

6 ways to help your team handle stress in times of disruption

Here are things you can do to help your team process the changes swirling around them and chart a productive course forward — despite the upheaval in their life and work.



1. Manage your own stress first.

As they say on an airplane: Put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others. You can't help your team cope with the changes and challenges they're facing if you're a tightly wound ball of anxiety. Worse, you could spread your stress around.

To help you cope with your own life situation, start each day by asking *How am I feeling?* and *What do I need?* Depending on the answers, you might decide to:

- **Engage in self-care:** Stay healthy by getting good nutrition, hydration, and sleep. Limit checking the news to avoid getting sucked in or overwhelmed by what's happening in the world. And be sure to take the head-clearing, tension-reducing breaks you need throughout the day — like taking a walk outside or trying a [breathing technique](#).
- **List all of your worries and separate out those you can't control:** Determine what you need to accept for the time being (e.g., your team's live event was just cancelled) versus what you can take action to improve (e.g., explore options for holding the event remotely).
- **Adjust your work schedule to fit new obligations:** For example, if you've suddenly become a part-time teacher or caregiver, set clear expectations with your manager and team about your new routine and availability.
- **Reflect on how you're mentally adjusting to the change:** Rather than focusing on what you stand to lose, assess the situation in a balanced way to better adapt to the change and help others do the same. For more, fill out [our reflection guide on adapting to change](#).

2. Give ongoing, detailed updates about how your company is responding to the change.

When your direct reports are carrying a larger mental burden than usual — worried about a child home from school, the health of elderly relatives, or their family finances — it's only natural for them to add their jobs to the list: *Is my job safe? Will my work change? Will the company survive this disruption?*

If you aren't already getting regular information from your CEO or manager about your organization's finances, strategy, and adjustments in light of current changes, ask for it. Even if your team isn't typically very interested in these details, they'll be looking for reassuring signs of company health now.

Pass along as much performance data as you can (e.g., *"Our March revenue was down 30 percent, which is tough but understandable, given the circumstances. But there are some bright spots — the sales team signed a big two-year contract last week"*). And if you're able, share any news that points to potential job security, with the caveat that things are in flux (e.g., *"The executive team shared that layoffs are not part of the plan, but that could change because they are still revising the company's financial outlook"* or *"Our team is considered essential personnel, but things will remain fluid for some time"*).

But what if your company is struggling? You need to confront that brutal fact with your team. You're not doing people a favor by keeping them in the dark. You might say, *"I'll be honest — the company is struggling. I know the finance team is working hard to revise the outlook. At this point, all options have to be on the table, including layoffs, which would be a last resort. I know this is hard to hear. How can we work together to weather this uncertainty?"* You may not be able to reduce stress for your team, but you can be an authentic, transparent leader.

For more, see [How to communicate change to your team](#).

3. Take time in team meetings to acknowledge the disruption and ask how everyone is doing.

Maybe you find it easy to adjust to new realities. Or, maybe you're so concerned about your team getting their work done that you want to be "all business." But if you carry on like nothing major is happening in the world, you'll look like the person restocking the bar on the *Titanic* — oblivious to the chaos around them.

People need a chance to express their feelings — the whole spectrum of grief, loss, anger, hope, and excitement. According to FranklinCovey change-management experts Curt Garbett and Curtis Bateman, the goal is to acknowledge and empathize with their

experiences, not tell them how to feel. “Start a dialogue and get people talking,” says Garbett.

This could mean scheduling a meeting specifically for the team to connect or simply starting your regular team meetings by asking how people are doing. Garbett and Bateman suggest using unemotional language (e.g., “*How big a change is this for you — small, medium, large, supersized? Why?*”). By talking as a group, your direct reports can hear what everyone else is going through, which may help them be more understanding of an extra-stressed or affected teammate.

Finally, don’t forget to ask about the good things in people’s lives, whether they’re work-related (e.g., we got the new safety system installed) or not, such as a birthday, a child learning to ride a bike, or even meeting a personal goal like mastering a new recipe. When times are tough, it’s important to recognize small positives and ways the world may be changing for the better.

Caveat: While you want to provide ample opportunity for people to process how they’re feeling, there may be times when they don’t feel up to it or they would rather share privately. Don’t force the issue — and ask your direct reports whether the check-ins are helpful. If your team doesn’t think they’re necessary, reduce the number of meetings so people don’t feel bombarded during a busy time.

4. Help your team narrow their work focus to a few key priorities.

Generally, people can’t work at their full capacity while also making a big shift. To protect your team from overwhelm — and help them focus on what’s truly important — revisit their priorities.

As you consider where to direct your team’s energy, first ask yourself (and then ask your team):

- *What new goals have emerged?*
- *What goals do we still need to deliver on?*
- *What can we let go of to make more time and space?*

Some new priorities will be obvious (e.g., solving our supply-chain problem so we can keep filling orders or shifting our events from live to online). Others may not be. You might begin to get clarity by asking your team to consider potential opportunities: “*What might this shift allow our team to do that we couldn’t do before?*”

You could also engage your team in a “keep it, kill it, or change it” activity, which Garbett and Bateman recommend as a good way to help a group refocus: Make a list of all the things you and your team do regularly — including meetings — then go through the list together and decide whether to keep, cancel, or change each item in order to help your team hone in on

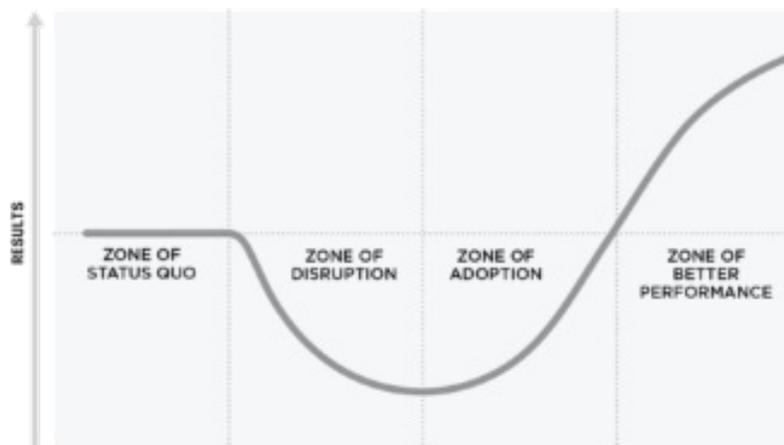
what's important right now.

Once you zero in on the critical work to be done, set clear expectations for results — understanding that people might need flexibility or accommodation on the hours they're able to put in. Emphasize that as circumstances continue to change, priorities might, too. It may help to explore “what would happen if ...” scenarios with your team and make proactive plans to address likely possibilities. By calmly considering the options early, you could save your team some pain and panic later on.

For more, see 8 ways to better manage ambiguity and uncertainty.

5. In 1-on-1s, follow up on how people feel — and try to offer a hopeful vision for the future.

People's reactions to upheaval can vary wildly. One direct report may express “the sky is falling!” fear, while another may feel energized and ready to take on a challenge. To make matters even more complicated, individuals will face highs and lows on their journeys to process what's happening — someone who struggles one day may take things in stride the next, while even the steadiest on your team will have times when they feel the weight of anxiety.



Use regular 1-on-1s to check in on their mindset and, as Bateman puts it, “gradually help people pull their heads above water and see the horizon ahead.” Ask each person how they're doing. You might try using a visual tool, such as the Change Model (right), and asking them to plot where they are today on the curve. You could also ask them to fill out our reflection guide on adapting to change.

Practice being a good listener to show that you understand and care. If the person is struggling to find hope in the situation, consider asking a few questions to get them thinking about potential opportunities, such as ideas they have to stay productive despite the disruption or new work they might be interested in trying.

After they've shared, you'll also want to offer your perspective on the situation — being honest about how you feel and the challenges ahead, but also describing the good things that may arise from this uncertainty, such as a chance to focus on your organization's core mission or improve strategy. For example: *"It has been really hard to shift our processes so quickly. There's still lots of hard work ahead, but I have confidence in our team. And, personally, I've found it exciting to deliver for our customers when they really need us. We have an opportunity to build loyalty that will serve us well in the future."*

6. Be flexible to accommodate people's needs — and celebrate victories, even if they're small.

Your job leading others through major change is a bit like walking a balance beam — you need to stay flexible but focused, reacting to individual needs as they arise and keeping the team steady enough to stay the course.

If a direct report needs to take a day or two off for a mental health break or to recalibrate their lives, give them that time if possible. Get creative if you need to, asking the team to pitch in if critical work needs to get done. And if work can wait? Let it wait. Don't be the boss who harps "Where's that TPS report?" when your direct report is suddenly dealing with three children at home all day on top of their full-time job.

And if a team member needs more help, such as visits with a mental health provider or leave to care for a family member, ask HR what resources your organization can provide. For more, see [How to respond when a direct report has anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues](#).

Finally, don't forget to recognize and celebrate with your team when something goes well, whether that's completing a tough task, landing a sale — or simply making it to the end of the week.

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