

LEADERSHIP

Social Distancing Doesn't Have to Disrupt Mentorship

by [David G. Smith](#) and [W. Brad Johnson](#)

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The current pandemic has many more people teleworking and adapting business to the virtual environment. While continuing to lead direct reports and collaborate with customers remain business imperatives in the new “workplace,” don’t forget your mentees. Great mentors show up and engage with mentees in crises and uncertain times, even when that requires creativity and adaptation. There are several reasons not to let your commitments slide.

First, mentors play a pivotal role in safeguarding retention and building organizational commitment, particularly in times of crisis. Research shows that when mentors are actively engaged with mentees, those mentees form stronger emotional bonds to the organization, report higher job satisfaction, and perceive greater support from the organization broadly. To retain high-potential junior talent and ensure strong post-pandemic succession planning, consistent and committed mentoring relationships are vital.

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Second, at their best mentorships are life-altering relationships that inspire mutual learning and development. Every growth-fostering interaction in a strong mentorship bolsters a mentee’s professional and personal growth, identity, self-worth, and self-efficacy. Facing an uncertain future, mentees — now more than ever — will leverage

connections with mentors to lower anxiety, overcome imposter syndrome, and grasp hold of their mentor’s hopeful vision of how they can not only weather the storm but continue to thrive in their careers.

Finally, moments of adversity offer golden opportunities to create indelible mental maps of what excellent mentoring looks like. In his book *Leaders Eat Last*, Simon Sinek reminds us that leaders don’t always appreciate the impact of their examples on those they lead. Mentors must own the power of modeling loyalty and commitment. Just as good leaders

care for their people first, so too should mentors demonstrate commitment to their mentees through ongoing communication and expressions of care. Do this well, and you'll equip your mentees with a template for excellent *in extremis* mentorship.

Whether you typically meet in-person on a regular basis or haven't spoken in a while, now is the time to reach out to your mentees. There is good evidence that mentoring via real-time videoconferencing yields equivalent outcomes to in-person mentoring. Alternatively, methods such as email, chats, and text messaging allow flexibility in keeping the lines of communication open but are more limited and are prone to misunderstandings.

In ordinary circumstances, many mentors focus on the *career functions* of mentoring. Although those remain important, the *psychosocial functions* — acceptance, affirmation, friendship, emotional support, reassurance — are especially valuable in uncertain times. Psychosocial functions tap into empathy and compassion and involve deliberate expressions of care. Demonstrating emotional and social support might begin with generous listening to understand your mentees' struggles and concerns. Acknowledge and validate the challenges they are facing and the distress they are feeling. Be a role model, show vulnerability, and share authentically about your own experiences during the shutdown of normal work. Discuss how the break in physical routines, the restricted access to others, and the bombardment of information can feel overwhelming and isolating. Be supportive and affirming, and be clear about what you know and don't know. Give mentees permission to take a break from the news and their work routines to engage in self-care. A bit of humor can break the tension.

And remember that several career functions of mentoring can continue regardless of social distancing. Use some of your new discretionary time to leverage your social capital and sponsor mentees, opening virtual doors and making valuable introductions. Create a safe space for career conversations. Mentees may be worried that they'll be laid off, that their work will no longer be noticed by their managers, or that progress toward advancement and promotion will be derailed. Pass along credible inside intelligence about ramifications of the shutdown, and provide opportunities for visibility in the virtual workplace by copying mentees on emails and including them in online meetings when

appropriate. Online meetings afford a new setting in which to model and teach new skills and behaviors — and the learning may flow in both directions. Mentors might discover that their mentees have much to teach them about virtual work and new technologies. And as many people are discovering, online meetings have their own rules, norms, and best practices. Both mentor and mentee should adopt a learning mindset.

We offer several additional recommendations for continuing and deepening your mentorships in a time of social distancing:

- **Communicate with your mentees, but don't assume you understand their situations.** Everyone is already experiencing plenty of uncertainty and new demands. Let your mentoring be something mentees can depend on without any pressure to reciprocate. Reach out, ask how they are faring, learn about their unique circumstances and stressors, and if they are amenable, find time for a phone call or a video meeting, even if only for a few minutes.
- **Make adjustments to established norms.** If a mentee is eager to continue with tele-mentoring, figure out a new rhythm and the best medium for meeting in the online environment, which may require changes to previous routines. You might need to work around childcare, eldercare, or other commitments your mentee is responsible for in this new environment.
- **Be authentic, and welcome reciprocity.** If you have children at home because schools are closed, or if you are occupying your pet's favorite spot in the house while you telework, don't hide those personal challenges. Use them to “keep it real” and to develop a friendly connection with your mentees. Sharing your situation makes it more comfortable for mentees to share theirs. And don't miss the opportunity for a good laugh if kids or pets integrate themselves into a meeting!
- **Show care and compassion.** Test your listening skills, and focus on your mentee's concerns. Financial, health, job, and family matters are all likely to be pressing issues. Demonstrate that you hear and understand; in that way, you can help validate and normalize mentees' emotions and experiences.
- **Address concerns through coping and mastery skills.** Remember: You don't need to rescue or fix anything for your mentees. Instead, offer support that will enable them to

overcome challenges on their own. Provide strategies, skills, and resources that they can use to learn and to grow their efficacy.

Although social distancing is necessary during the pandemic, it doesn't mean you can't maintain close emotional and relational proximity with your mentees. Use this moment in time to explore new ways of staying connected, show that you care, validate feelings of distress, develop talent, and challenge yourself to get out of your mentoring comfort zone.

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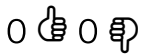
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Very informative! Though we are required to maintain physical distance even, there should not be a social distancing. In fact, current situation need to be looked as an opportunity to make good connection with your mentor/mentee.

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