



LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: HELPING YOUR DIRECT REPORTS FOCUS AND ENGAGE

I had an executive coaching call with Mary last week, the CEO of a large financial services organization, and she shared with me that she is having trouble focusing. The pandemic has distracted her and, frankly most of us, with worries about health, financial fears, and the unknown future. The ability to focus, prioritize, organize, and be available for others is now a challenge for many leaders. What can a leader do?

Someone else we coach said that he became aware of the depth of struggles several of his direct reports were having. He first noticed that projects were not getting done as quickly as usual. As he talked with direct reports, he realized that some different strategies – different from business as usual – were needed to help his staff focus on the tasks at hand.

Strategies we suggest:

1. **Lead effectively.** Make sure you are taking care of your own leadership effectiveness and vitality. You must ensure you are in tiptop shape to engage your team effectively.
2. **Show empathy.** While many express that videoconferencing is not the same as face-to-face, it is definitely better than having no visual cues. The whole team wants to see each other. Ensure you understand the right cadence for staff meetings. Many leaders find some “urgent” meetings are required as well as the more strategic ones. Starting conversations with a personal check-in regarding how members of the team are doing is liberating and builds trust. Maybe challenge them to share with the team some things they are doing differently that are positives, i.e., the silver linings, such as connecting with people they may not have if we were not all in a videoconferencing world.
3. **Delegate more thoughtfully.** This will require understanding the competencies and emotional state of each individual. A person who might have been an all-star in January may now be suffering due to a loss of a loved one, pressures at home, uncertainties in the office, or some other circumstance related to the pandemic. Take care to check in even more when delegating tasks, large or small.
4. **Schedule video one-on-ones.** In addition to holding team meetings to discuss any concerns people might not be comfortable sharing in a group, one-on-ones should be done on a regular basis.
5. **Avoid talking about everything at once.** Set small goals or milestones and set deadlines. Open-ended timing is not usually helpful when you are trying to increase focus.
6. **Prioritize.** Refrain from assigning an array of tasks at this time. Instead, allow direct reports to accomplish one thing, before piling on other tasks. Assign what you really need to get done first and go down the list. People can become overwhelmed, more now than ever, by the size or number of projects on their plates.
7. **Set up update conversations tied to the milestones or interim goals.** Depending on the nature and projected length of the task/project, a little extra guidance may be required now.
8. **Show that you care about the person, not just the project itself.** Again, compassion and empathy can be very helpful in raising your direct reports’ level of motivation.

Here are three resources you may want to check out:

1. *Forbes*: [How to focus on your work when all you can think about is Covid-19.](#)
2. *Harvard Business Review*: [How to keep your team motivated remotely.](#)
3. *Chief Executive*: [Maintaining morale and productivity during Covid-19.](#)

Is your team as productive as you would like? What do you think will help your direct reports focus and get the work done?