

April 2, 2020 | Coping with COVID-19

Q&A call with Mary Cranston and Joan C. Williams (MC & JCW)

The Women's Leadership Edge team also compiled a [Coping with COVID-19 Guide](#).

Q: What are the challenges that you are facing?

Concern #1: Productivity expectations and communication issues

- managers' expectations around productivity aren't changing – a lot of managers are holding on to old school expectations of lots of “face time”
- cultural issues and lack of consistency across the organization
- managers demonstrating a fundamental lack of trust: if they're not in the office, “they're not working”
- **MC:** Silver lining: this crisis is demonstrating that the best way to manage large globally diverse groups = **inclusive leadership style** (prioritize communication, listening skills, and receiving feedback from employees)
- i.e. leadership asks “how can I help?” (allow all employees to speak)
- not just management that has insecurities about productivity (employees too)
- need to set new expectations/priorities to make employees feel good about what they're getting done (*conscious prioritization*)
- **JCW:** Good example from Hastings – had to shift to teaching on Teams on a dime
- Admin held town meeting for anyone who wanted to attend: share what works/ what doesn't – JCW picked up just 2 or 3 tips, but tremendously helpful
- Good model= managers meeting to discuss what expectations should be for remote work, share what works/what doesn't
- “virtual village” or “manager support group”: bring more rigid + more inclusive leaders together in a one HR meeting to discuss what's working/not working & devise clearly laid out plan of what the new expectations for employees are

Concern #2: People are concerned they'll still be expected to perform on original goals

- **MC:** managers need to communicate
- Right now managers are delighted workers are doing just 50% of what they were expected – communicate this to employees!

Concern #3: What if this goes on for several months?

- **MC:** companies need to clearly communicate what the new expectations are/and update as they evolve
- Managers need to lead by example (They WFH and make visible how they are balancing work/ family)

Concern #4: How to support employees managing households, homeschooling, etc?

- **MC:** managers should work w/ employees to create a cadence for the day (all the team meetings are in one part of the day – so they can be assured they’re not going to hop on the phone all day)
- Acknowledge that kids are used to 100% of their parent’s time when they are home. Now they have a new world where they need to be responsible for themselves part of the day.
- Silver lining: Companies can provide resources for managing anxiety, work/life balance, etc. and legitimize these best practices (when life returns to normal)
- **JCW:** Ideal worker: someone who starts work early adulthood, and works full-time for 40 years
 - works perfectly for spouses married to homemakers, and people without children
 - most workers aren’t this
 - if employers communicate that they expect their employees to be ideal workers – recipe for serious conflict in family
 - *After this discussion [Brigid Schulte wrote about this in the NYT](#)*
 - *redefine what it means to be a responsible, conscientious worker
 - This is crisis working not ordinary teleworking (first step = employer announces that they’re not holding employees to artificial standards of productivity)
 - Not only do employers have to redefine ideal worker, have to encourage individuals in their families to not just go with the defaults
 - Set up a new routine, communicate clearly w/ partner
 - Use Mr. Rogers, video calls with grandparents, etc.

2

Concern #5: How to make sure that employees who don’t have children feel heard? Or feel they are expected to carry a bigger load of the burden?

- **JCW:** solving the work/family balance of some employees by dumping on others is a real short term plan, leads to resentment
- This means that the employer hasn’t thought through the ideal worker concept – this strategy has never been realistic.
- Managers need to clearly message: we need to restructure productivity goals
- **MC:** Discuss how to help employees who have small children (those with more time volunteer to help) *has to be a volunteer system, not imposed from people higher up
- Lots of good will out there – tap into that/provide structure for inherent generosity

Concern #6: How to signal broad inclusiveness? People have stress and anxiety – how as an employer do you provide resources?

- **MC:** leader asks open-ended questions and listens, invites in people to speak who are normally more reserved and shy (learn from the wisdom of the group)

- Make sure people feel totally comfortable in bringing up things they can use help on
- **JCW:** It might be helpful for leader to acknowledge the stress of the team. If you're dealing with a crisis of any kind, talk to me, the line is open, here are the resources we have available.
- some managers have great technical skills, not people skills, create a protocol for talking about anxieties (maybe through assistants)
- Consider connecting your employees with [resources](#) like the [Headspace meditation app](#) (*signaling openness and supportiveness to employees) – frightened that you'll turn into a therapist? Talk with other managers about what they're doing.

Concern #7: Fear of backlash when life returns to normal?

- **JCW:** Brightside - after this, we're never going back to where we were (companies that never would've considered teleworking are making it work)
- Negative: people are doing telecommunicating in a way that's not real telecommuting (snowstorm cooking)
- Define work hours
- Explain how you're communicating with your coworkers

Concern #8a: Law firm is not a remote work culture at all and had to become one overnight. How to avoid throwing the good of teleworking with the bad/managing people's perceptions of WFH when return to normal life?

- **JCW:** Send [clear guidelines](#) for how to make teleworking work. Create guard rails, give employees consistent set of guidelines/new norms.

Concern #8b: How to manage transition back to office so that leadership doesn't close up to the idea of expanding telecommuting options?

- **MC:** this is forcing managers to see that WFH is not the end of the world
- Evolution in a law firm is rare, but it's not impossible
- Good guidelines to help the whole firm to regularize when people will be talking to one another
- Clients are all WFH too – show clients services in various ways
- **JCW:** townhalls can be useful in a bunch of different ways to glean best practices; a town hall for employees w/ families (struggling with caregiving – what's working/ what's not?)
- One participant said their company has a working parent coach on retainer; townhall for elder care givers
- Provide resources for elders (perhaps have IT people available to teach elders how to utilize online shopping options)
- *How to use this as an inflection point – of working effectively while telecommuting (head off backlash worry)

- In town halls: designate someone who will synthesize discussion and bring to managers (how to structure/institutionalize)

Concern #9: How you create community when people are feeling isolated?

- **JCW:** virtual happy hours, virtual movie nights, etc. – are they effective?
- **MC:** win/win for companies: demonstrate that they were there for their employees during this crisis
- Empower employees to self-organize (people who have the time to do these things can do it)
- HR or managers can communicate that people should let them know what types of meetings would be helpful to them

Concern #10: Levels of domestic violence may be going up, while people going to shelters and seeking help are going down

- **JCW:** assume that someone you are employing is dealing with these challenges – [include these resources](#)

Concern #11: Communicating to employees who are fearful of layoffs?

JCW: *if able*, signal to employees that company will try to get through this without layoffs

MC: delicate issue → authentic communication is critical

- give bad news + what's being done about it
- if leadership team says nothing, may be adding to the stress
- if at the moment, not thinking about layoffs, say it → if that changes, will update
- no communication will be interpreted in most negative way possible

Concern #12: Communicating to clients fearful of lower productivity/accessibility?

- **MC:** most important = we're here for you, fully operational, (law firms)
- law firms can help with communications around emergency preparedness – handout checklists of things to think about
- business lawyers – how to be effective in a market like this: what you can/ can't expect
- clients are very insecure/need communications that are comforting

JCW: what kinds of other support would be helpful to WLE members?

- webinar for working parents?
- webinars for managers?
- how do you not lose momentum on D&I goals during this crisis? (layoffs exacerbate D&I issues)

Let us know at questions@womensleadershipedge.org

Closing thoughts:

- The Women's Leadership Edge team has put together [a guide for Coping with COVID-19](#).
- Send out successful protocol for telecommuting (understand what it takes to make telecommuting work correctly) – each manager should do this
- This does not mean holding people to artificial standards of productivity OR dumping all the work on people without kids
- People in top leadership roles need to communicate to middle managers that they will be less rigid on standards than before → allowing middle managers to be more inclusive and compassionate leaders
- Companies that bill by the hour (communicate clearly “this is where we need to hit folks”)
- Start by being compassionate and hand holding → in a couple weeks will have greater idea of
- prognosis for business
- [Catalyst](#) has discovered inclusive leadership = key for diversity, allows non-dominant people to share their talents more deeply
- Hiring not booming – use [Bias Interrupters](#) to make sure people are getting = access to assignments, performance evaluations are fair and don't exacerbate the [D&I issues](#).