

Firm Culture in a Crisis: Tools for Survival

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Every business has a culture. Your culture helps attract and retain the kind of talent allowing your firm to be successful. It maximizes your competitiveness in the markets where you live and work. Your dominant culture may be collaborative, competitive, innovative, or rule driven. These distinct types of cultures support your firm's goals when things are business as usual.



But what kind of culture do you need in a time of crisis and transition?

It is not business as usual right now. How can you shift your culture from what it currently is to what it needs to be to support you as you start to transition back to the office? Since culture is how things ARE around here, that probably looks a lot different for you right now. And it's changing fast.

What-ever your dominant culture, shift to a culture of "we" until we settle into a new normal. What does that mean? As a leader you already consider the needs of many people. You are already thinking what is best for everyone and considering the firm and client's needs. We are in this together: no one is unaffected.

It is so important to understand that we have a **Relational Responsibility** to one another. Each person matters, and the decisions *each* person makes impacts everyone. We each need to make decisions based on our *connectivity, not our individualism*.

To operate in this new environment, you have likely already created or tweaked policies such as a temporary work from home policy and agreement. You have found ways to support the most vulnerable populations at your office and figured out how to protect vulnerable clients from exposure to illness. You may also be struggling to support your workforce's financial security and help find needed

resources. Your leadership role may feel more like that of a social worker right now than a business leader or human resources manager.

As an “interim social worker” there are additional tools that could really help. There are many resources available locally and nationally. I have included a few “self-serve” kinds of resources you can implement including tools for managing anxiety in your workplace, and how to connect services and support to your workforce. And throughout this time of increased stress, it is so important that you build and maintain your own resilience. I provide some easy ways to do this. We start with resources to support your business.

Use Resources to Support Your Firm.

1. Don't forget to connect with your Employee Assistance Program, call them. They have a lot of tools available that are included with your Program including help with finances, how to provide services such as mental health and information on daycare services. Your workforce may just to talk with someone who can help reduce their stress and fears.
2. If you do not have an EAP, do you have a relationship with any mental health professionals who could make themselves available for a phone conversation with anyone feeling overwhelmed? You could put someone on a temporary contract to provide emotional and mental support.
3. Do you work with a financial planner? If so, can they provide some tips for how your workforce can manage financial pressures that may be arising? This is also something you can find in your community and contract with someone to provide advice in a group setting or one-on-one (remotely).
4. If you have a professional association, visit their website for news and tools to support your business and people.
5. Access the Association of Legal Administrators at www.alanet.org for resources and support. Or the ABA at www.americanbar.org. Or ALA at www.alanet.org

Flexibility is your superpower right now.

How flexible can you be with your role and policies and procedures? If you have a culture that is highly trusting, from management to workforce and back, you will excel at offering flexibility. You already have the foundation you need and may just need to edit a couple of policies that give direction to your workforce on remote working expectations, return to work procedures, or ongoing work from home, or hybrid work arrangements.

If you are a highly rules driven culture with strong enforcement policies, this is an opportunity for you to make a shift. It is also an opportunity to be highly communicative and transparent. First, talk openly about the flexible work arrangements you've had in place, and share them through multiple mediums including a memo or email, and get information out through verbal communications such as a group voicemail message, podcast, video, etc. The most important thing is to communicate and demonstrate trust in your workforce. And now that you are transitioning back to the office, or some version of returning, “over” communicate how it is working.

Above are specific resources, but let's also talk about how to support yourself and other leaders during this stressful time. Below are tools to help you build and maintain *your resilience* so you can remain in a support role.

Maintaining Your Resilience is a secret weapon.

If you are reading this, you are likely the person on the front lines, managing stress and chaos daily. You are probably sleep-deprived, experiencing a higher than normal level of anxiety or stress, and trying to balance many priorities including your family and social network. How do you keep yourself resilient and strong? Here are four strategies:

a) Mindfulness

Mindfulness is simply bringing your attention to what you are experiencing in the moment. You do this without judgment by just noticing what you are thinking and feeling in that moment. You can practice mindfulness formally through training. You can also practice being mindful all during the day. I like setting specific times during my day to stop, bring my attention to what I am thinking and feeling, and focusing on my breathing for a couple of minutes. After this quick break, I continue working. I find I bring greater clarity to what I am working on. And sometimes I re-direct my attention because I realize I was distracted and unproductive.

A simple mindfulness exercise:

At the top of each hour, pause for one to two minutes. Bring your awareness to your thoughts, feelings, what you notice in your body including areas of tension or discomfort. Notice your breathing and if you are holding your breath, breathing shallow or regular.

Here are some Apps to support you in developing a regular mindful pause during your day:

- **Calm**-- Brings sense of clarity to everyday life, great for meditation, mindfulness, and changing your life in positive ways.
- **Aura**-- daily micro-meditations – 3 minutes each.
- **Breeth**-- Free App that follows the user through the day, offers 5-minute meditations and tips for overcoming pressure and living with intention and inner peace.
- **Headspace**--Spoken word exercise around 10 minutes a day.
- **Insight Timer**-- Over 4000 guided meditations from over 1000 teachers on various topics such as self-compassion, nature, and stress.
- **Ten Percent Happier**-- Training for those skeptical of meditation presented by Dan Harris, author of 10% Happier.
- **Mindfulness Daily**-- Takes a few minutes each day offering quick, effective guided practices to reduce stress, anxiety, improve performance and enhance sleep.

b) Movement

Build exercise into each day. You need a minimum of **150 minutes a week** of exercise for good health. You also need exercise to clear your head, re-energize yourself, and deepen your breathing. I recommend you put exercise on your calendar like you would any meeting and treat it like it is critically important. If you do not keep yourself healthy, you will not be able to help others. Here are various strategies to get in your 150 minutes per week.

DAILY (7 days a week)	21-minute sessions
5 days a week	30-minute sessions
3 days a week	50-minute sessions
2 days a week	75-minute sessions

Exercise can be a mix of different kinds of activity including walking, running, cycling, exercise equipment workout, weight training, yoga, swimming, vigorous yardwork/gardening, exercise classes, etc. Get up and move around your office or home, take the stairs, walk the hallways, take a walk around the block a couple of times a day, and consider walking meetings with colleagues or peers to encourage one another to take this needed movement break.

c) Mastery

Mastery is about engaging your brain to focus on something specific. This could be tackling a project, revising a needed policy, or putting a new program in place. You may need to take some time to read and study something important to your work. The most important thing is to engage your brain in something that allows you to focus and create. If you can carve out time every day to work on a specific project, that is even better. Mastery allows you focus your brain, which allows you to bring calm to your nervous system by engaging your pre-frontal cortex. This also works if you want to practice a hobby such as playing music, cooking, reading for pleasure, painting, gardening (bonus with providing movement), crossword puzzles, and games both online and traditional board games.

d) Meaningful Engagement

During this period of social distancing it is important to remain connected to others. This may need to be via technology or engaging in your social distance activity. If you are out on a walk by yourself, call someone to check in and get caught up. Use that time to engage and move. Make sure you have several meaningful engagements each day both professional and personal.

Your work culture should still be about “we” in this time of social distancing, and partial return to the office. Part of that is taking care of your employees, while also taking good care of yourself. Don’t forget to exercise, eat well, engage meaningfully with others, be mindful, and engage your mind. Doing these things will build and maintain your resilience so you can remain in a support role. By doing these things you also teach others how to be more resilient.

As a leader, you are being watched by others who will see how you are acting (or not acting) as a sign for what they should do.

You have a huge opportunity to set the expectation and lead by example. And don’t forget to check in with yourself regularly and *breathe*.