



*In a time of crisis, some managers feel reluctant to hold others accountable. They confuse empathy with lowering the bar.*

## MANAGEMENT BY COACHING

By Kimberly Paterson, CEC

# GETTING BACK UP TO SPEED

*How a trauma like COVID-19 hurts individual performance, and what you can do about it*

**I**ncreasing numbers of us are back in the office and back to pre-COVID-19 schedules and expectations. But are we really back? The current evidence says the answer for many is “no.”

### Mental health challenges rising

Nearly half of Americans report the coronavirus crisis is harming their mental health, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation poll. A federal emergency hotline for people in emotional distress registered a more than 1,000% increase in April compared with the same time last year. Another study conducted, surveying 2,032 U.S. adults and using a standard measure of mental distress, revealed that after the 2020 pandemic struck, participants were eight times more likely to screen positive for serious mental illness than in 2018. Some people are suffering more than others. Younger adults ages 18 to 44, mostly iGen (Generation Z) and Millennials (Generation Y), have borne the brunt of the mental health effects. They’ve experienced a tenfold increase in serious mental distress compared with 2018.

The other group in distress is those with children under 18 at home.

Eventually, COVID-19 will run its course. But the impact of the pandemic on mental health will linger. When diseases strike, experts say, they cast a shadow pandemic of psychological and societal injuries. The shadow often trails the disease by weeks, months, even years. And it receives scant attention compared with the disease, even though it, too, wreaks carnage, devastates families, and harms and kills.

The upswing in people coping with mental health issues is impacting performance at work. Anxiety, chronic stress, depression and isolation impact mental capacity and, in turn, our ability to focus, organize, problem solve, stay motivated, and manage emotions.

### The cycle of emergency, regression and recovery

Not everyone is facing a mental health challenge. But that doesn’t mean people aren’t struggling. These days, even the most resilient leaders confess to feeling exhausted and lacking motivation. They are not alone. According to a Korn Ferry study of 7,000 American professionals, 73% report feeling burned out.

Dr. Merete Wedell-Wedellsborg, clinical psychologist and author of *Battle Mind: Performing Under Pressure*, says that people going through crises follow a pattern: Emergency. Regression. Recovery. In the beginning, when an *emergency* arises, energy rises, and performance goes up. We tap into resources we didn’t even know we had. The crisis brings out the best in us. We feel full of purpose, and much gets done. We pull together and become highly productive. But then the adrenaline-fueled pace of the initial crisis stalls out. Problems become more complex and exhausting. Fuses are short.

Then we hit the *regression* phase. People get tired. The basic things in life seem to take an extraordinary amount of effort. We lose our sense of purpose and start fighting about things that don’t matter and forget to do the basic things like eating, drinking, combing our hair, and getting out of our pajamas. The prolonged pressure leads us to regress to a less mature state. Retreating to an emotional comfort zone is our brain’s way of coping with the confusion and insecurity we’re feeling. This is the phase many of us are in now.

The challenge for leaders is to pull through the regression phase in a constructive way and get to the *recovery* phase to reopen, rebuild, and prepare for the future.

### Rethinking priorities

COVID-19 has changed everything in our lives—how we work, spend our days, celebrate milestones,

and connect with loved ones and friends. While the coronavirus crisis has shaken a lot of people's sense of security, it has also helped us realize which aspects of our lives—both personal and professional—might have been taken for granted. People may have presumed that they would "always" be in a particular job, for example, or overlooked the damage that our focus on our careers may have caused to our personal lives.

Throughout this crisis we may have reordered our priorities, realizing that we wish to devote more time to certain things such as family, friends, and hobbies. The trauma brought by the pandemic may have also alerted us to just how short and precious life is.

Many people are hoping that this strange period will be the "reset" moment they have needed for years, which may mean that they don't want to go back to their old ways.

For some, virtual work may become the only way they're willing to work. Others will choose to spend less time and energy on work and more on family. Some will rethink their jobs entirely—perhaps choose to pursue a personal passion or trade a career in business for one in public service. The pandemic has also given us a new-found or enhanced appreciation for key workers and other people who provide value and contribute to society.

### Five steps to drive performance

Whether it's anxiety, burnout, shifting values, or the distraction of working from home, a Globant Consulting study shows that close to half of all professionals say their productivity has suffered since they started working from home. While leaders can't make the virus and its

impact on people and the economy go away, there are meaningful steps they can take to help others achieve the best results possible under the circumstances:

#### 1. Communicate with transparency, frequency, and positivity.

Safety is one of our most basic needs as human beings—not just physical safety but also emotional safety. When life feels scary, it's hard to focus on work. The more uncertain the world seems, the more important it is for organizations to create an environment where people feel cared for and safe, and leaders can be trusted.

Leaders build trust by being transparent. If people are going to lose their jobs or face pay cuts, communicate that at the earliest possible time. When you make decisions that will impact your people, take them into your confidence. Explain why and how you've reached your conclusions, why you've rejected certain positions in favor of the one you've adopted, and what you envision happening and not happening as a result.

Communicate often. Keeping people in the loop builds trust. Without that regular communication, the void is filled with rumors and speculation.

Use positive language and tone. Research shows that leaders who most effectively build trust through communication demonstrate 26.2% less negative sentiment than their peers. This does not mean sweeping problems under the rug or sugar-coating the truth. It means putting the facts into a context that leaves people with hope. The leader who paints a picture of light at the end of the tunnel and says that we'll get through this together is far more reassuring than the leader who keeps stressing the hard road ahead.

**2. Connect, not just communicate.** Perhaps the biggest mistake you can make during stressful times is underestimating your team's emotions. During difficult times it is more important to monitor people's affect, mood, and stress and the impact they may be having on performance.

Simple ways to achieve this are to have more one-on-one meetings with team members and to ask open-ended questions that invite people to engage. Instead of asking, "How are you doing?" to which most people will answer "fine," ask something like, "How are you staying well or taking care of yourself these days?"

People often hesitate to have deeper conversations out of fear that they may be prying, someone may get emotional, or a problem may surface that they can't solve. What's important is creating an opportunity for someone to talk. All you need to do is listen.

**3. Recognize that every individual is different.** It is human nature to view others through the lens of our own values, character traits, and life experiences. That's a mistake. You may thrive on freedom and flexibility, but someone else may need a structured schedule and the social pressure of co-workers around them to stay motivated. You may work from a quiet, private, well-equipped home office while someone else may be Zooming into the team meeting from a laptop perched on their bathroom counter while their three-year-old and six-year-old are pounding on the door begging mommy to come out and play.

Helping people perform at their best means recognizing their reality and working with them to problem solve how they can make the most of their situation. For example, if

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I find myself being called on to help business leaders free up time to focus on these items. They realize—especially in today’s environment—that any time they spend on something other than marketing their business and communicating with their clients could very well jeopardize their ability to survive. The last thing they need to do is spend time on activities they can outsource for a reasonable fee.

Time is the most valuable resource for all of us. And that’s the very reason my industry exists. As professional employer organizations, we come alongside businesses and handle the employee-related administrative activities. PEOs all over the country help business owners focus on the most critical things: marketing their business and serving their clients. Nationwide, more than 3 million people are covered by PEO arrangements.

As an insurance professional, I know you are passionately interested in the well-being of every client you have. And that concern extends well beyond the insurance products you can sell them. I encourage you to explore our industry; educate yourself and your clients on the services a PEO can provide. See how outsourcing non-revenue generating activities can bring relief during today’s volatile environment and going forward. Your client’s future—and perhaps your own—may depend on it. ■



### The author

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someone is forced to work from home but needs structure and the pressure of meeting others’ expectations, you may schedule a check-in early every Monday morning and help them find a work buddy with whom they can do morning and end-of-day check-ins.

**4. Set realistic expectations and hold people accountable.** Once you’ve got an accurate read on the person’s situation and the support they need from you, agree on realistic expectations. Ask, “How do you want me to stay in touch with you about status and share feedback on how you’re doing?” Some people will want regular check-ins; others are self-motivated and don’t need that level of support.

*How leaders guide and support their staff through this crisis is an opportunity to help their team members grow collectively as individuals and to strengthen the organization’s bonds with its people.*

In a time of crisis, some managers feel reluctant to hold others accountable. They confuse empathy with lowering the bar. You can demonstrate your care for an employee’s struggles by both acknowledging their hardship and redoubling efforts to help them succeed.

If someone’s performance is suffering, it’s vital to understand why and to support them in developing a plan of their own for how to address the problem. If you’re prescriptive about how to solve the problem, you’ll never have the person’s true buy-in. If a person has traditionally been a poor performer, don’t allow COVID-19 to become an excuse for not taking action.

**5. Be alert to potential mental health issues.** Pretty much everyone has a relatively high level of anxiety at the moment. So how do you differentiate “normal” under the circumstances from something more troubling? Common behaviors that can signal a problem include dependable colleagues missing deadlines, failing to get work done, disappearing for long periods of time, or becoming suddenly prone to outbursts and other erratic behavior. Disheveled appearance, weight loss or weight gain, high irritability and antisocial behavior are also signs.

If you suspect a problem, don’t jump to conclusions. Another reason may be triggering the behavior—such as the death of a loved one, a key earner in the household losing their job, or an added responsibility of caring for a failing elderly parent.

Open the door to a conversation. Recognize that most people will walk through that door, but some won’t. If your colleague chooses to talk, be a nonjudgmental listener.

Avoid the temptation to become the person’s therapist or try to solve their problem. Mention available mental health services if the person seems receptive. Enlist help from others in your organization if you feel that the person is in danger or can’t perform the job adequately. If you’d like a free copy of *10 Warning Signs There May*

*Be A Mental Health Issue*, email me at [kpaterson@cim-co.com](mailto:kpaterson@cim-co.com).

### The opportunity

For many, the pandemic is the worst event of their lifetimes. As a leader, you are an amplifier of people’s emotions. If you do things right, you can bring out the best in people even in the worst of times.

How leaders guide and support their staff through this crisis is an opportunity to help their team members grow collectively as individuals and to strengthen the organization’s bonds with its people. ■

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