

May 2020

NAVIGATING CONFLICT & JUDGEMENT DURING COVID-19

Many academic medical institutions are having to make difficult decisions in the wake of COVID-19. Who on a team needs to come into work and who can work remotely? How long can a team or clinic service operate on reduced hours or staff and limit the negative economic impacts? How long can employees on reduced services not come into work before potentially being furloughed? When governmental decisions allow institutions to begin phasing employees and students back to campus, how do we navigate individuals who do not feel safe coming back to campus yet? How do we support and acknowledge the contributions of essential employees who have been required to come into work during the entirety of the COVID-19 crisis when monetary or time-off merit awards are currently not feasible?

Communication, Feedback, & Empathy

How your institution communicates their decisions and implementation processes is very important at this time. Be clear, honest, as consistent as possible, acknowledge that processes may shift according to the university's accepted guidelines, and above all – be compassionate in your language and tone. Voice appreciation and support for community members in every communication. No one wants to be viewed as disposable, even if they know it's likely that they may be laid off or furloughed.

Be open about how phasing employees and students back to campus will not be a simple or easy process, but that the safety and health of everyone in our academic community is of the utmost importance. Recognize that mistakes are inevitable and correcting course – not assigning blame – is the way to deal with them when they occur. Encourage community members to be understanding, flexible, and compassionate with one another as each department and service finds the right pace to safely return everyone back to campus – which may be a moving target.

Reaffirm a culture of feedback. University and college-level decisions may have unforeseen or unintended impacts on its community members. Encourage and provide an outlet for employees and students to give feedback as soon as possible about any process or decision. Potentially, adjustments could quickly be made once college leadership is alerted. Employees and students should reach out to Human Resources or Student Services if they have any concerns regarding their ability to adhere to any college decision/protocol.

Examples of Leadership Communications

"These times are not normal, nor are they a short diversion, such that we can simply wait for the pandemic to end. This crisis requires that we do rather than merely wait. We must persist through the crisis, pursuing our mission in the face of these unwanted but unavoidable circumstances with courage, grit, and creativity. That will require all of us to do hard things, made all the harder because we cannot take joy and inspiration from friends, classmates, coworkers, and neighbors in the ways that we usually do."

- President Chris Eisgruber's letter
to the Princeton University community

"I understand that all of this rapid change creates anxiety and uncertainty. Especially when it means changing how we live. That's why today I am going to set out for you as clearly as possible, what you can expect as we continue to fight the virus together."

- Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand Prime Minister,
in an early national address

Health & Safety

Strongly encourage returning employees and students to adhere to the accepted guidelines that your institution is implementing. Clearly communicate the expectations of adherence and frame the expectation from a place of progress and communal care for one another instead of being “yet one more restriction” placed upon them - this will not last forever. We encourage member institutions to determine and take “reasonable precautions” and make “reasonable accommodations” for their community members.

Employees and students not adhering to the accepted guidelines in the workplace are putting the health of others at risk. A lack of adherence may be due to something small and fixable when addressed on an individual basis or it may be willful disregard. Determine how your institution will address these issues and any liability concerns in collaboration with your Human Resources office, Student Services, Risk Management, and college supervisors.

Conflict and Fear

When a crisis occurs, feelings of uncertainty and loss of control can almost instinctively lead to issues resulting from conflict and fear. Being fearful and anxious can cause people to behave in individualistic ways rather than community-driven ways. It's understandable and instinctual that when crisis happens, we want to ensure that ourselves and our loved ones are safe and protected. But beyond this, we must realize that supporting our community members is also tied to the realization of that interconnected, desired outcome.

This crisis has also amplified topics and realities that have long been taboo in our society to openly discuss; class divides, financial insecurity, hierarchy and power differentials, housing insecurity, death, etc. In light of this, many of us will need to get more comfortable with having “crucial conversations” – i.e. discussions between people where the stakes are high, opinions vary, and emotions run strong. Supervisors and managers may especially need to refresh their communication skills in this arena. Please refer to the [“Navigating Crucial Conversations”](#) document for more detailed information.

Encouraging Help-Seeking Behaviors

Employees and students are often unaware of the full range of support services available to them and may have limited contact with people who can help them find out. People may have limited internet or phone access at home, and it may be challenging to find a private space to make a phone call or to access and read information. People may also have had difficult experiences in the past when their requests for help were fruitless or the service offered was a poor fit for them or their family. Please refer to the [“Encouraging Help-Seeking Behavior”](#) document for more detailed information.

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