

Workforce Relationships in the COVID-19 Era

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In healthcare we focus a lot on building and sustaining a culture of psychological safety where criticism is welcomed and not penalized. This is because we want to create an environment where employees feel safe to identify organizational failures, or opportunity for failures.¹ There is a lesson here for responding to personal criticism when we, or the organization our leadership role supports, is the target of self-protective behaviors from the workforce returning from furlough or layoff.

Many will consciously or unconsciously experience broken trust with government and their employer. The social contract with their employer has been strained, and for some even broken. Living under constant pressure from risk of infection, loss of colleagues or loved ones; stressed by the manner in which others are not coping well at all; beleaguered by financial loss, health insurance suspended, mortgages going unpaid; isolated at home with stretched family dynamics, and listening to bleak news every evening on the television challenge the assumption that our employer and our government will take care of us. We bring all this stress with us back into the workplace.

We return with new expectations of our employer, with an instinct for self-protection, and with lots of unresolved attitudes about so many real and perceived failures of ourselves, others, and the systems that were supposed to protect us. Happy just to be back working, which will not be true for many who anticipated a quick recovery and life as normal to follow, it will take as much as six to eight months for acting out to surface. It will begin with a pointing fingers and open criticism. Failure, preventable or not, or the result of unintended consequences involving many factors, or even the result of well thought out and planned strategies is still failure and loss.

Loss needs to be grieved, people need to tell their stories in order to process their experience and put it into perspective, and open discussion about failures in a manner that encourages optimism and hope about the future need to take place in an environment of psychological safety.² This is a necessary first step in reengineering and reestablishing the social contract between employee and employer. Value, trust, and respect will follow. Leaders must constantly display these behaviors while providing a safety net for those struggling with adaptation to a new reality in life and work. This starts with not taking criticism personally, ever.

Understanding the culture of the community we serve and the organization we work for will help us align these efforts to develop a psychologically safe workplace. A workplace where it is safe to talk about real and perceived failures of people, employers, and even the agencies we believe failed us during this time. We have all experienced this trauma in one way or another. We all need recovery. We all will be critical of someone and some things at one point or another.

Let's choose together to build value, trust, and respect toward one another as we work through reentry and the reemergence of our industry. Corrie Ten Boom, who was sent to a concentration camp in WWII for opening her doors to those who were in hiding for fear of execution, said this of fear and worry, "Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrows. It only empties today of its strength." Let's be strong together in the days ahead.

Last month's article: *Mental Health Comes Out of the Shadows*. You can reach Dr. Jernigan at j.jernigan@stantonchase.com

¹ Redefining Criticism, Donnellan; *Healthcare Executive*, ACHE; May/June 2020

² Leading a Culture of Safety: A Blueprint for Success; ACHE, IHI/NPSF Lucian Leape Institute, 2017