

# Pressures of a pandemic

by Ben Rawal

Coping with our own challenges borne out of Covid-19 is often difficult enough, particularly given the restrictions that we have all experienced during the past 12 months. In this article, Ben Rawal provides guidance on how managers can continue to support their teams with their own levels of stress and anxiety.

Successfully coping with pressure and stress is an essential factor in developing your career as a finance professional. For those of you also responsible for managing a team, good leadership implies a willingness to support your employees without taking on the burden of their problems, emotions or stress itself.

This can often be a difficult balancing act, especially for leaders with high levels of empathy that may sometimes run the risk of becoming too emotionally involved. Conversely, perhaps avoiding conversations around your team's feelings is easier and achieves suitable boundaries? Whatever your approach, it is important to keep one eye on the future and how your legacy as a leader will be remembered long beyond the demise of Covid-19.

## Recognising the signs

We all manage stress differently. Although there are many common assumptions and beliefs around how individuals behave under stress, the most important indicator is one of change – unexpected behavioural change.

Regardless of whether your team members are calm and steady, or loud and outgoing, extreme levels of stress are likely to change these behaviours. This is an important point to remember because we often allow our stereotypes of a stressed individual to drive our perceptions.

All of this ultimately means that you need to understand your team – their behaviours when things are going well, and how they act when frustrated, angry, and generally uncomfortable.

Recognising the signs of their stress depends on a careful analysis of the facts – an area where most accountants will excel! Utilise these strengths that most of you use in a financial environment every day and re-focus your efforts on to your team. Focus on their eye contact (or lack of it), their facial expressions, their hand gestures and changes in their vocal tone, volume and pitch.

This of course will require concentration, effort and a level of intuition – once again, aspects of an accountant's 'toolkit' that is regularly utilised in other settings.

**“Look for the unexpected changes in behaviour, rather than the stereotypical signs of stress. We are all different, and deal with stress in various ways – many of which are unexpected”.**

## Beyond normal

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary ways of working, beyond those that most organisations deem standard procedure. Lockdown conditions appear to have encouraged workers to spend longer on their computers, extending working days to an average of 11 hours per day online.

Perhaps this is a change that both you and your teams have experienced, and is an area worth highlighting and discussing. For some, the avoidance of the daily commute has been welcoming, but this is not the case for everyone. Organisations and managers should display a more open-minded approach

to how the pressures and strains of lockdown may actually be impacting their teams.

This requires the ability to show empathy and understand how it feels from the perspective of each team member.

It is vital that you maintain contact with your team, beyond the requirements and expectations of the job. As a manager, creating and facilitating opportunities for your team members to come together in a virtual environment will help to promote a sense of normality during strange times. This could take the form of team building events, utilising the excellent breakout room options that are available across most of the virtual platforms.

**“Explore how the challenges of working during lockdown and Covid-19 are impacting your team. Be careful not to make assumptions about or ‘downplay’ their experience(s) and problems”. Statements such as “It’s difficult for everyone...” are neither helpful or supportive.**

## How are you?

Beyond your somewhat natural skills in analysing, there will be times where you need to go further than observing and thinking. During these times, the simple question “How are you?” can work wonders.

The research indicates that you may need to ask this question at least three times before you begin to receive a response that is reflective of the individual's deeper feelings and wellbeing. The reason for this is that most individuals will offer a habitual response to the question "How are you?" – including "I'm good", "I'm well thanks", or "Not bad". This question-and-answer routine often forms part of the pleasantries that we exchange with others in both a personal and professional environment – but it offers very little insight into how we are genuinely feeling.

Like peeling an onion, asking variations of the question "How are you?" will generally provide improved insight into the individual's current experiences and emotions at a deeper level.

**"Consider that others may not initially provide a deep and genuine insight into how they are feeling. At times, you may need to work at this".**

**Listen – with your ears and your eyes!**

When talking with our teams, we often miss vital opportunities to genuinely understand how they are feeling. Many of us recognise that we could improve our listening skills – both in and out of work – and frequently miss clues that our team members provide through their choice of words and body language.

For many of us at the moment, video conversations with our team members are two-dimensional at best. In other words, we increase our reliance on listening and where possible, support what we can hear with what we see on camera. There are times however, where cameras are switched off, fail to work, or impact our connection speed – almost creating the same conditions of a telephone call.

Learning and genuinely 'tuning in' to a conversation involving only one of our five senses is often alien to many of us – especially when we place so much reliance on our other senses (most

notably sight and touch) to create a more well-informed understanding.

Using our cameras (where possible) will enable an improved insight into your team members' issues and problems – especially when the words you hear fail to match the body language and facial expressions that you see.

**"Encourage your team to use their cameras during 1-1 discussions and team meetings. Remember to set an example by ensuring that your own camera is also switched on".**

### Conclusion

The pressures of Covid-19 are experienced by all in different ways. As a manager, you can support your team members through genuinely showing an interest in how they are coping with the pandemic.

Identifying the changes in your team's behaviours and moods, whilst exploring their feelings will provide a greater insight into what is happening for them. As a manager, be prepared to push the boundaries on being an accommodating boss and genuinely listen to what is happening in their world.



**Ben Rawal,**  
BSc MBA FCCA

## Top Tips:



### ✓ A Warning Sign?

Being aware of how your team generally behave and communicate can offer helpful clues to their levels of stress and general satisfaction in their role. Build your own picture of individual behavioural changes, rather than making wholesale assumptions which might miss the mark.

### ✓ Creating Opportunities

Prior to Covid-19, managing your team in accordance with organisational policies and procedures would have been more predictable and clear. The existing environment requires a change in thinking and a more flexible approach to working together – what opportunities for innovation can you create alongside your team?

### ✓ Using your Analytical Skills

As accountants, our analytical skills are often taken for granted. Harness these skills with your team members, but focus on analysing behaviours, rather than numbers.

### ✓ Listen, listen, listen...

Deep listening is a difficult skill, but one that can be learned and developed. Challenge your own listening skills as a manager, and look for other visual indicators that the message you are hearing is consistent with your team members' body