

SURVIVAL TO SUSTAINABILITY

A Guide for Leaders of Remote Teams



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A Must for the Marketplace

COVID-19 has done more than just fill hospitals with patients and the world with fear; it has forced workers accustomed to commuting to accept a new normal. Working from home, remote work, or virtual teams—call it what you will, but today's workplace dynamics present challenges to business leaders across the spectrum.

Short-term adaptations for survival have morphed into permanent business models. Leaders have discovered efficiencies and savings in unexpected avenues. Digital communication and project management platforms like Zoom and Monday.com have replaced traditional meeting rooms and conference tables. Even conversations historically held over the phone now come with an unspoken expectation to have a video component.

Though many employees have adapted, the new normal poses a threat to the benefits of office centricity: cultivating relationships, promoting unity and alignment, and making timely decisions. Losing these in-person dynamics could prove fatal. Whether out of necessity due to lingering health concerns and regulations or elected due to optimized workflow and employee preference, **leaders with dispersed teams must adapt their traditional strategies to protect company health and effectiveness.**

A leader's outlook matters. Instead of perceiving these shifts as burdensome, leaders must welcome them as unique ministry opportunities and lead their remote workforce effectively by looking to proven practices, innovative solutions, and experienced leaders.



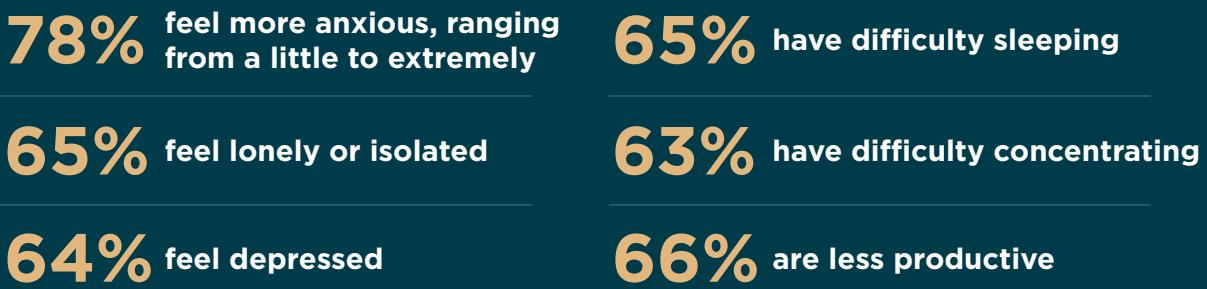
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Feeling the Pressure from All Sides

Working from home may make employees more productive in the short term, but uncertainty and an unpredictable future will eventually dismantle our companies. COVID-19 is not the sole stresser of 2020. Government regulations change daily; the political landscape is hostile; social unrest fills the streets with protesters and rioters; and social media fuels the fire of fear. With little time for training in working remotely, employees operate out of a stress response.

COVID-19 Remote Employees	VS.	Traditional Virtual Workers
Forced to work remotely either by government orders or company decisions		Opted to work remotely by choice
Working from home in a makeshift workspace		Working in an established offsite work location
Facing disruptions and distractions from family members, roommates, or pets		Accustomed to remote work routines
Fearful of job instability and financial impacts		Higher confidence that work will continue as usual

The University of North Carolina School of Medicine and Harvard Medical School have been studying the impact of distancing mandates on American workers. In a survey of the emotional and psychological well-being of 1,500 adults, 90% reported experiencing emotional distress. Several areas registered in the moderate or greater extent by more than half of the population: Concerns about groceries, medications, the health and safety of loved ones, the breakdown of society, frustrations by limited recreation, and sensing an uncertain future led to long-term drain of energy and emotion. Additionally, alcoholism, drug use, and suicide have increased.



Fight for Health

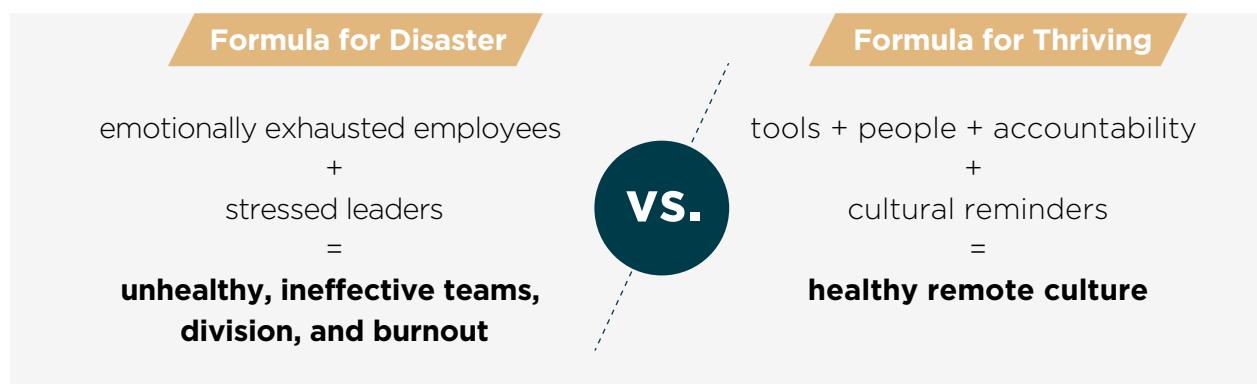
God designed our minds to react to stress by releasing two hormones: cortisol and adrenaline. Adrenaline wears off quickly, but cortisol lingers for up to 42 hours. Elevated cortisol levels affect our ability to think, process, sleep, and make decisions.

Prolonged stress can also produce fear, which can lead to a host of unhealthy responses: scattered thinking, heightened addiction, substance abuse, etc.

These emotional effects are not limited to downline employees. Leaders operate out of the same fear response, bearing the weight of resolving staffing, financial, and operational issues. Caring about the people we lead takes an unavoidable and visible emotional toll. When employees see their leaders—political, church, or business—in an ongoing state of panic, they may imitate us.

| Our natural response to fear is freeze, flight, or fight.

Freeze and fight responses might spell disaster for our companies, but running hard after a solution can become a formula for thriving.



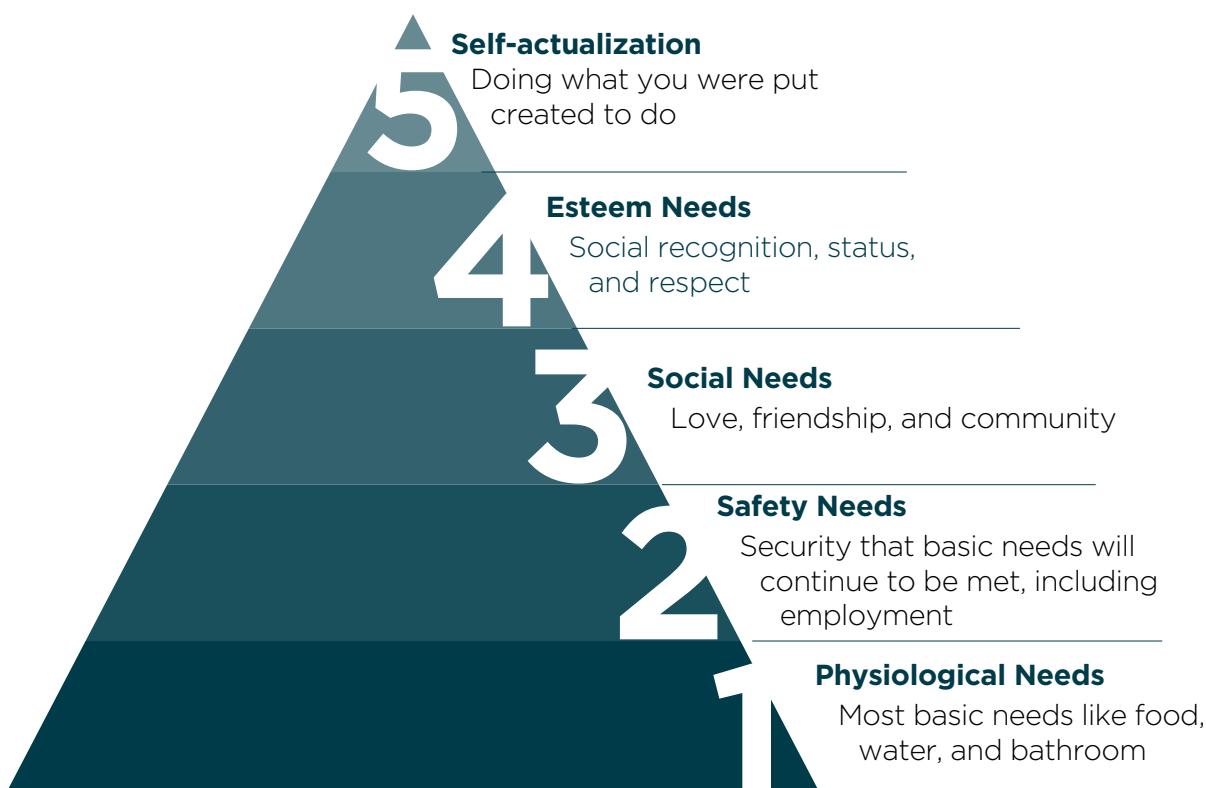
Calling out these realities shouldn't incite fear or evoke discouragement, rather it exposes the risk of neglect and enables leaders to step into their responsibility.



Where Psychology and Scripture Converge

In 1943, the US psychologist Abraham Maslow published a paper called “A Theory of Human Motivation.” Maslow defined what has become the most referenced list of human needs, now referred to as the Hierarchy of Human Needs.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Human Needs



Written as pure psychology, Maslow’s research is bedrock in management theory. It can be boiled down to this: personal fulfillment impacts business success. Workers want their employers to fulfill a holistic need; this generation desires love, a sense of belonging, and an environment where they can grow. They may not express it this way, but they have an intrinsic desire to be all God created them to be.

By contrast, in 1909, Frederick Taylor published a theory of management in his article “The Principles of Scientific Management.” Taylor analyzed workflow to improve efficiency. Now obsolete, Taylor’s theory suggested that managers do the thinking and workers do the working. Sadly, this short-sighted approach stifles potential and ignores human needs such as Maslow observed, yet it drives much of modern management.

Managers may celebrate how “efficient” their employees work when they are stripped of the distraction of being in the same office together, but a consequence of working from home is the disintegration of the team as it is deprived of organic interaction. Leaders who focus primarily on efficiency will lead their teams down a dangerous path. Maslow’s observations help us understand the holistic nature of a person—psychological, emotional, spiritual, and physical. **People need a sense of belonging to something bigger, and a remote workforce magnifies the need for leaders to create unity.**



With large organizations now known for their thriving workplace cultures like Elevation Church, Movement Mortgage, and Ronald Blue Trust, C12 Advocate **Chris Allen** has spent his career helping leaders build cultures where people can grow into who God created them to be. Observing the psychological impact that the workplace shift has had, Chris calls business leaders to be shepherds.

As Christian leaders, we value people because they are made in the image of God. Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God and the second is to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39). God’s anger burns against leaders who do not shepherd their flocks (Zech. 10). Because sheep are timid, easily frightened animals, He aches for those without a shepherd (Num. 27) and shows compassion on all who have been abandoned by their protectors (Matt. 9). The Lord Himself is the Great Shepherd to the lost sheep. We should be like Him as we lead, lovingly driving away our teams’ insecurities and fears that wreak havoc on their psychological safety.

What are we doing to show our employees we love and care about them—that we want to help them during this hard time? How are we serving them as shepherds and loving them as our neighbors—even when we can not see them face to face?

People can read non-verbals, even on a Zoom call. When we model stable behavior, rational decision-making, compassionate action, and provide them with a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves, we can reduce their stress and meet their elevated needs. Our leadership will remind them that God is in control, bring them assurance, and help them grow into who God created them to be.



Perspective Point

Empathy assumes you understand someone. Ask the following questions to get a fuller picture of the circumstances and potential anxieties of your employees:

- Who are they home with?
- How are they being impacted?
- What are their fears or challenges?
- How can you help?



4 A New Way to Manage People and Projects

"How do I manage my team when I can't see that they are working?"

"How do I know what they are doing?"

"I can't afford for this to fail."

Do these sentiments sound familiar? These common perceptions of newly remote leaders like you may expose an unhealthy lack of trust in your newly remote team. Technology has long been a blessing and a curse. Cell phones and instant messenger platforms make us accessible even when we are away from the workplace—a blessing when we need to respond to urgent matters. The technology becomes a curse when our employees, desperate for affirmation, struggle to separate work life and home life. In an effort to prove their value, they diminish their productivity by not taking breaks.

Break the Cycle!

Leaders who do not project trust and employees who cannot escape insecurity perpetuate an unhealthy cycle. Good employees want to deliver value, but many come with baggage from former employers.



Breaking the cycle of mistrust starts with creating a different culture. It begins with assuming the best of our people and teaching them to think for themselves in team-oriented ways. Less visibility does not call for less trust; it calls for different techniques catered to the unique roles of the individual. Long before working remotely was thrust upon us in 2020, remote teams developed efficient best practices.

Know Your Flock

Employees often feel the pressure to appear as though they have it all together. When they clock in for work, they may try to clock out from their personal lives. But we all know that we carry our full selves into our workday. It is naive to pretend we do not and unfair to expect that from employees.

Proverbs 27:23 says, “Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds.” As leaders, **we need to know who our employees are, what they’re facing, and how they’re doing**—a challenging task made more difficult when people fear disappointing their boss. When leading remote teams, the lack of in-person contact increases the burden.

Effective leaders of remote teams embrace feedback, ensure safety in being honest, listen to employee concerns, and then respond accordingly. Employee surveys by Best Christian Workplaces Institute or Office Vibe allow you to measure NPS, culture, and feelings.



C12 Member **Robert Ming** started working remotely 20 years ago before it was a dominant practice. Now as managing partner of [Quadrant Law Group LLP](#), a fully remote law firm, he has focused on building a healthy culture where everyone thrives.

For years, personality assessments have equipped teams to better understand ourselves and each other. Ming has had great success with them and suggests leveraging psychological profiles, like Birkman Signature or Psychological Capital Questionnaire. The intent of assessments in the workplace is not to put people “in a box” and naively think there’s some scientific formula to figure out how to work with them. The goal is good: to provide reference points to help us serve people according to their individual needs. Assessments help us discern how individuals can work best from home in areas like motivation, accountability, resilience, efficacy, and the need for interaction.

Think in terms of the most obvious personality distinction: introverts and extroverts. Carl Jung, who first coined these terms, would likely place people somewhere on a spectrum, but we tend to identify as one or the other.

Extroverts are like social butterflies. Energized by social interaction, remote extroverts crave connection with their peers outside of formal Zoom meetings and messenger platforms. Extroverts without people become unmotivated. Virtual break rooms, social hours, and games are popular and effective opportunities for them to refuel.

Introverts are like hermit crabs. Task-oriented and self-motivated without guidance, remote introverts are drained by social interaction. Introverts forced to interact withdraw in silence. While they maintain motivation, they need quiet affirmation and gentle prioritization.

The Enneagram, StrengthsFinder, and Myers-Briggs are additional assessments that can help leaders identify personality traits of team members. We know that “drivers” and “achievers” will work from home all day without rest. Internally motivated people risk becoming workaholics, while externally motivated people risk becoming unproductive.

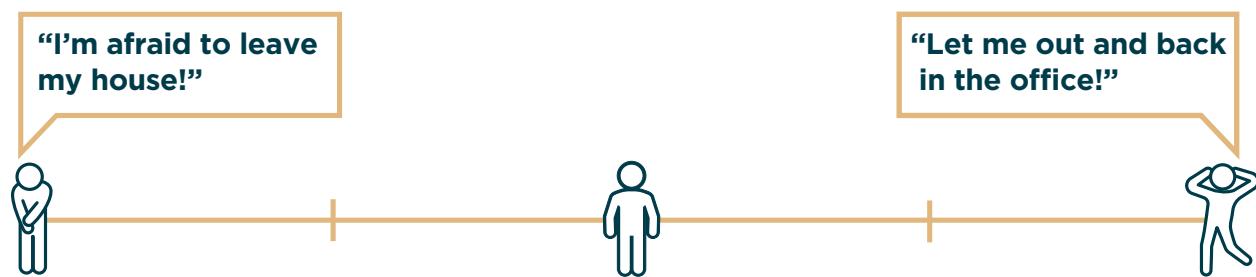
Forms of Accountability

According to Ming’s observations, different roles and personality types will need one of the following forms of accountability:

- A “jockey” who hovers, drives hard, and controls movement
- A “turnstile” who provides clear guidelines and incremental tasks that can be measured, rather than just an end goal
- A “fishbowl” with work visibility through regular communication and quality assurance
- A “stopwatch” with detailed time tracking and descriptions of completed work
- “Blinking lights” to indicate status availability, alarms, automatic escalation, and performance metrics

We must also acknowledge the different levels of stress among our team and understand where each person falls on the wide spectrum of a COVID-19-related state of mind.

Forced Remote Workers' State of Mind



Depending on an individual’s life experiences, some will weather this more easily than others. Do our managers know their team members and their current circumstances well enough to serve them accordingly?

The pandemic has stripped some of their network, community, or church. Income levels contribute to the impact: Some have a dedicated at-home work space and can afford childcare; others may be working at the kitchen table with continuous distractions.

Research shows the greatest impact falls on women aged 28-45 who are managing school-age children, assisting in remote learning, and maintaining the household. With stress levels increasing more than any other population group, experts predict that many will opt out of the workforce even when COVID-19 levels out.

Effective leaders understand what makes different types of people happy, healthy, and effective—and knowing their tendencies equips the leader to build effective setups. Whether it is in the office, fully remote, or a hybrid of the two, empower employees with the autonomy to choose how they work best.



5

Working from Home, Not Living at Work

Burnout, exhaustion of physical or emotional strength or motivation, is a cumulative effect of chronic work stress. Where are our employees on the burnout scale?¹ With several months of forced remote employment under our belts and no end in sight, many employees may be experiencing high levels of burnout. COVID-19 restrictions have blurred the traditional transitions between home and work. Working from home can dangerously feel like living at work. Since we cannot just send everyone on vacation, healthy boundaries—for ourselves and others—is essential to prevent burnout.



“I feel great!”



“I’m stressed.”



“I’m burned out.”

Recalibration for Those at Home

Redefine priorities.

In his talk at the 2019 Global Leadership Summit, Craig Groeschel introduced the “GETMO” principle: sometimes it is “good enough to move on.” Our employees can’t do everything. Work at home calls them to play several full-time roles simultaneously: spouse, parent, teacher, leader, worker, etc. Juggling these roles requires an adjustment of expectations. They might have to cut back on some tasks to make time for the people God has placed in their lives. When they feel inclined to work harder, they may need to discern when it is more appropriate to clock out.

Replicate a commute.

No one misses traffic, but for many at-home workers, they miss the buffer a commute used to afford them. A commute provides solitude before and after work to listen to podcasts, music, or audiobooks, to pray or make phone calls, to rest, or just to enjoy silence. Encourage your employees to replicate this transition by setting aside time before and after clocking in to create healthy mental white space, especially before coming into the presence of family or others in a household.

¹ See the C12 blog post “The Epidemic of a Hustle Culture” to learn more about the causes, dangers, and remedies for burnout in business.

A virtual commute could look something like this:

- ⌚ A quiet time in the first hour of the day reading Scripture, praying, and meditating (ideally with no technology unless using Bible and journaling applications)²
- ⌚ A morning walk to listen to a podcast, audiobook, or worship music
- ⌚ A midday workout or activity that allows body movement, blood flow, and a break for the brain and eyes
- ⌚ An end-of-day walk or run to decompress, slow the wheel of business thoughts, and refocus on the priorities of home life

Build physical transitions.

A dedicated work space has surprising power over our mental posture, allowing for a mental transition from home to work. Even a closed door allows an employee to be “at work” with the privacy needed for virtual meetings, phone calls, and confidential information. Walking through that same door at the end of the workday allows an employee to shift priorities to the forefront.

Book “balance time.”

In an office setting, off-site lunches afford a temporary respite from work. Encourage scheduling “balance time”—time when an employee clocks out midday to cultivate balance. In the fast-food industry, workers are given three breaks in an eight-hour shift: two 15- and one 30-minute respite. At-home workers need a similar rhythm away from the computer. A short break in mid-morning, a slightly longer lunchtime, and then a mid-afternoon pick-me-up can effectively punctuate the workday and may enhance productivity. The three breaks can be physical, social, and spiritual.



Physical

walk the dog, jump on an indoor fitness machine, run up and down the stairs



Social

grab coffee with a colleague at a virtual shop, eat lunch with your partner and kids, or catch up with a friend or family member over the phone



Spiritual

Pray, meditate, read, listen to uplifting music, look at something you find beautiful, or anything else that reconnects you to God, His will, and His love

Have your team put balance time on their calendars and keep the commitment just as they would any other meeting.

² Visit www.TheMostImportantHour.com to access C12's resources for an effective daily quiet time.

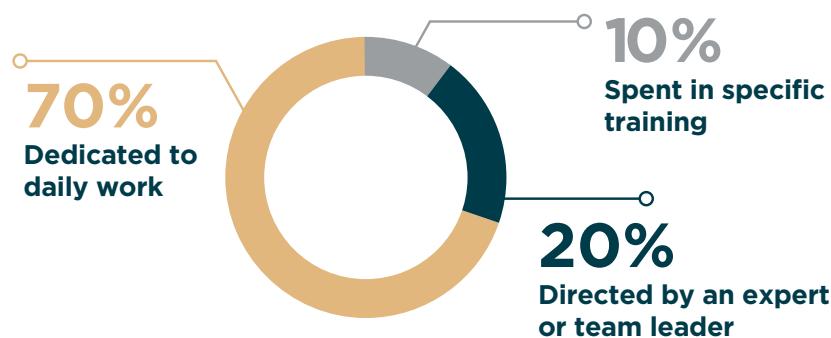
Switch back to audio.

Research shows Zoom calls to be more taxing than telephone calls because workers feel trapped by a screen. Consider making first introductions using video formats, so people can make connections and learn nonverbal cues. Use a conference call format for subsequent communication as they allow us to walk and talk—which studies have linked to innovative ideas and insight.

Set clear expectations.

As a leader, set clear expectations and look for indications of burnout or inefficiency. Proactive strategies include:

- Give feedback regularly and have intentional interactions with touchpoints
- Review timestamps on emails to see when the team is working. If late at night, ask questions and set expectations, so they aren't striving to earn approval.
- Articulate the future concerning working remotely and how often employees should be in the office.
- Balance professional development using a 70/20/10 model:



Scripture reminds us that God cares about us in times of struggle: “Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him” (Isaiah 30:18). Show your employees you care about their mental health and communicate future plans for working remotely. This will result in team members with a vested interest.

Likewise, as leaders, we must care for ourselves. We need competent teams that can keep the company functioning even if we were to be sidelined. How much better if our self-care allows us to step up in unprecedented times and lead well the companies God has entrusted us with. To that end, replenish your resources with spiritual reflection, music, art, and sleep. Just as your employees need sustenance and recharging, so do you.



Reflect on your routine during the work-from-home transition:

When you are worn out, what replenishes you?

To what extent have you maintained healthy habits of recharging?

What adjustments do you need to make to restore healthy habits?

6

Keeping Culture: How to Stay Connected as a Team

Employee engagement is an HR concept associated with performance. Organizations with high engagement routinely outperform those with lower engagement. Effective employee engagement invites people to engage with company culture—they connect to a company's overall mission and how their individual beliefs and gifts can contribute.

Culture is the result of hundreds of thousands of interactions between a group of people created by both structure and spontaneity. In a more disconnected, distracted, and somewhat frustrated era, leaders must ask, “How are we connecting our people to the team and the company culture to advance our purpose?”

3 Ps for Remote Connection:

P Personal

Verbal and non-verbal behaviours are vital to successful collaboration among participants at a meeting. Though many of the nuances of body language and tone are lost in virtual meetings, body language in front of webcams is louder than we think. Others quickly detect distracted participants, so leaders must model an active presence and engagement.

In her 2020 Global Leadership Summit talk, Vanessa Van Edwards, a behavioral investigator specializing in science-based people skills, recommended the first principle to effective video communication is to show your hands. People are judged by their warmth and competence, and research reveals that we look at others' hands as the first indicator of trust. When we join a virtual meeting, we build trust simply by waving at participants.

Before diving into business agendas, make personal connections. Ask the group to share how they are doing in the at-home work environment, what they have learned, anxieties they feel, or positive outcomes from the restrictions. Model vulnerability by sharing about yourself first. Then ask, “As a leader, how can I better support you?”

P Peer-to-Peer

Leaders should set expectations with managers about how they should be connecting

with employees. Engagement and culture building is not a top-down responsibility exclusively; encourage colleagues and peers to support one another too.

Take inventory to learn how team members want to stay connected and encourage one another. Here are some ideas to inspire peer-to-peer encouragement:

- Allocate intentional time during meetings — e.g., distribute a spreadsheet in advance for team members to report how they are doing in different areas of life, review as a team, and speak truth into concerning trends.
- Celebrate “wins” in staff or team meetings each week — e.g., ask team members for something positive they experienced in the last week and to share with the group.
- Write encouraging words — e.g., invite team members to write and mail uplifting cards to one another.

P **Proactive**

In virtual settings, we lose the opportunities for unplanned relationship building. We have lost the conversations around the water cooler. Now interactions tend to occur only around scheduled meetings, so connections require intentionality. In the same way we would appoint someone to lead a caring initiative, we can appoint a person or team to lead virtual team building. Allot times when the meeting’s purpose centers around company culture, not a business-driven agenda. For all occasions when teams would typically gather in person, find ways to gather virtually. Many companies have seen success with virtual retirement parties and coffee catch-ups.

Some Things Never Change

Research reveals that adding on to existing structures works better for behavior change than adopting something new. To apply the three P principles, adapt existing practices that are already critical to your culture: appreciation, encouragement, and communication. This will prevent people from operating in isolation.



Express Appreciation

Some leaders assume they should express appreciation primarily to make employees feel good. But affirmation does so much more. In companies where affirmation reigns, tardiness, absenteeism, staff turnover, conflict, on-site accidents, and employee theft all decrease. Productivity, profitability, and engagement increase. Lack of appreciation is one of the key reasons people leave a job. Appreciation is the oil that helps a business run more smoothly. Authentic appreciation is expressed person to person between colleagues who have personal relationships.



Many confuse appreciation with recognition. Recognition is performance based and can make a person feel like an object used for an outcome. It can create resentment and a competitive environment when only certain performers are repeatedly recognized and other hard workers are passed over. Appreciation is gratitude—an expression of love—for a person.



In Dr. Gary Chapman's book *The 5 Love Languages*, he describes five ways people can express love: words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time, and physical touch. Taking the principles to the workplace, Chapman co-authored *5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace* with **Dr. Paul White**, president of Appreciation at Work and a psychologist and leadership trainer who assists with improving workplace relationships.

Dr. Chapman and White researched how remote employees differ from onsite employees in how they like to be shown appreciation and encouragement. For example, one of the five love languages is quality time. How do we express care through quality time when we work apart? With the dramatic increase in remote teams, Dr. White conducted a study mid-COVID-19 to better understand the

experiences, perceptions, reactions, and coping mechanisms of pandemic-forced remote workers, and how leaders can best show them appreciation.

Workers who had lower anxiety levels and higher positive feelings shared six traits: a) get adequate sleep, b) eat healthy, c) limit news watching, d) take breaks from work, e) engage in rejuvenating activities, and f) connect with colleagues. His study showed that people like to connect remotely, especially on a personal level, not just in meetings. Leaders can elevate employee experiences by applying this intelligence and actively reaching out to connect with team members.

Appreciation must be communicated in a way that is meaningful to them. It must be:

1. Regular
2. Personal
3. In their love language
4. Viewed as authentic

Dr. White launched an online assessment, the Motivating by Appreciation Inventory, that identifies how team members prefer to be shown appreciation and provides ideas for nurturing long-distance relationships.



Employees can learn and share their languages of appreciation at appreciationatwork.com/work-personality-test

5 Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace

1. **Words of affirmation** - compliment a specific task done well
2. **Acts of service** - offer to help push a demanding project across the finish line
3. **Receiving gifts** - give a gift card to a favorite restaurant or coffee shop
4. **Quality time** - “check-in” to ask how a colleague is doing
5. **Physical touch** - celebrate success with a high five or fist bump

Not everyone feels appreciated and encouraged in the same ways. More than half of survey respondents reported they prefer specific actions as the primary way to receive appreciation.

46% of respondents chose words of affirmation as the primary way they want to be shown appreciation in the workplace

40% of respondents say they do not want to be recognized in front of a large group.

Be Visible and Vocal

As Dr. Brené Brown pointed out in *Rising Strong: How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*, “In the absence of data, we will always make up stories.” In an out-of-office environment, people will write their own narratives if we, as the leaders, are not proactively clarifying vision, direction, priorities, expectations, company health, and individual performance.

Depending on the nature of information, regular communication through texts, emails, phone calls, social platforms, and video conferencing will provide employees with the information they need to focus on what is working and what is critical. This may look like Monday team meetings to set priorities and align for the week and Friday follow-ups to share updates and celebrate progress.

We improve what we measure. Creating metrics clarifies expectations, improves performance, and offers a common language to evaluate goals.

In Application

Clarity Over Comfort



C12 Member **Erik Reagan** is the CEO of Focus Lab, a brand agency based in Savannah, GA. His team has spanned nine states with a hybrid model of in-office and remote employees since the company's inception. Since transitioning successfully to a fully remote workforce during COVID-19, Focus Lab has made remote their permanent model. When the pandemic separated his team,

Erik committed to the mantra “clarity over comfort.” He wanted to address the key questions people were wondering and the biggest fears that were causing anxiety.

Erik learned fears consuming his employees revolved mainly around job security, financial measures, and performance. Employees were concerned about how to maintain their level of productivity and quality. This was especially true for those who did not have a work space in their home or who were parents suddenly balancing work with their child’s virtual learning.

The company promised to reduce spending and the owners’ salaries before making any pay cuts. They loosened up expectations of each other, adjusted work hours, and frequently applied grace. They optimized their calendars by creating a color-coded system of red, yellow, and green to indicate availability. They agreed to assume the best of each other and celebrated each other’s embodiment of company core values.

In reflecting on this unique season in his career, Erik said he has “never felt so appreciated as a leader.”

Every organization is unique and should structure its teams however best suits its needs, services, products, and people. As leaders, however, we share the responsibility and opportunity to create workplaces where people can thrive.

We should ask ourselves:

- Who are we helping our people become through the context of our businesses?
- Are we helping them reduce their stress?
- Are we relating to their humanity?
- How are we contributing to their overall well-being?
- Are we helping them be better spouses, parents, and people?
- How are we helping them utilize their gifts in this remote environment?

We should ask our people:

- What have we learned by working remotely?
- What has worked well?
- What do we love about working remotely that we can leverage in the future?
- What new solutions have we found?
- What limitations do we have?
- What work cannot be done remotely?

We need to ask these questions regularly, not just during a crisis or pandemic. We can help our people become who God intended them to be while still seeing results in our organization. When we truly get to know our people, they will feel valued and see that we care for them. What we do matters. Scripture says our work will be evaluated by fire. If the work survives, we'll receive a reward in eternity (1 Cor. 3:13-15). How we care for people matters more than how much money we generate. Whether our teams have the privilege to work under one roof or many, intentional leaders can defy the constraints and glorify God by how we create even virtual unity.

Hear more from the panel of experts of this guide in our webinar [Leading Your Dispersed Team Survival to Sustainability](#)



For nearly three decades, our singular focus has been to create a framework that **compels** and **equips** Christian business leaders to achieve excellence through the power of peers. Thousands of faith-driven, results-minded CEOs and executives meet in forums monthly to encourage and challenge one another. Together, they make better decisions, avoid costly mistakes, and create solid plans for business growth, all while striving to create eternal impact far beyond the bottom line.

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