Supporting your Faculty and Staff during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dr Clare Dallat (PhD, Engineering Psychology)

E: clare@riskresolve.org.au

We're living through extraordinary times. The COVID-19 pandemic represents many new and novel challenges for us all, specifically faculty and staff working in our schools. These challenges may include learning how to adapt to online teaching, adhering to travel restrictions, working to support student wellbeing and navigating parents' fears. All of this while navigating their own concern over loved ones who may be vulnerable to the virus, pressure to care for children at home, and potential job losses/ financial insecurity impacting their own families. Work and home boundaries are wholly inter-connected, and significant uncertainty exists as to when and how the COVID-19 situation will end. It is completely normal for any human being to feel worried, anxious, and experience a whole range of other emotions.

We also understand that the situation is evolving dramatically and changing constantly. What we knew three weeks ago has now been superseded by new information, graphs, rates and generally, grim statistics. Due to the complex mix of scientific, medical, educational and social factors that are involved, there is no simple linear path or pre-prepared roadmap as to the perfect course of action a school should adopt in managing their response to COVID-19.

However, what we do know for sure, is that how we care for and support our staff and faculty now, will greatly influence how well they, and our schools recover from the COVID-19 crisis. We are also able take advantage of existing knowledge regarding various aspects of this new normal and, where appropriate apply it to how we lead, and support our staff and faculty through this pandemic. This paper briefly summarises a range of research findings that may be of benefit to school administration's in assessing and planning their approaches to staff/faculty well-being and their psychosocial health. It is not an exhaustive summary, merely a brief overview. The data referenced is from multiple sources and at the end of this paper, recommendations for schools to consider are provided at the end of this paper.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee

Created by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee is the longest-standing and highest-level humanitarian coordination forum of the UN system, bringing together the executive heads of 18 UN and non-UN organizations to ensure coherence of preparedness and response efforts, formulate policy, and agree on priorities for strengthened humanitarian action. This Committee has provided some important insight into what likely and common responses individuals may have to the COVID-19 pandemic. As school administrators, it is important to understand and expect that many in our teams could be experiencing these emotions. They include:
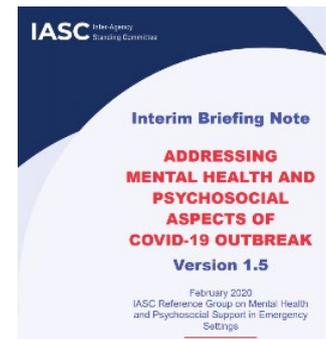
- Fear of falling ill and dying

- Avoiding approaching health facilities due to fear of becoming infected while in care

- Fear of losing livelihoods, not being able to work during isolation, and of being dismissed from work

- Fear of being socially excluded/placed in quarantine because of being associated with the disease (e.g. racism against persons who are from, or perceived to be from, affected areas)

- Feeling powerless in protecting loved ones and fear of losing loved ones because of the virus

- Fear of being separated from loved ones and caregivers due to quarantine regime

- Refusal to care for unaccompanied or separated minors, people with disabilities or the elderly due to fear of infection, because parents or caregivers have been taken into quarantine

- Feelings of helplessness, boredom, loneliness and depression due to being isolated

- Fear of reliving the experience of a previous epidemic

By understanding the range of feelings that are likely to be experienced as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, we can be empowered to identify helpful strategies that can both acknowledge these feelings are normal, and identify interventions to support our staff and faculty manage them.

Reference: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/

Distance Learning

As well as the range of psychosocial impacts discussed earlier, the cognitive demand and time required of teaching staff to plan, prepare and deliver distance learning to students is amplified by the demands of this technology- based approach. Frequently these new approaches to learning have led to teachers being increasingly relied upon by their students and their parents, and this can result in a heightened sense of responsibility.

Many schools are making genuine and innovative attempts at ensuring their staff communities remain connected during this time. Events such as trivia nights, online recess and coffee breaks, and regular group check-ins are excellent initiatives.

While these types of initiatives provide a platform from which to launch, maintain and share connection over an extended period on a group level, faculty/staff will also require more one-on-one support, and some 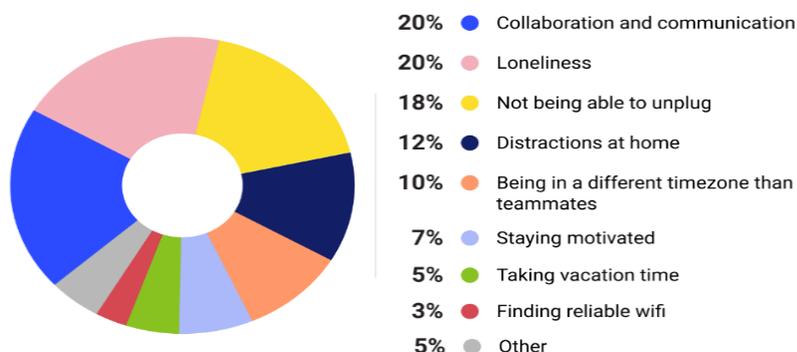may also need professional psychological assistance. Administrators should ensure staff and faculty have access to confidential mental health support, and importantly that it is made as easy as possible to access.

Reference: https://www.headsup.org.au/docs/default-source/resources/400282_1217_bl1256_acc2.pdf?sfvrsn=ddcf264d_2

Community and Collaboration in Remote Working

Although the COVID-19 outbreak has necessitated schools to conduct distance learning on such a large scale for the first time, much can be learned from the experiences of employees who have worked remotely for years. The study below reports on the experience of some 3500 global remote workers. Their top struggles in remote operation were lack of communication, feeling lonely, isolated, and not being able to unplug. Applying these findings to schools in the present COVID-19 world, the situation is likely very similar, and probably exacerbated with the challenges mentioned earlier in this paper.

What's your biggest struggle with working remotely?

- 20% Collaboration and communication
- 20% Loneliness
- 18% Not being able to unplug
- 12% Distractions at home
- 10% Being in a different timezone than teammates
- 7% Staying motivated
- 5% Taking vacation time
- 3% Finding reliable wifi
- 5% Other

State of Remote Report 2020
buffer.com/state-of-remote-2020

Ref: State of Remote Work 2020 (3500 remote workers globally) www.buffer.com/stae-of-remote-2020

Employee Needs from Leadership in times of Crisis

It is expected that staff and faculty will look to school leadership and administration for direction, assurance and truth in times of crisis. A study by Gallup found four universal needs that followers have of their leaders in these times:

- Trust
- Compassion
- Stability
- Hope

Leadership Pillars in a COVID-19 scenario

Based on the above universal needs, Gallup developed a leadership audit tool and applied it to the COVID-19 response in the US. It is structured on items relating to the most important actionable organisational practices that will increase trust, compassion, stability and hope.

The findings indicated that, especially in times of crisis, people look for the following traits in their leaders as a signal that their life will be ok, and that they can be part of the solution:

---

1. My leadership has a clear plan of action. The employer should clearly communicate a plan of action in response to COVID-19.

2. I feel well-prepared to do my job. During high-stress times, managers need to go back to the basics of clarifying expectations, reviewing material and equipment needs, and readjusting roles so that people can leverage their strengths in new ways. Further, each employee needs to see how they fit into the bigger picture of the organization -- its mission and purpose.

3. My supervisor keeps me informed about what is going on. The supervisor or manager is the key conduit, responsible for translating the organization's response to COVID-19 for each employee. Only the direct manager can know each employee's situation, keep them informed, and adjust expectations, coaching and accountability to inspire high performance.

4. My organization cares about my wellbeing. Before the novel coronavirus outbreak, work and life were more blended than ever before. Now, with millions of people required to work from home and with millions of kids kept home from school, blending work and life is even more complicated -- and it's creating all kinds of unprecedented stress on employees' wellbeing. **A key predictor of low worry and high confidence is whether each employee believes, and experiences, that the organization is looking out for their best interest.**

These findings are of direct relevance to schools experiencing the current climate. School administrations are encouraged to ensure that their planning, communication and resources consider the above criteria.

Source: Gallup: https://www.gallup.com/workplace/297497/covid-employees-need-leaders-right.aspx

Communication

Substantial research has been conducted into management communication during a crisis. In short, the following key points are important to consider in your school's communication strategy during COVID-19:

- The Head is front and centre
- The response is quick
- Uncertainty is not sugar coated
- The school errs on the side of overcommunication
- What is being said reflects the actions of leaders and managers
- All stakeholders are being communicated with, and
- Multiple forms of communication are being implemented

Although many of these guidelines are well over 20 years old, they still hold strong today.

Discussion and Recommendations

This short paper has provided an overview of several key areas that require ongoing school administration consideration and attention during the COVID-19 situation. They are intended to serve as an opportunity to self-audit your school's current approach and performance and support you to identify areas that can be further optimised to enhance well-being and connection of your staff/ faculty.

It is extremely likely that emotional and mental health of staff and faculty will be or is already impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and for some, this impact will be significant. By implementing periodic and regular personal check-ins between staff and faculty and their leadership, schools can be better placed to identify additional interventions that may be necessary to further optimise the support provided to these staff and faculty.

We are all in this for the foreseeable future, but it is most certainly possible to emerge stronger and more genuinely connected than ever before.

About the Author

Dr Clare Dallat is the Director of Risk Resolve; a service that provides both educational and risk management services for schools, organisations and governments across Australia, the United States, the Middle East, Asia and Europe, since 2007. Clare has a PhD in Engineering Psychology, and an MSc. in Risk, Crisis and Disaster Management. She is an experienced outdoor educator and has twenty-five years of practice in outdoor education. She sits on the Accreditation Council for the Association of Experiential Education and is an adjunct researcher within the Centre for Human Factors and Sociotechnical Systems at The University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland. Clare is the first recipient outside of North America to receive the prestigious Charles 'Reb' Gregg International Wilderness Risk Management Award for

leadership, innovation and service to the field. She is an Editorial Board Member of the International Journal of Experiential Education and co-chairs the annual International Wilderness Risk Management Research Symposium.

"To lead people, walk beside them" (Lao Tzu)