about performance expectations during this time. Priorities have likely shifted and workloads may look very different—don't leave employees guessing about what they should or should not be doing.

What to Think About Next: Creating Clarity

As your organization starts to understand the impact of this crisis it's important to provide clarity for your employees. Define your expectations to help them prioritize what's important. Communicate about any information or resources they've requested and any next steps to help focus on getting back to work.

RESPONDING TIPS

Create and communicate a vision for success.

It may not be possible to get everyone on the same page when employees are physically and mentally in different places. And with so much change and uncertainty, it may only be possible to focus on the next couple weeks ahead. Communicating a consistent message across every level of your organization can help keep everyone connected and grounded.

Develop key objectives or short-term goals and share them with your employees. Integrate your vision into all aspects of operations from leadership communications and team meetings to one-on-ones. At a minimum, communication should address what the future holds for employees and the impact on their jobs.

Ramp up employee check-ins and feedback loops.

While it may not be an appropriate time to have a performance conversation, leveraging regular 1-on-1 conversations to check in with employees can help managers collect information about how they are handling this situation and what resources they might need to be successful.

Don't assume you know what employees need or what they are dealing with. Ask them what they need and communicate honestly and often about changes and updates. Feedback can also be used to understand if you are communicating well and if employees feel like they're in the loop and understand the message.

Adjust and set expectations.

Your team may be dispersed and on their "own schedule." Employees likely are still adjusting and need a little more flexibility in completing their work—but this doesn't mean they aren't working. Share information early on with your team to set expectations for performance. Reinforce those shared messages and core values through regular email or chat. You can also offer communication training to your managers to help them support employee emotions. These tactics can help you develop a common ground where everyone can check back in and level set.

QUANTUM
WORKPLACE

RESPONDING REFLECTION

1. What do our employees need?

Do they know where to access information?

Do they understand the information provided?

Do they trust us to help them get through this?

2. How can we improve communication?

Where do employees go for information naturally?

How much information should we provide?

How often should we provide updates?

3. How do we hope to look as an organization in 1 week? In 2 weeks? After this is over?

4. What are our 1-month goals? 6-month goals? 1-year goals?

Where You Are: Disruption

People respond to and approach change in a variety of ways. Your employees might be feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and struggling to stay connected. Helping people move through transitional phases and accept a new reality is sometimes easier said than done.

While you may still be dealing with unexpected twists and turns in getting your workforce up and running in a new environment, it's important to recognize how vital maintaining a little normalcy is to your organization's success. Although you might not know how to deal with this crisis, anticipating what's next will challenge you to be proactive in coaching your employees and managers to help your business regain its momentum.

What to Think About Next: Regaining Momentum

While it's not always possible to provide your employees with everything they need, being empathetic and supportive can help you acknowledge your organization's status and wrestle with the unknown as it comes. This is not a time to stop the feedback loop. Follow up regularly and continue to understand "normal." Define what it means for your business and how you can achieve it one day at a time.

SUPPORTING TIPS

Boost employee listening.

Consider implementing a remote work experience or emergency response pulse survey to assess employee perceptions. Keep these surveys open for 3-5 days and continue to survey every 2-3 weeks to track changes and new developments over time. Use this data to see how people are adjusting, what they still need or have questions on, and where you can create even more clarity.

Collecting employee opinions shows that you care about how they are feeling and doing. Now it's time to enable your employees to drive that change. If you've launched a survey, you already have a lot of valuable information that can help you determine where to start.

Include opportunities for employee feedback as a regular part of your plan. Uncovering issues and concerns can help inform your strategy, but beyond that it shows that you are willing to listen and take action.

Keep mission and purpose at the forefront.

It's super important that employees stay connected to your organizational mission. Though it may look a bit different than it did two months ago, continuing to find ways to connect individual work to the greater good is extremely important for engagement and performance. Find ways to reinforce your mission, vision, and values as often as possible—in company-wide communications, staff meetings, one-on-one meetings and elsewhere.

QUANTUM
WORKPLACE

SUPPORTING TIPS

Guide performance.

You can earn a lot of credibility with your employees by meeting them where they are. And while company-wide goals might have taken a turn there are still opportunities to improve and guide performance.

Examine and adjust goals and priorities. It's likely your goals and priorities have shifted, and it's important to recognize and communicate that. Establish a clear plan for helping employees prioritize critical and high-impact tasks. Understand what employees are going through right now and be flexible with how and when work gets done.

Maintain manager visibility. Make sure managers connect for a short daily check-in and prioritize face-to-face interactions when possible. Building strong manager-employee relationships in times of crisis are ones that will impact engagement down the road.

Use recognition to boost morale. Continue sharing success stories and recognize employees for important contributions. Make recognition public and shareable, through social media, company intranet, and other electronic channels so it can be shared and commented on.

SUPPORTING REFLECTION

1. How can you create more intentional listening posts?

2. What goals remain important? How can you keep goals on track? What needs adjusting?

3. How can remote one-on-ones be most effective?

4. What level of flexibility can you provide when it comes to getting work done?

5. How will you continue to recognize good performance?

Where You Are: New Normal

After you've addressed your employees' needs, made adjustments, and settled into your new normal it's time to get back to business as usual. You might settle into a new normal for a time, but another big change is right around the corner.

- What will it look like when it's time to go back to work?
- How will the changes you've made impact the future of your work, people, and culture?
- What do you need to get ahead of before this next wave of change hits?

In reality, returning to normal business after a major crisis isn't always possible. Your company's DNA has evolved and may be operating a little differently. So before you can begin to put the pieces together to get back on track, you must pause and be intentional about your next move—even when you're feeling the pressure to get things moving.

Consider how this new normal impacts:

- Physical workspaces
- PTO and vacation policies
- Team-building and morale
- Benefits and compensation
- Talent acquisition and recruitment
- Onboarding and candidate experiences
- Talent decisions and development
- Career growth and alignment

What to Think About Next: Getting Back to Business

Getting back to business might be a relief for some, but it's still a big change and is likely to stir up some anxiety for many. Employees have been through a lot of change and will need ongoing support and coaching in order to succeed. To move forward you'll need to continue to listen, anticipate, and adapt through this stage to be successful. By leading them to a future of high performance and engagement, you'll be well on your way to achieving business success.

RECOVERING TIPS

Elevate your employee listening strategy.

If you put your engagement survey on pause, now is the time to put it back in motion. Collecting employee perceptions at this stage can help you understand:

- How are employees feeling now that things have normalized?
- What expectations or needs do they have?
- How are managers handling things?
- Are employees feeling engaged?
- Are they clear on changes to come?
- What are they worried about?
- How have the events of this crisis impacted engagement?

Employee engagement surveys have always been—and will always be—an incredibly valuable way for employees to share feedback and for teams and leaders to act on that feedback.

You might need to make adjustments to your survey by adding or removing some questions as needed. It's appropriate to acknowledge the pandemic in your communications as well. As you prepare your internal communication plan, determine if you need to make adjustments to the survey content.

Prioritize performance.

Get back on track. Start to think about pre-crisis goals and projects and how (or if) they fit into the future. Decide what will stay and what may no longer be a priority.

Align on organization-wide goals. Make sure to realign across the organization if goals have changed. Keep and set new goals to help employees align with their personal, professional, team, and organizational priorities.

Continue recognizing good performance regularly. Employees need to feel valued now more than ever. Find ways for your team to celebrate wins. Boosting confidence and positivity can improve morale—which spreads quickly across teams when democratized.

Bring employee development back into the fold. Whether we'll be working remotely for a prolonged period of time or returning to our "normal" work environments soon, you'll want your teams to be skilled, motivated, and empowered to perform their roles in the future.

Reinitiate performance conversations. Continue to schedule and hold these meetings at least monthly during this time to stay connected and aligned.

Assess talent risk and rising stars.

The state of your talent pool has likely shifted since the beginning of this crisis. Even in the best case scenarios, it's likely that the circumstances of this event have revealed or hastened true performance issues. The last thing you want to do is make "gut" decisions—you need data to help you make informed decisions.

Use talent reviews to understand where there are critical needs and risks and where you might need to think about shifting or hiring. Ask your managers to document and share performance, growth trajectory, and retention risk for each employee every 6-12 weeks. Talent reviews can also help you elevate and recognize your top performers—and keep your mid-range performers on a path to success.

RECOVERING REFLECTION

1. How do we prioritize performance?

2. How do you keep high performers engaged after tough times?

3. How will you engage surviving employees?

4. How will you recover lost business?

5. How will you recruit new employees?

Where You Are: Reflection

It may not seem like it, but going through major change can be extremely rewarding for organizations. Experiencing hardship in the moment is very difficult, but how you fight through, respond, support your employees, and recover is what ultimately leads to future success.

What to Think About Next: Moving Forward

We don't know what is going to happen as the seasons of this crisis pass by—but there are some important things that are important to consider.

When the time comes to **re-enter the workforce** there will likely be individual differences in how your employees will want to return to their physical workspace. Some may embrace a sense of normalcy and others may resist or be anxious about returning. If they've settled into remote working it may feel very disruptive to return to an office full of people.

As a result, employers will have to acknowledge **regular remote work** in the future if their employees succeed doing it now. Some employers might actually shift to a remote culture in an attempt to save money on real estate costs and be more nimble with finances.

And while it may seem like your workforce can return to its normal productivity and performance, you'll need to be cautious of **employee burnout** both in the roles of essential and remote workers. Our support systems have had to shift, so physical isolation may lead to emotional isolation and increased mental health issues.

If you were **prioritizing employee listening** pre-crisis, obviously you'll continue. If you weren't, you shouldn't stop once this is all over. Your employees will have new expectations around this and hopefully you've seen the value it adds. Employee listening helps you make smarter decisions in all areas of your business moving forward and stay in tune with employee needs and expectations.

Organizations who have adopted a **performance mindset** are on the path to a resilient future. Those who have moved away from annual reviews to more agile performance processes like frequent one-on-ones, OKRs, and a robust feedback culture will have an easier time checking in with employees, creating goal clarity, and getting things back on track.

SUCCEEDING REFLECTION

1. How has it made you stronger?

2. What did you learn from this?

3. What gaps still exist?

4. What policies worked that you might continue? What will carry forward?

5. What do you need to do to set your managers and teams up for long-term success after experiencing this?

CONCLUSION

As an organization, it's imperative to put on a united front for your employees. And while you might not have all the answers, you do have the power to communicate often, listen to your employees, and stay the course. We have a variety of resources available to help you navigate these uncertain times. We invite you to read, download, and share them with your team.

We're all in this together. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us at hello@quantumworkplace.com.