OFA Peer TA
Strengthening Self-sufficiency Pathways

THE "ROADMAP" SERIES
Leadership & Management Strategies

Building Social Cohesion Among Virtual Teams

ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES
Office of Family Assistance

About the Roadmap Series:

Supported by the Office of Family Assistance's Peer Technical Assistance (PeerTA), the Roadmap Series highlights responsive leadership and management practices to support the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) agencies and their partners in adapting to new ways of work and connection amid the pandemic.
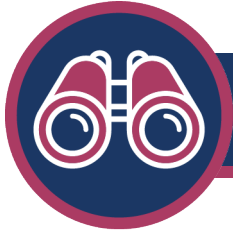
The Challenge

Many TANF administrators, managers, and supervisors are facing new challenges as they quickly adapt to managing their teams virtually. These challenges are amplified amid the pandemic with an abrupt shift away from a workplace and the social connections colleagues.

Key Takeaways

Research shows that socially cohesive teams with strong social ties, interpersonal connection, and commitment to each are more apt to navigate the challenges that come with sudden change. Research also suggests that the camaraderie experienced with socially cohesive teams can ease members' feelings of uncertainty.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program staff are quickly adapting to remote work and virtual service delivery amid the pandemic to ensure the health and safety of individuals and families. Newly introduced virtual platforms and processes will likely enable staff to work remotely at least part of the time going forward. Given this drastic workplace shift, PeerTA is leveraging knowledge across the TANF field to share tips and resources as well as responsive practices recently implemented at TANF agencies to support administrators, managers, and supervisors in promoting social cohesion among their staff in a remote context.

Explore employee attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors.

Organizations with cultures of psychological safety or environments where people are comfortable being themselves have been proven to spur learning and continuous improvement among staff.[1] Every team functions differently, so there is no "one size fits all" approach for remote work. Instead, the task of a leader is to translate the organization's positive and healthy workplace culture into a remote context by continuing to foster their team's motivation and engagement in their work.[2]

Team culture goes beyond the functions of how you get your work done. Absent the face-to-face exchanges that happen in person, remote work can impact peer relationships, leading to "relational impoverishment" or weakened interpersonal connections with peers and managers.[3] Consider the following questions when going virtual with your work culture:

- How does each staff member work best? How do they function and work together as a team?

- What purposeful efforts are you taking to maintain peer relationships and interpersonal connection among your team?

- How did staff formerly engage in informal conversations at the office and are there virtual ways to mimic these activities (e.g., chatting about their families, eating lunch together, sharing stories of client successes, etc.)?

- How does your team support members who bring new ideas to the table, particularly during change? Are staff members able to share different perspectives?

Staff at the Colorado Works Program have a daily funny email thread and weekly time for "water cooler talks," or informal gathering and conversation.

Leadership at Reach Up, Vermont's TANF program, have connected staff to mindfulness and meditation resources and their Employee Assistance Program (EAP).
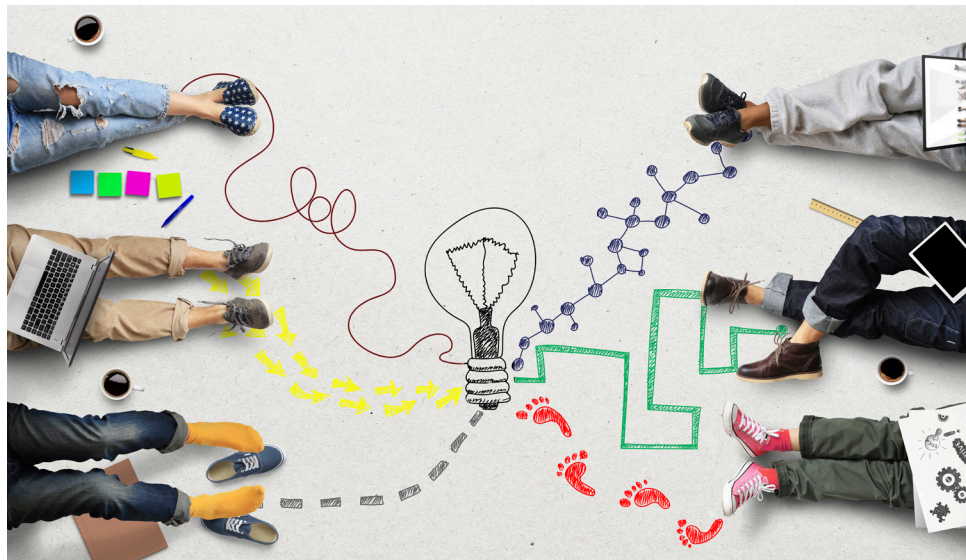
Compassionately support remote employees.

Individuals in the workplace are constantly influenced by the emotions and moods of those around them, including their leaders.[4] Now, more than ever, it is essential for supervisors and senior leadership to emotionally connect with their staff, demonstrate empathy, and encourage staff to take care of themselves in addition to their clients. Research shows that compassionate leaders improve employees' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and likelihood of expressing compassion towards one another.[5]

As staff stretch to meet the changing needs of their clients, evidence shows that practicing professional and emotional self-care may be correlated with less burnout and increased satisfaction with being able to do one's work effectively.[6]

When speaking with your team, emphasize that self-care is a critical piece of their job and is "necessary for [their] effectiveness and success in honoring [their] professional and personal commitments."[7] Being sensitive to the well-being of others means noticing when they might need help. Consider asking yourself and your staff the following questions to get a pulse on what your team might need:

- How are you feeling about working remotely?

- What does it feel like to be part of a remote team?

- What is challenging about working remotely? What has become easier since working remotely?

- Do you know who you could reach out to if you were experiencing a challenge?

- Do you feel valued and respected by organizational leadership? By your peers?

- Do you feel socially connected with your coworkers and/or others throughout the week?

- What changes, if any, would improve your ability to work comfortably from home?

Adapt approach to ongoing check-ins.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, you may have relied on dropping by someone's desk to see how things are going. These informal check-ins are critical as studies show that recurring one-on-one meetings increase workplace engagement and reduce staff turnover.[8]

Leaders can continue to check in with staff remotely by sending an instant message, hopping on a video call, or posting on a collaborative platform like Microsoft Teams or Skype.

However, staff may continue to balance childcare and caregiving responsibilities with work, and an unscheduled call may come at a bad time. Below, are ways managers can continue to regularly connect with staff that are navigating work-life balances at home:

Start with an email or instant message asking for a quick check-in and give the other person space to fit it in their schedule – e.g., can you give me a call when you have a few minutes?

Be clear about the time sensitivity of your request (do you need to talk in the next hour, this afternoon, or this week?) and the amount of time you need (do you want to discuss a project, or do you have a quick question?).

Set aside protected time on a regular basis for check-ins. If you have a weekly meeting, you won't need as much unscheduled communication.

Staff at the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services conduct regular check-ins with county providers to find out if state regulations, like signature requirements, need to be adapted to better serve clients remotely.

Promote staff engagement outside of work.

Studying the real-time effects of social isolation during COVID-19, researchers from the University of Washington (UW) suggest using technology in a way that maximizes person-to-person connectiveness. "The closer to live [interaction], the better," said Dr. Jonathan Kanter, a psychological scientist at UW's Center for the Science of Social Connection.[9]

In fact, a study in The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry found a nationally representative sample of older adults who used Skype's video chat function had a lower risk of developing depression than adults using other forms of communication technologies, such as email or social media.[10]

While staff have likely had access to a variety of virtual communication tools, including phone calls and social media, these platforms may start to feel stale.

You might be able to reinvigorate them by intentionally using them in different ways.

- Encourage staff to start virtual "clubs" based on their interests, like a cooking club, book club, or movie club. Set a weekly or biweekly time to meet with your co-workers to mimic those informal chats you would have in-person.

- If it is challenging for staff to find a time to gather for a club, suggest a shared document among colleagues where a running list of TV, movie, podcast, or book recommendations can be shared. Co-workers can also share tips they have found useful for working remotely. This is a great option for days when people want to interact with co-workers but might not have the energy for a full conversation.

Leadership at Arapahoe/Douglas Works! Workforce Center (CO) have daily lunch-and-learns on a variety of topics that allow staff to spend time together and receive training on new technologies and platforms.

Where Can I Find More Information?

For more information on compassionately supporting remote employees, see the accompanying brief, "Compassionate Leadership: Leading with Heart." For tips on staying socially connected in a way that works for you, see the accompanying brief, "Physically Distant, but Socially Connected: Understanding Different Modes of Connection."

Are you interested in learning more about how other fields are approaching leadership during COVID-19? Harvard Business Review produced the following free e-book which includes pieces on leading through the COVID-19 crisis, managing remote teams, and communicating effectively: Coronavirus and Business: The Insights You Need from Harvard Business Review. The London Business School launched a webinar series called Leading Through a Pandemic. The first installment, Working Virtually, focuses on how to manage and engage a remote team.

Learn More About PeerTA

The PeerTA provides evidence-informed, direct, and timely technical assistance to state, tribal, county, and territory TANF programs and their partners. PeerTA also facilitates the sharing of timely and practical information on innovative practices, emerging challenges and opportunities, and application of lessons learned to the broader TANF field.

To learn more about the PeerTA network and the resources, publications, and tools it makes available, please visit: https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/

To make a request for technical assistance, please visit: https://peerta.acf.hhs.gov/technical-assistance

Suggested Citation

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Endnotes

1 Edmondson, A.C. (2004). Psychological Safety, Trust, and Learning in Organizations. In R.M. Kramer & K.S. Cook (Eds.), *Trust and Distrust in Organizations: Dilemmas and Approaches.*

2 Organizational Behavior, an e-book by the University of Minnesota, includes chapters on Understanding Organizational Culture (15.2) and Characteristics of Organizational Culture (15.3) (2010).

3 Gajendran, R.S., & Harrison, D.A. (2007). The Good, the Bad, and the Unknown About Telecommuting: Meta-Analysis of Psychological Mediators and Individual Consequences. Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 92, No. 6, 1524-1541.

4 Barsade, S.G. (2002). The Ripple Effect: Emotional Contagion and its Influence on Group Behavior. *Administrative Science Quarterly 47*(4).

5 Lilius, J.M., Kanov, J., Dutton, J., Worline, M.C., & Maitlis, S. (2011). Compassion revealed: What we know about compassion at work (and where we need to know more). In G. M. Spreitzer & K.S. Cameron (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship.*

6 Bloomquist, K.R., Wood, L., Friedmeyer-Trainor, K., & Kim, H. (2015). Self-care and Professional Quality of Life: Predictive Factors Among MSW Practitioners. *Advances in Social Work 16*(2).

7 For more information on self-care, see the University of Buffalo School of Social Work's Introduction to Self-Care. For self-care tips for helpers developed by Francoise Mathieu, M. Ed., CCC., Compassion Fatigue Specialist, and disseminated by the National Council for Behavioral Health, see Top 12 Self-Care Tips for Helpers.

8 Amabile, T., & Kramer, S. J. (2011). The Power of Small Wins. Harvard Business Review.

9 Brodeur, N. (2020, March 23). We're in this human experiment: UW researchers study effects of coronavirus isolation. *The Seattle Times.*

10 Teo, A.R., Markwardt, S., & Hinton, L. (2019). Using Skype to Beat the Blues: Longitudinal Data from a National Representative Sample. *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry 27*(3).