

# *Distributed Teams*

Guidance for success



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# Document Purpose

The guidelines and considerations included in this document are intended to help organizations whose employees have suddenly been required to work from home full-time in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In most organizations, there will be many employees who have worked from home previously, either full-time or on a casual/as-need basis, but for the majority, this is a new situation that presents unique challenges and opportunities.

Based on the extensive previous experience of the Colliers Workplace Strategy & Innovation team in helping organizations transition to distributed work models, this document is a resource to help companies maintain the productivity, engagement, and morale of their newly remote workforce, with both short-term and long-term considerations.

# Who Should Use This Document

The content of this document has been structured to provide information to a variety of people across the organization and can be shared, as appropriate, either in full or in part. For instance, the section entitled Working from home: Taking care of your health could be distributed widely to all employees as a quick reference to maintaining wellbeing in their home-based work setting. Other sections will help to guide leaders from all parts of the organization as they guide their teams to adapt to unfamiliar practices and find their own balance of managing work and leading people.

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# Introduction

## Guiding People Through Change

As March 2020 comes to a close but the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic continues, it is important to step back and consider what is happening in our organizations as we settle into working from home and managing our work as part of distributed team. The need to keep our work and business progressing as we adjust to social distancing has propelled many people through the typical change curve (see illustration, below) to full Adoption in a matter of hours or days.

While early feedback may indicate that people are adjusting well to the sudden change, we suggest that all organizations proceed with caution. A common enemy outside of our control (the virus) has highlighted the need to protect the health and safety of employees and slow the spread of COVID-19, motivating organizations to solve the immediate technical and physical aspects of remote working. Longer term, as we transition from days to weeks, and perhaps months, leaders will need to monitor their teams' morale, effectiveness, and wellbeing. There is a potential that the change curve phases may become cyclical, with some employees continually regressing from Adoption back through Denial, greatly impacting their engagement and productivity.

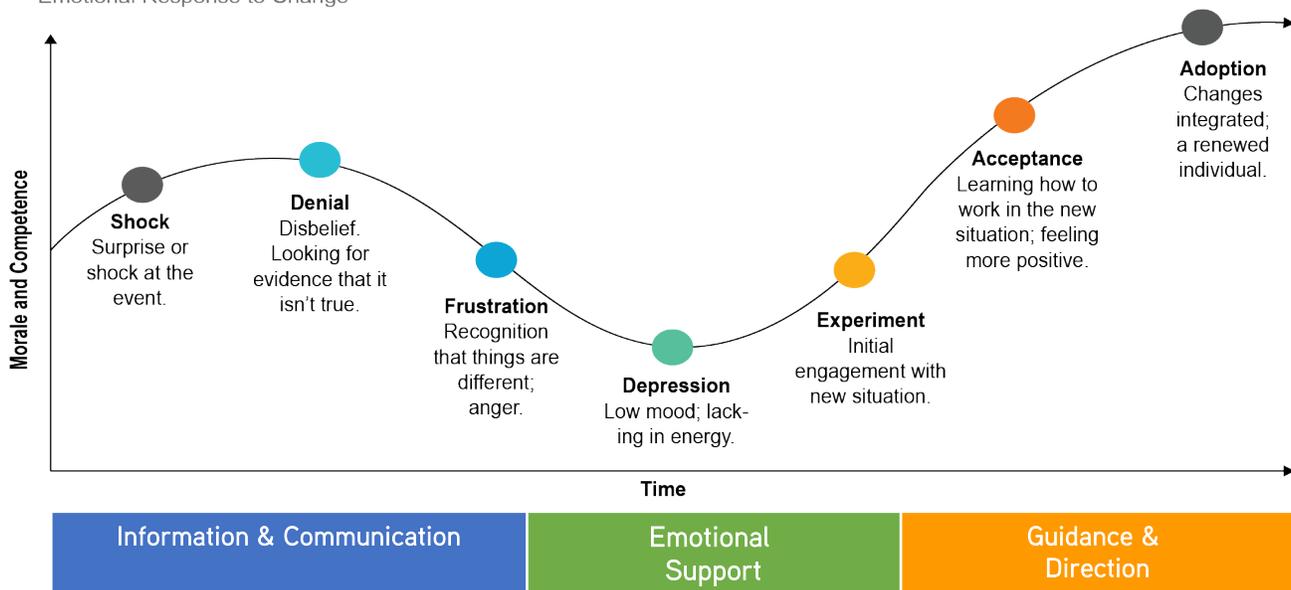
In particular, isolation can have a huge impact on wellbeing and morale, and the Frustration and Depression phases of change need to be monitored closely. Organizations must recognize that every individual will go through this at their own pace, and that this situation is affecting both their personal and professional lives. Helping managers develop new skills to lead through these times will help teams remain focused, productive and ultimately come out stronger.

Recognize this will be no small feat for leadership at all levels, with many new issues competing for the time, attention and resources of people who already had a full plate of responsibility. Creating support networks and skills training will help, resulting in a sense of community and cohesion, and leading to an even more highly integrated and skilled leadership team.

Use this experience as an opportunity to build trust within teams and across the organization. Consider trust-building as the foundation of every action, every communication and every conversation.

### Kubler-Ross Change Model Curve

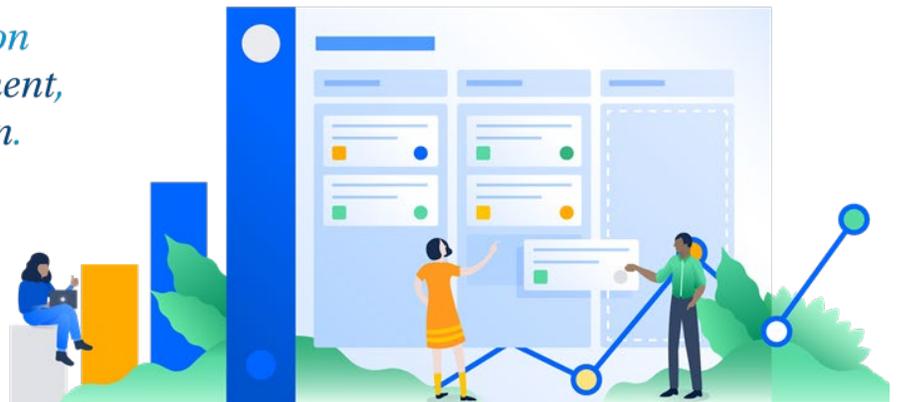
Emotional Response to Change



# Leading Distributed Teams

*A system of leading built on tenets of trust, empowerment, and fostered collaboration.*

Provides flexibility, freedom, and choice.



## Management of Employees

We need to continually monitor and adjust expectations and attitudes. We know that working at home can be highly productive; research has proven it time and again in the past decade, and it is already common practice for many organizations. For most job types and functions, there is no reason people cannot actively participate in work, achieve targets and be efficient.

Of course, if childcare is added to the equation, it makes everything more complex. Be open to not only a new location for work, but also adjusted hours regarding when the work gets done. A workday that is based around a child-centric schedule can work. Remember, it's about the result, not about the time spent doing the work. It comes back to trusting people to complete their required tasks, however that looks individually. This is a great opportunity to reinforce that you value and respect each employee's judgement and are available to offer support.

As leaders, there is a chance to learn and develop new skills for managing remote teams. These skills will serve you well now, and into the future. This one has some good tips, and its free to all:

<https://www.linkedin.com/learning/leading-at-a-distance/leading-both-in-person-and-at-a-distance>

Commit to learning the technology. Virtual meetings, brainstorming and file management protocols are more important than ever, and your team will follow your lead on prioritizing this issue. Make the best use of your time and your organization's investment in the technology tools that you have. Take action to develop your expertise in using and promoting best and most effective use of what is available to you.

It is the responsibility of every organization, and most importantly front-line leaders, to step out of the chaos and talk about the facts. Be reassuring, pragmatic and reasonable. Your information needs to come directly from WHO, AHS or your own government. Restrict and discourage distribution of information from all other sources on all communication and social media formats. This includes all leaders and managers, both formally and informally. It's unproductive, distracting, and can serve to exacerbate people's anxiety.

# Getting & Keeping Remote Teams Productive

Once you've gotten yourself set up with the technology, tools and workspace, you will be working to address issues such as team coordination, document management and workflow. The following tips will help to keep the team productive and running smoothly:

- 1** *Daily Huddles:* Quick, relatively informal Skype check-ins (preferably with video) with the team to **provide updates on what everyone is working on, provide an opportunity ask for help or information, and coordinate priorities** of the team. Discuss the best time of day with the team (start, mid-day or end of day) and then keep it consistent in the calendar. Not everyone will be there everyday, but participation should be strongly encouraged.
- 2** *Team Action Log:* More commonly used for project-specific teams, in a distributed team where work is quite collaborative, a live action log allows a team to share a to-do list. This will **help team members stay aligned** on who's doing what, and help each person independently decide what they should tackle next. If it can live in a Teams or SharePoint environment, all team members can update and add to it in real time and managers can keep abreast of what's going on and redirect if needed.
- 3** *Clearly communicate deadlines:* Your own, or those of your colleagues and teams. Clear communication and documentation will ensure a common understanding and prioritization.
- 4** *Leading distributed teams:* Specific talents and skills become more critical in leading from a distance. Understanding the unique needs and preferences will allow leaders to provide the right level of coaching and direction for each team member. This is important at all levels of leadership in the organization.
- 5** *Recognition and celebration:* Keep it up. Remember the importance of a personal thank-you, and when public acknowledgement of accomplishments should take place. This goes for the minor achievements and major milestones. Be cognizant of opportunities to recognize employees and colleagues.
- 6** *Talk to each other:* Without the quick hallway conversations, relationships start to lose energy and people can feel isolated. Everyone should be encouraged to pick up the phone and have a chat about nothing in particular. Respect that the person you're calling may be in the middle of something so open with the offer to call another time...but connections remain important.
- 7** *Open a team chat:* In Skype, Teams or other instant messaging tool – and keep it open all day. People can ask a quick question or share a thought without interrupting everyone or waiting for the next huddle. It's as close as you can get to sitting next to each other.
- 8** *Leaders stay connected:* Each team member will need a differing amount of communication to find the balance of micro-managing vs. ignoring. This is very personal to each individual. The best way to know is to ask them what they need. It is critical to be clear in what you do, what you say, and how you say it so employees feel seen and supported, rather than watched and monitored.

## Engage your network and team to champion new ways of working, including:

 <p>Encouraging different people to lead key activities &amp; discussions</p>	 <p>Leverage the network in your team to keep a "finger on the pulse" to monitor support</p>
 <p>Facilitate coaching sessions, ask how people are coping and solutions they have developed</p>	 <p>Present a positive attitude &amp; outlook to encourage the team and maintain enthusiasm</p>

# Policy & Procedure

It is important to review HR and IT policies and potential impacts to remote working. While many may require temporary adjustments to existing policies, these should be considered for long term implications as well, and others may be new issues to be considered. Potential policy implications may include:

- Flexible work hours, work location, workplace assignment
- Confidentiality policies: Online, conversational, documents
- Security: Online and building access
- Leave and vacation policies
- Travel policies
- Remote access policies and procedures, including the ability to access intranet/file shares from outside of corporate systems and non-company computers
- Technology assignment: how laptops, cell phones are assigned/distributed and managed
- Housekeeping and cleaning
- Ergonomics & health: Evaluation, special needs assessments, ergonomic requirements
- Home office accommodation: Space, information security, ergonomics, equipment, compensation

## Home Office Accommodations

### *Short Term*

**Prioritize the basics:** Does everyone have an external keyboard, mouse and monitor? How can this equipment be packaged from the office to be sent home or for planned pick-ups? Prepare a standard kit – and don't forget the cables! Guaranteed that if you wait to be asked, you'll end up with multiple requests as people only think of what they need 'now'.

### *Long Term*

**Loaning employees their task chairs** for extended work from home. This will incur cost to the organization but reap huge benefits for your staff. If this isolation moves from weeks to months, it will be worth the effort.

Encourage employees to **purchase permanent home desks/chairs** to be delivered. Perhaps the organization can negotiate better pricing for employees who are willing to do this, or can offer to share costs or provide a stipend? This is a unique situation and every organization will need to decide what they can do to help.

Consult with Employment, Human Resources and Health & Safety experts regarding risk management, and the interpretation of employer's responsibility to provide a safe environment applied to office workers. If a unionized environment, agreements should be reviewed to assess impact to longer term remote work requirements.

# Information & Communication

- 1 **Medium:** Decide the best method to share different types of information. Resist over-reliance on email.
- 2 **Sender:** Be cautious of who is sending what, and repeated communications from multiple sources which can result in over-communication, and/or potential for conflicting messages. Decide early who will share what and stick to that.
- 3 **Repository:** Where's the one place I can go for information that I need? Regardless of other formats, a central intranet page that has a copy of everything keeps people from needing to search email histories or missing important items.
- 4 **Face-to-Face:** Never underestimate the power of a message delivered by a real person. Body language, eye contact, and facial expressions are crucial parts of communication, and much can be misinterpreted within an email, or a long pause on a phone call. In this time of social distancing, face-to-face is really camera-to-camera, via video conferences and Video Townhalls.
- 5 **Cadence:** Information overload becomes noise and is then commonly ignored or scanned. Be purposeful in timing, and understand people are still trying to work and sometimes communication is distracting and adds to their stress, even when the intention is the opposite.
- 6 **Personal:** One-on-one conversations have never been so important. Cascading information through small group and individual calls and notes allows each leader or manager to customize the way in which messages are delivered, in fitting with each team's norms and communication styles.
- 7 **Ask:** We can become so busy making sure we've rolled out information we forget to ask people what they want to know, what their priorities are and what they are worried about. Continuously check in across the organization and adjust.
- 8 **Participative:** Create a forum for people to discuss, offer suggestions and help be part of the solution. Topic-based online chats and video/Skype forums can add fun and inspiration to the day – and solve common problems.
- 9 **Share responsibility:** Keep managers and people leaders front and centre, to lead connection of their teams. Also, encourage team members to take ownership or step-up to represent their teams. Keep people engaged and visible by sharing ownership for communications and motivating colleagues.
- 10 **Pick up the phone:** Don't wait for something big. Check in with colleagues and employees regularly. Caution: be clear in behavior, attitudes and conversation that this is a "are you ok, and how can I help?" call, and not a "are you really working?" check.

# Leading Effective Virtual Meetings

- 1 **Preparation:** Log in before the meeting start time to prepare and to ensure the technology is working correctly.
- 2 **Introductions:** Identify / introduce all meeting participants, particularly if some attendees do not know each other.
- 3 **Encourage video:** Communication effectiveness increases when you can see the speakers. If there is no video, each speaker should identify themselves prior to speaking.
- 4 **Review use of the mute button:** All should use it when they're not speaking. Because of this, allow time to people to unmute before they respond to questions.
- 5 **Stay on track:** Define and share the purpose and agenda of items you intend to cover. Preferably this is in the meeting invite that is sent out in advance. Allow others to add to it at the start of the meeting. Acknowledge and defer items if revised agenda exceeds meeting time scheduled. If conversations move away from the agenda or do not involve all attendees, identify an owner to schedule another discussion.
- 6 **Keep participants engaged:** Mention specific people to provide input and when asking questions before saying "does anyone have any questions"? Do this throughout the call. Be aware that usually a few will jump in, while others hesitate. Facilitate to make sure everyone has a voice throughout vs at the end.
- 7 **Capture and summarize:** At the end of the meeting, summarize action items and owners. Identify when another meeting or follow-up is required, who will attend, timing and agenda items. Document actions items and distribute to all participants.
- 8 **Follow-up:** Follow-up with individuals who didn't actively participate to ensure understanding and encourage engagement in future conversations. Follow-up with individuals who have take-away assignments to ensure clarity and capacity.

## In Addition:

**Adjust expectations.** Remember these are exceptional times and hearing children, pets and doorbells in the background is acceptable as we all try to work through our personal situations. Share this with the team.

**Respect working hours.** Schedule calls when you would expect people to be at the office, unless a teammate has a specific reason to meet at an earlier/later time (i.e. once the children are in bed, or before they wake up) and you've mutually agreed to push beyond 9:00-5:00.

*All meetings have a purpose, and each purpose requires unique planning. Below are characteristics that can influence how you facilitate different meetings.*

<b>Report</b>	<b>Coordinate</b>	<b>Brainstorm</b>	<b>Present</b>	<b>One on One</b>
Provide updates, new information and status to team.	Offer guidance and direction to coordinate efforts & align the team.	Explore ideas, directions, and alternate points of view.	Formally sharing content, such as findings & strategies.	Informal discussion, mentoring, and personal check-ins.
<p>Hints:</p> <p>Manager-led. Content prepared in advance. Consider whether a meeting is required, or if a summary document would suffice.</p>	<p>Hints:</p> <p>Manager facilitates. Agenda prepared in advance. Everyone takes a turn .</p>	<p>Hints:</p> <p>Purpose and scope agreed in advance. Set up format &amp; protocols to enable everyone to engage &amp; participate. Use technology to share visuals.</p>	<p>Hints:</p> <p>Speaker-led. Mute protocols. Content prepared in advance. Designated pauses for Q&amp;A. Consider chat for Q&amp;A rather than voice. Speaker should have video function on.</p>	<p>Hints:</p> <p>Video on. Offer options for scheduled or ad hoc. Be prepared to share content. Follow-up with summary and commitments.</p>

# Working From Home

## Taking Care Of Your Health

In what we hope to be a short-term situation, many employees will resist the financial burden of purchasing big ticket items such as desks and ergonomic chairs. People will find themselves in a variety of situations with the balance of their home-life as well. If this continues for more than a couple of weeks, more measures should be considered, particularly related to the following:

**The kitchen table:** Often as shared workspace with a spouse or kids doing homework. To the degree possible, consider keeping it as the “quiet” work zone. Encourage telephone calls and other activities to be moved to bedrooms or other rooms, or out to the deck (weather permitting!).

- If you have a desk in the house, use it: even if it’s in your child’s bedroom! Being able to walk away from your work for breaks is beneficial. Also, if you don’t need to move your work out of the way for every meal, it’s far more convenient.
- No kitchen table: are you instead sitting on stools at the island? Be very aware of your posture during the day. Alternate standing and sitting to work. Pay attention to the next point – *Move*.

**Move.** Especially if you are without ergonomic chairs, move your body. Stand at the island for a while, sit on your couch if you’re reading. Take short walks. Have stairs? Go up and down a few times throughout the day. Stretch! (see below, and <https://www.genhealthtips.com/8-yoga-poses-you-can-do-in-your-desk-chair/>)

- As long as the weather is cooperating, **take a break outside** on the deck/balcony/yard if you have one. Work there for a while for a change of scenery if you have a table and chair.

**Get creative.** What furniture or pieces can you find around the house that can be repurposed? One colleague remembered a fold-up table kept in the motorhome, which served as a great temporary desk.

**Take regular breaks during the day, as you would at work.** With all meetings and discussions taking place online, recognize that you’re not taking the breaks you would naturally have the office. As guidance, take a 5-10-minute screen break every hour.

**Take time to unwind.** Without the time of the commute, you will find yourself jumping directly from work mode to home life. Allow yourself a few minutes of contemplation, exercise or other means to create a separation from one to the other. Develop an end of day ritual with your spouse or roommate, sharing your thoughts over a cup of tea or a glass of wine.

**Share advice and tips.** With everyone facing similar challenges, we can benefit from each other’s experience. Acknowledge what you’re struggling with and see how your colleagues have coped or solved the problem. Share what you’ve learned with them. This includes managing your personal situation related to your family.

**Consider setting aside specific ‘coffee break’ appointments with the kids.** Other than very small children, most will be able to manage themselves if they know when mom or dad will be with them. Planned focused time with the kids will help to reduce the disruption and frustration that your continuous partial attention can otherwise cause.

**Disconnect from media.** The onslaught and endless cycle of information is exhausting and adds anxiety and stress unnecessarily. Rely only on trusted sources (AHS, Government of Canada) and minimize how often you check in.

# Working From Home Taking Care Of Your Health

## Meditation

Completing a 5- or 10-minute meditation will not only reduce stress or anxiety but will also help to lengthen the attention span and increase work productivity. Meditation can be done at the start of your day, throughout, or at the end. Below are two free applications for reference.



Transcendental meditation is a technique to reduce stress and anxiety, practiced for 20 minutes twice each day. Having practiced for more than 40 years, billionaire Ray Dalio, the founder of \$160 billion hedge-fund behemoth Bridgewater Associates, says that Transcendental Meditation has been “the single biggest influence” on his life, and is discussed in his book “Principles”.

## Exercise and Mobility

Taking breaks throughout the day to stretch and move helps to reduce bodily pain, improve your posture and be a source of stress relief. See the below images for reference or this link as an alternative source: <https://www.healthline.com/health/deskercise>



## Diet

The benefits of a healthy diet include weight control, mood improvement, the ability to combat disease, boosts your energy and improves life longevity. Trying to maintain this while working from home can be a challenge. Avoiding the urge to snack throughout the day and sticking to a routine (breakfast, lunch and dinner with a couple of breaks for healthy snacks) is beneficial. Making sure your foods are full of vitamins and unprocessed ensures your body is provided adequate nutrition to support your full day of work.

Tips and tricks: <https://www.healthline.com/health/5-benefits-healthy-habits>

## *Lessons Learned*

# Preparing For The New Normal

While the immediate COVID-19 response and prevention situation is likely temporary, there is value in capturing challenges and successes as you and your teams learn, adapt, and develop solutions together. Regardless of how long the self-isolation and social distancing mandates are in place, it is unlikely that most organizations will fully return to their previous approach to the workplace. Even if there is a desire to revert back to a fully in-office, face-to-face work environment, there are protocols and processes that can be adapted from this period that will help your organization to be more prepared and adaptable in the future.

We recommend capturing lessons learned regularly: what are the challenges you are facing, and how have they been addressed? What are some of the unexpected successes, and how can they be replicated in the future? What were your team's greatest achievements? It is important to document these items as they occur, and use them to determine an actionable path forward, integrating the lessons learned into permanent practice and policy.

It is also important to solicit feedback from all levels of the organization. Executives, team leaders, and individual contributors will all have different experiences, and will all have valuable input to share. We recommend engaging with leaders and staff regularly in the form of pulse checks or town halls, and make sure that people feel empowered to speak freely about their personal challenges and successes and take responsibility to document results.

Together, you can learn from this unprecedented and unforeseen situation, to better support your staff in the future while maintaining or enhancing employee engagement and effectiveness. Long term decisions about workplace accommodation as well as business continuity plans need to be developed holistically, benefiting the organization's ability to work effectively.

# Steps You Can Take Today



- 1 Regularly *check in* with groups and individuals.
- 2 Proactively *engage* your team, discuss the challenges you're having, find solutions together.
- 3 *Commit to using* available technologies and encourage others to do the same; take the time to learn how to use them to their full potential and capabilities.
- 4 *Organize* social activities in virtual formats – have a virtual coffee together or offer informal opportunities to bring the team together.
- 5 *Celebrate* events and successes and challenges overcome! Acknowledge progress as this gets easier.

*Colliers is a global leader in workplace strategy, and it is the sole focus of our integrated Workplace Strategy & Innovation team. Our Calgary-based team has diverse knowledge & nearly 40 years of combined workplace experience. We focus on clients' required business outcomes and future needs. We help organizations develop and execute workplace strategies that achieve measurable results.*



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