



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS SYSTEM

Guide to People Management During COVID-19



As we continue in our journey of managing during the COVID-19 crisis, some of us may be feeling exhausted, exhilarated, hopeful, tragic, or any number of other emotions. It's important to know that the people on our teams are feeling these same emotions, and may now be looking to you, their manager and leader, for support. If you spend 10 minutes reading this guide, you will be well prepared for the challenges ahead of us.

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Why did we make this guide?

In short, everything has changed dramatically in the world, our work, and our personal lives. In spite of this upheaval, our mission remains the same: “The University of Illinois System will transform lives and serve society by educating, creating knowledge, and putting knowledge to work on a large scale and with excellence” and we need to find new, creative ways to support this mission. As a people manager and leader at this great institution, it is up to you to create the conditions that allow your team to do their best work, and to have the most job satisfaction possible. At the same time, however, you also have to take care of yourself. The purpose of this guide is to provide you an understanding of the challenges we now face, both as individuals and as leaders, and some useful suggestions for how to address them.



Remember, Share, and Lead Through the Guiding Principles:

Now more than ever, it is imperative that we lead with heart and give each other grace while exuding and assuming good intent. The [U of I System Guiding Principles](#) are a tool and resource we can use in order to ensure:

Excellence with Integrity – Across the U of I System, we believe that the pursuit of excellence—in our research, in our teaching, in our outreach and engagement—is a challenging, relentless, multidimensional process.

Fostering Healthy Relationships Across the Campuses – The University of Illinois System has the privilege and responsibility to cultivate the immense talents of diverse students, faculty, staff, and leaders.

Financial and Environmental Sustainability – Financial sustainability is concerned with fiscal resilience and foresight, whereas environmental sustainability encompasses our buildings, our infrastructure, our land, our utilities, and our climate.

Freedom of Speech on Campus - An unyielding allegiance to freedom of speech – even controversial, contentious, and unpopular speech – is indispensable to developing the analytical and communication skills of our students and empowering all members of our campus communities to be active and informed citizens.

Globalization and Immigration – We live in a world where it is possible to connect with virtually anyone, anywhere, at any time.

Civic Engagement – The University of Illinois System has a rich history of civic engagement. It’s our responsibility, as The Public’s University, to improve quality of life by eliminating barriers to full participation, addressing problems systemically, and finding new avenues for relevance.

The Challenge of Focusing on Work

The uncertainty about our health, jobs, the economy, friends, family, and the world in general results in an incredible amount of stress.

A threat in our environment makes us vigilant and still productive, but creativity is limited.

When that threat is at our doorstep, we become cognitively impaired – it is even hard to read emails.

The threat levels now for the population at large are comparable to what marginalized populations experience on a daily basis.



Time Differences

It is a universal truth that it's harder to share ideas and collaborate when you don't work at the same time or run into each other in the hallway. This is compounded when everyone on your team is juggling both the personal and professional requirements of this crisis. While technology allows us to be forever connected, it's not realistic to think that answers can be delivered as quickly as if you could just pop by someone's desk to ask them a question.

Inability to See Body Language

While we do have numerous tools at our disposal to “see” each other during this crisis, it isn't the same. Have you noticed that you feel exhausted after a Zoom meeting? One reason for this is that when you're in person, your eyes tend to look in the direction of one person and your brain is very good at blurring things happening in your peripheral vision. This allows your brain to translate the data in your direct line of site. In group Zoom meetings, you're not only concentrating on the one person who is speaking to you, but your brain is trying (subconsciously) to make sense of all of the data it's receiving from other participants, the chat window, the reactions, etc. All of this overstimulation can cause us to miss subtle clues that we may more easily pick up in one-on-one or face-to-face conversations.

The Challenges of Managing a Remote Team

As we navigate this crisis together, a number of common concerns have surfaced that we'd like to spend some time discussing. Many managers have shared feelings of uneasiness around the following areas:

Inability to Observe Day-to-Day Workflows

This inability can cause us as managers to ask “What does my employee do on a day-to-day basis?” or “Are my employees still positively contributing to the goals of my department or the greater campus?” These questions exemplify the differences between an “input” style of management vs. an “output” style of management. Not being able to see employees every day forces us, as leaders, to set strong performance goals and expectations for work outcomes vs. measuring how long someone is “on the job”. This may be a new or different way of engaging with your team, but once perfected, it will help you to be highly effective.

Trust

It's more difficult to build trust when individuals are working in remote environments. Compound this with high stress levels and the quick action that is necessary when responding to change, and it's no surprise that misunderstandings can (and will) occur more frequently. Trust is at the heart of every relationship, and it's especially critical in the workplace. In fact, the primary factor affecting employee turnover is whether or not there is a trusting relationship between a manager and their employees. Trust is critical for engagement, creativity, and commitment, and therefore is something we must foster in this time of crisis.

How do we, as Managers, address today's challenges?



Ask. Listen. *Then* do. In some cases, listening is enough.

Show empathy, for yourself and others, while allowing for different reactions and self-care needs

Recognize that each individual has varying capacities to “perform”



Demonstrate gratitude by asking your employees what they need to feel appreciated and doing your best to give that to them; say “thank you!”

Use this time to interrogate your assumptions and judgements

Take care of ourselves, so we are able to take care of our teams



Be authentic and honest, acknowledge the downsides as well as the positives

Offer grace and allow yourself and others to have good moments as well as not so good moments

Trust your employees

Step 1 | Prepare to Communicate

In times of uncertainty, people managers need to communicate, communicate, communicate. You need to share information, answer questions, admit what you don't know, and be transparent. This can be uncomfortable, and can be overlooked when you are being pulled in a number of different directions. But let's be clear, when there is a lack of information, false information often fills the void. Get ready to communicate by building agreed upon structures for sharing information. Check out this great [article from Gartner](#) for choosing the right communication channel for delivering your message.

Step 2 | Establish Clear Expectations

Your next, and most important, step is to establish clear expectations that will allow individuals to be successful and teams to successfully collaborate in this new environment. Connect with your direct reports to understand their expectations for work, and create agreements for how the team will work remotely. Work with your team to establish team norms, including dos and don'ts, to guide you during daily operations and high-stakes moments. You should also work with individuals on your team to create and agree to individual guidelines around key work outputs, ensuring clarity on how each person fits into the bigger picture.

As you think about setting these group norms and individual guidelines, you may want to consider asking your team:

What do you see as the benefits of working remotely?

How do you like to communicate (e.g., phone, email, videoconference)?

In what instances do you prefer which method(s) of communication?

What expectations you have of me as your manager?

What will your working hours be?

How can we best keep each other updated regarding projects and development?

What would you like to try doing that you haven't had the opportunity to do in the past?

What interests do you have that I might not be aware of? Skills?

What concerns do you have about our remote work relationship?

What additional information would help me better understand your remote work situation?

Remember, in addition to setting clear expectations, it's important to recognize that especially in times of uncertainty, goals and expectations should be dynamic, not static.

You should be open and flexible to adjusting goals, as necessary, to respond to changing conditions and people's individual circumstances.

In addition to building this foundation for success, there are a number of other tips available for supervising remote workers:

Reaching out to individuals on your team more often, just to check in

Avoiding check-ins that feel like micromanagement

Celebrating small daily progress and wins

Creating opportunities for community building by hosting meetings where no work is discussed, optional coffee chats, happy hours, online games, etc. - be creative and involve the team to learn what they want to do

Developing a remote communications strategy:

- Limit hours when people send and receive emails

- Schedule sending of messages

- Embrace asynchronous communication

- Set crossover meeting times

Setting new "norms", such as creating goal-based outcomes vs. hours-based work as discussed earlier

Step 3 | Actively Offer Support to Your Team

Interestingly, during ordinary times most people look for competence first in their leader. During periods of stress, many people start to look first for caring and empathy, and then for competence. In these unprecedented times, your team is looking to you for support more than ever. Because of this, you have the opportunity to step-up as a leader in a few essential ways.



Ask your employees how they are set-up for working from home and encourage them to get the equipment they need. If they are experiencing ergonomic issues, you can direct them to [System Human Resource Services](#) for resources on establishing an ergonomic workspace.

Ergonomics

Flexible Work Schedules

In many cases, supervisors, managers, and their teams have the ability to update normal working hours to allow employees to adjust to this crisis. As a manager, you should start the discussion with your employees about their schedule by asking them what they need to be most successful. Some alternatives to consider include changing their “shift” from 8 to 5 to: early morning hours, late day hours, or working four 10-hour days.

For represented employees, be sure to make changes within the parameters of the contracts and collective bargaining agreements which apply. In some cases, the union may need to be notified of the scheduling changes before they can occur. Please contact System HR if you anticipate a permanent schedule change.



Mental Health Days

Employees may use sick leave for mental health reasons as appropriate under our sick leave policies. We encourage you to check-in on your employees by asking how they are doing, reminding them of the resources available to them, being as flexible as you can with requests for alternative working arrangements, and providing links to leave options on our website. Learn more about using [sick leave](#). You may also review leave provisions provided by the [Families First Coronavirus Response Act](#).



Practice Equity

Marginalized and underrepresented communities are suffering even more during this crisis. They are more impacted in terms of who is getting and dying from COVID-19; the inequities in our healthcare system are real, as are the financial repercussions, food insecurities, and lack of social support. As a leader in the U of I System, you need to be particularly aware that you may have staff members dealing with these situations, and they may be reluctant to share their concerns with you.

During this time, and always, all people managers should strive to treat people with equity, not equality. In other words:

Recognize and respond to each person’s unique circumstances and needs

Acknowledge differential impacts

Be compassionate

Step 4 | Set Yourself Up for Success

As a member of the U of I System community, you also have at your disposal a number of resources in this space. One example is the [Work Smart from Home](#) guide from The University of Illinois Extension:

Set a Schedule

Have a set action that indicated you are transitioning to and from work each day

Plan your day with 2-3 specific tasks to move forward or accomplish

Use block scheduling and plan for breaks and lunch

Engage in Healthy Habits

Have a designated work area so when you are there, you are in “work mode”

Have office space ergonomically set up for optimal body health

Connect with others

Make exercise part of your day

Drink water throughout the day

Reward yourself for productivity



Avoid Distractions

Inform family members and friends that you are working to minimize distractions

Turn off both social media and notifications for social media during work hours

Have set times to look at you email in order to not disrupt workflow

Step 5 | Adjust

Realize that the typical speed of change in our everyday life causes us to make mistakes, and that's OK, as long as we use the experience to recalibrate, adjust, and move forward.

The ability to learn from past experience and experimentation to solve new or first-time problems is called nimble learning.

This, in addition to the leadership competencies discussed in the System HR Change Management Series will help you grow your skills and be successful today and in the future.

Step 6 | Continue to Develop Your Team

One way to show you care and to create some stability during this time is to continue to develop members of your team. Here at the U of I System, all employees are encouraged to engage in regular professional development activities. There are a number of free resources available to system employees to help you meet your professional development goals.

[LinkedIn Learning](#) – login using your NetID and password to access over 1,200 online courses.

[Know Your U Program](#) - Know Your U is an investment in our most valuable resource, giving employees a broader perspective into the scope and impact of our universities, and how their roles contribute to the greater good. It is a chance to learn more about academic units that have helped set enrollment records for six straight years; about research that promises to build on the system's long, rich legacy of groundbreaking innovation; and about the iconic facilities that define our three, best-in-class universities.

The [System Offices Professional Development Guidelines](#) offer parameters to system office units when developing employee and unit professional development plans, including budget allocations. In support of this program, system office departments are strongly encouraged to allocate sufficient resources to develop employee knowledge, skills, and abilities through various internal and external opportunities.

The [System Offices Scholarship Program](#) supports employee development through a competitive annual scholarship program available to eligible employees enrolled in a degree program not covered under employee tuition waiver benefits.

Step 7 | Show Appreciation

Another important factor in creating a successful remote working environment during this crisis is becoming more familiar with appreciation. There are a number of ways to show the members of your team that you appreciate them. One group has even likened the different types of appreciation to the bestselling book *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman. In their adaptation, the Five Appreciation Languages (for work) include:

Words of Affirmation



Personal and Written Communication
46%

Quality Time



Focused Attention and Companionship
26%

Acts of Service



Lending a Helping Hand
22%

Tangible Gifts



Gift Cards, Treats, etc...
6%

Physical Touch



Consenting Hugs, Pats on the Back, High Fives
<1%

As you think about appreciation, consider the following questions:

When have you have felt appreciated by those with whom you work, how did that impact you?

When have you observed a colleague who did not feel appreciated, what did you see? How did it impact their work? Their team? The organization?

Now consider your team.

By doing their job well, who on your team makes your life easier? What do they do (specifically) that you value?

Commit to telling them what you value, and why, in your next one-on-one conversation. If you discover what form of appreciation resonates most with them, and provide it, you'll make an even bigger impact.

Additionally, now is an ideal time to encourage members of your team to appreciate each other. You can create forums and rituals for this to happen, such as asking for “kudos” and “bright spots” at the beginning of meetings.



WHAT ELSE DO WE HAVE TO OFFER YOU THAT IS UNIQUELY U of I SYSTEM?

At this point, we hope you have some good ideas for how you can engage your team during this tough time. But you may be asking, what is there specifically that the system can do to help me. To that end, we offer the following suggestions:

[Staying Engaged and Energized While Remote Working](#) is a dynamic compilation of resources maintained by System HR that offers remote professional development opportunities as well as information to help navigate the challenges associated with the abrupt switch to remote working due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[System HR's COVID-19 Resources](#) is a comprehensive collection of important information spanning all three universities and the system offices.

Engage with our System community

[System Offices Wellness](#)

Illinois Human Resources [Coping with COVID-19 Toolkit](#)

UIC Wellness Center [Wellness Resources](#)

[Turning 'Uncertain' Into 'Extraordinary'](#)



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In closing, please know that we're here to help you and your team be successful in this time. Reach out as needed!

Jami Painter
Associate Vice President &
Chief Human Resources Officer
System Human Resource Services

U of I System Guide to People Management During COVID-19: Quick Reference

Taking Care of Yourself

First, check in with yourself.

Are you okay? What do you need right now? Your team needs you to stay calm and grounded. Self-care looks different for everyone.

Things for consideration:

Are you getting enough sleep?

Are you taking enough breaks throughout the day?

Are you moving your body?

Are you getting outside?

Is there anything you need from your manager to feel more supported?

Wellness

During these unprecedented times, your priorities around self-care, exercise, work, and family have likely shifted. Please realize the same is probably true for members of your team. Help them refocus on self-care or find support while caring for others by:

[Becoming familiar with the wellness resources available on campus. A list of resources can be found on the COVID-19 Resources page.](#)

Communicating with your team that working from home on a prolonged basis, especially under quarantine, can be a very isolating experience. Check in with your team members regularly to ensure they are doing ok, and when they are not, connect them to available [Employee Assistance Programs](#).

[Remind them \(and yourself\) to work in a way that is kind to their body. In other words, don't spend all day hunched over a stool at the kitchen counter, take regular breaks, and make sure to stretch!](#)

[Pointing them to helpful resources on the System Offices Wellness page.](#)

Taking Care of Your Team

As a leader, it is important to ask your direct reports how you can best support them.

Here are a few example questions to ask:

How are you doing/feeling right now?

What's one thing I could do to help you?

If you ask the above questions and don't receive a response, you may need to dig deeper:

[Offer a time to discuss, one-on-one, how the current situation is affecting them.](#)

Provide strategies for maintaining productivity.

Please note: Before providing solutions here, ask them if they would like you to help them think through this questions and what helps THEM stay productive.

[Remind your direct reports of why we are doing the work we do; highlight some of the work they are doing, and that the U of I System is doing, to make a difference for people during COVID-19.](#)

Discuss personal and professional barriers or challenges that may make it difficult to perform at their best.

Please note: Again, before providing solutions here, ask them if they would like you to help them think through this questions and make the suggestions about them, not you.



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Team Bonding

Use this time as an opportunity to build or rebuild relationships.

Here are some ideas you might consider, but start by asking your team what they might like:

As appropriate, allow the first few minutes of individual and team meetings for small talk, jokes, and catching up on each other's lives before jumping into business.

Please note: This is not a requirement; as the leader, create space for those to easily opt-out without drawing attention to them.

Create informal and optional opportunities to connect: schedule a weekly virtual happy hour, coffee break, or lunch; make clear that the purpose is to catch-up / visit / chat or something else, not to work.

Find a way to LAUGH with your team.

Celebrate successes, no matter how small: Working from home doesn't mean you should forgo opportunities to celebrate the completion of a deliverable or project, wish someone a Happy Birthday, or generally find ways to celebrate the positives together.

Consider hosting a recurring, ongoing Zoom meeting that people can dip in and out of, for example: a Zoom room that your team members can jump in and out of to create a "water cooler" spot for the team to have a break.

Allow space to conduct deeper check-in meetings with your team members so that you can hold space for their concerns and needs.



Your Role as a Leader

Set expectations early and clearly

Being clear with your team will keep them focused and working towards the same goals. Set clear expectations for:

- work hours
- availability
- communication system
- timely meetings
- key projects and deadlines
- scheduled meetings
- responding to email
- boundaries

Ask your direct reports

What concrete directions do you need to move forward on your current projects?

How are you feeling about your capacity and current workload?

What clarity do you need on your priorities for this week?

Be flexible

For many employees, this will be their first time working remotely. Their current home environments might not be conducive for remote work. As a result, during team meetings and one-on-ones there may be children playing or crying, and/or noises, dogs barking in the background, etc.

Have an agenda

When scheduling team meetings and individual check-ins, be sure to put together an agenda or add it to the meeting invite in the notes section. This helps to ensure preparation and clarity for everyone.

At the beginning of the meeting, quickly review the agenda and check to see if any pressing matters have come up that need to be addressed; adjust accordingly.

Create boundaries

Set work schedules and boundaries together to support your team members' work-life balance and avoid possible burnout. Show your team that you care, trust their work ethic, and remind them on a regular basis that remote doesn't mean that they need to be online or available 24/7.

Breaks

Encourage your direct reports to take breaks. When working from home, it can be difficult to create space to stop working. Model this behavior by taking breaks yourself.

U of I System Guide to People Management During COVID-19: Quick Reference

Be flexible and show empathy

Remember that people are not machines:

Many of us are feeling anxious and distracted. Many of us are scared and worried about our well-being or the well-being of our loved ones. Expect a decline in productivity and focus.

Gently remind people that a decline in productivity is normal during a time of crisis and encourage them to practice compassion with themselves and each other.

Discuss flexible work schedules

Discuss work schedules with each of your direct reports. Making room for this discussion shows them that you care for their time. Be mindful that their work schedule might be different than it normally is, and may change as needs require. Be especially mindful of people who are balancing work and providing care for others at the same time.

Managers of non-exempt/hourly employees should give them clear direction on when/when not to work, and remind and encourage them to take their regular breaks.

Contact System HR to discuss permanent schedule changes for employees in a collective bargaining agreement.

Support caretakers:

Especially during uncertain times, encourage you employees to take sick time, and/or leave time provided by the Families First Coronavirus Response Act when they need to care for themselves or their families due to COVID-19 illness.

Be present

Prepare for meetings by creating and reviewing materials, documents, and agendas ahead of time.

Don't multitask; give your direct reports the same level of respect and attention when remote that you would in a face-to-face meeting. It's difficult to create empathy and trust with your team if you are not fully present.

Actively solicit feedback

Actively make more space for feedback. It's important that you don't assume that your direct reports will feel comfortable sharing. Ask what more you could be doing to support them.

Examples include:

What could help you to meet your current commitments and responsibilities?

What roadblocks are you facing?

What remains unclear on expected outcomes, and how might you get there?

What help do you need prioritizing work and/or deliverables?

Actively give feedback:

Provide feedback often, in quick soundbytes, to help your team members course correct quickly. As much as possible, feedback should be delivered over Zoom, not over email, to ensure understanding and the opportunity for members of your team to ask for clarification as needed.

