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Coaching Teams . Changing Cultures

Coaching Your Team Through Uncertain Times - by Francesca Gino and Dan Cable

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As they try to ride out the coronavirus pandemic, people are stressed and scared — nervous about others' and their own health and the state of the world. For those lucky enough to be healthy and working from home in quarantine, their jobs can seem trivial and irritating. Separated physically from their colleagues, customers, and normal workplace, they find themselves alone with their computers, sporadically touching base remotely with those they used to see regularly. Many feel lost. Leaders of organizations can help their people get through these trying times by coaching them as they reevaluate their lives and rethink what they add to the world. Here's how.

Think about how you can serve the people you lead. Take time to reach out to those you lead in phone and video calls. Ask them how they're doing and how you can help. Then do whatever you can to get them what they need, even if it has nothing to do with work. "Servant leaders" view their key role as serving employees as they explore and grow, providing tangible and emotional support along the way. [Research](#) shows that they create greater engagement and help employees bring more of themselves to work.

Help employees discover their own personal purpose. In this new work-from-home environment, free from the normal work scripts, many of us need to ask some basic questions: "What is my job now? How do I go about helping my organization succeed? What do I want out of my career?" The answers might not be the same as they were a month ago. Discuss with employees whether any of the basic elements of their work have changed or will change. Get them to prioritize whom they are trying to serve and what they need from you in order to be effective. This type of conversation can provide the clarity needed to personalize our work's purpose better than an organization's vision or mission statement, which is often so grand that employees have difficulty connecting it to their daily tasks.

In their [research](#), Antonio Freitas of State University of New York and his colleagues demonstrate the value of questioning employees about their job tasks and then asking, "Why does it matter?" four times after each response. This exercise can connect a person's daily activities to a higher-level goal.

Suppose a manager is in charge of completing performance evaluation forms for each employee. In response to the question, "Why does completing these forms matter?" she might answer, "I want to let my people know where they stand." Next, she's asked, "Why does it matter that people know where they stand?" The answer might be, "So that people can know how they can reach their career goals." And a third time: "Why does it matter if people know how to reach their career goals?" The answer might be: "They may focus their energy at work differently." Then a fourth question will follow:



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“Why does it matter whether people focus their energy at work in a different way?” A possible answer might be: “So that people feel like they are thriving while helping the company thrive.”

[Analyzing decision-making at NASA during the 1960s](#), Wharton professor Andrew Carton found that similar steps helped employees see a stronger connection between their work and NASA’s ultimate aspirations: “I’m building electrical circuits” or “I’m mopping floors” becomes “I’m putting a man on the moon.” The more we think about why we’re performing a task, the more motivated and persistent we’ll be — especially when the task becomes hard. And as Carton found in [his studies of NASA](#), this sense of purpose also boosted employees’ coordination and collective enthusiasm.

Encourage employees to reflect on opportunities to recraft their jobs. Leaders should go out of their way to talk with employees about their strengths and how they can use them in their new way of working. What abilities and talents would they like to use more in their work in the weeks, months, and years ahead? What would they like to learn?

This type of [job crafting](#) allows us to play to our strengths — letting our unique interests, perspectives, and background guide how we do our work and the value we add to the organization. Your “best self” starts to determine the way you work, and work becomes more exciting.

Managers are often nervous about letting employees bring more of themselves to work and breaking away from the usual way of working more generally. They worry that important tasks will go undone or that employees will goof off. But now that working at home is a necessity, employees are already trying to cope with an unprecedented amount of autonomy. Use this as an opportunity to give employees the freedom to be themselves and explore their talents and interests (as Francesca wrote about in [HBR’s Rebel Talent Big Idea program](#) and Dan in [Alive at Work](#)). Our joint [research](#) at hospitals, not-for-profits, and call centers shows that when leaders encourage employees to highlight and express their unique strengths on their jobs, their performance improves and [burnout rates drop](#).

When employees can bring their best selves to work, they feel more autonomous, and their work feels more meaningful. Even when they’re working in their living room, their engagement has a chance to soar. Work feels like it matters more when we get to decide how it’s done.

The current crisis may likewise serve as a trigger for individuals to reflect on who benefits from their work and how they are making a difference. With the help of their leaders, they can make adjustments to bring more meaning to their work during this time of crisis and beyond.