

Lead with empathy during the COVID-19 crisis

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In these uncertain and highly stressful times, there is heightened reliance on managers and supervisors to maintain the well-being, health and safety of their workforce.

During the COVID-19 crisis, leaders are performing their typical roles under the additional stress of [workforce instability](#) and escalated safety and [health risks](#), while also managing their own mounting work-life challenges and staying informed about rapidly changing policies.

And, with an increased prevalence of mental health issues experienced by workers on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic, supervisors and managers have been called upon to recognize when their employees may need additional psychological help as well.

It feels like a lot because it is.

Employers will not be able to lead effectively if they are also struggling. On an airplane, passengers are told to put on their oxygen masks before helping others with theirs. The same is true here.

As [scholars](#) of [health](#), with more than 30 years specializing in [supervisor](#) support behaviors, we created an [online training](#) on supervisor support strategies to help staff during a pandemic.

We believe that, in order to model [self-care](#) and support staff, leaders have to continue taking care of their own needs.

Leadership in a pandemic

[Extreme stress can affect](#) the way we act. Typically cool-headed employees may suddenly seem frazzled. Teams formerly consistent in meeting deadlines and turning in high-quality work may become less predictable.

This is not a time for the "tough love" approach to management to get a team functioning well again.

[Our research](#) into [supervisor support](#) for [Total Worker Health](#) has revealed that, for most employees, [social support](#) and understanding are key ingredients to helping alleviate stress and adjust work-life expectations.

It is important for supervisors and managers to model self-care while supporting and responding to their employees' mental health needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This can be done using two [evidence-based methods](#) of [effective leadership](#): [emotional support](#) and role modeling.

Support emotional health

Emotional support involves letting employees know that they are being cared for and that they should feel comfortable discussing work- and nonwork-related challenges.

A boss should convey that they are sensitive to the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has on employees' lives and work. Emotional support techniques include:

1. Providing comfort and monitoring for [signs of struggle](#) such as distress, social withdrawal and poor performance, and knowing when to refer an employee to professionals.
2. Recognizing that some employees may have [families and loved ones who are requiring additional attention](#), so openly asking employees how they are managing both work and nonwork.
3. For [those without others in the house](#) during physical distancing ordinances, offering check-ins and encouraging them to virtually connect with colleagues, friends and family.
4. Reinforcing to your employees that you are sympathetic and that you'll maintain an open-door policy—virtually—for them to talk

through issues when needed.

Model healthy work habits

Role modeling requires supervisors to display, through their own behaviors and guidance, how to integrate work-life obligations and engage in self-care during a crisis.

Simply put, leaders should be setting an example for their teams. Effective role modeling behaviors include:

1. Making sure you stay up-to-date on [safety and public health COVID-19 responses](#) relevant to your team.
2. Knowing about the most up-to-date wellness resources available to you and your workers. Remind people of these resources regularly in meetings and consider posting information about wellness resources in your virtual workspaces, [employee](#) websites and other shared spaces.
3. [Defining your own boundaries](#) and preferences regarding work hours, response times and disclosure around family obligations. Then, projecting consistency in your ability to adhere to these boundaries.
4. Using paid time off and [sick leave](#) when needed, and encouraging your staff to do the same, or helping your staff to find state and national level resources to assist with leave.

Promote work-life balance

Additional ways supervisors can support employees' work-life balance and reduce undue burden include identifying projects with flexible deadlines, helping prioritize the most important tasks, removing irrelevant tasks and discouraging newly remote employees from feeling

like they need to be "on the clock" constantly.

[Research shows](#) that employees with home-based caretaking responsibilities (e.g., children, aging parents) also perform better and maintain higher levels of well-being when work-family issues are factored into [policies and protocols](#).

When communicating with staff during this time, it is critically important to lead with empathy, strive for flexibility and model ways to prioritize health and well-being.

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