

Tools for Leadership in a New Reality

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, HRA has had to act quickly to radically transform the way we serve New Yorkers. Though resources like ACCESS HRA are already in place to help clients access services without coming to a center, many staff members have had to take on new roles due to locations consolidating, a dramatic increase in online and phone-based services, and the general increase in demand coupled with a changing service model caused by this very difficult time.

Managers and supervisors are also faced with a new reality – keeping staff engaged, motivated, and supported as they work from home, and helping staff from other areas transition to new roles that are often radically different from their previous work.

This guide will include general advice, talking points, and training resources to help you lead your team, address concerns, and help keep everyone motivated in this new reality.

Part 1: Working Remotely

- Working from home may be a new experience for many staff members, and when combined with reassignment to new roles, varying levels of comfort with technology, and the general stress of the pandemic it can create a difficult situation.
- When advising your staff on working from home, always remember that their circumstances will vary a great deal. It is ideal to create a kind of “home office” space when working from home, to separate the workday from normal home life – however, many staff members may not be able to do this depending on their living arrangements.
- Still, be sure to stress that it’s important to stick to a routine, check in regularly with both 1 on 1 and team meetings, and keep work-related documents and emails secure.
- Some staff members may be having difficulty working with family at home, while others may be coping with loneliness and isolation. Remember that no one’s experience is identical.
- Staff who are more comfortable with technology or who have successfully overcome a tech issue can help out other team members who may be struggling. Encourage them to share information outside of regular meetings.
- Just as it’s important to keep regular hours and stay in touch when working from home, it’s also important to disconnect when the workday ends. If staff are overextended remind them to take breaks when appropriate and stick to their regular work hours to avoid burnout.

Part 2: Change Management

- Taking on new job duties is stressful and challenging under perfect circumstances – doing it now is quite a bit harder. Remember that reassigned staff are dealing with a new reality above and beyond what others are facing.
- Staff handed new job duties often don’t have a sense of how what they are doing fits into a bigger picture, especially under these circumstances.
- Most staff who have been reassigned are working on applications or document indexing for SNAP and Cash Assistance – this is an essential step in connecting New Yorkers with benefits at a time when they have never needed them more.

- The job your team members are doing could mean the difference between someone being able to eat or going to bed hungry. They could help prevent New Yorkers from going into debt and potentially losing their housing through rent arrears.
- Helping New Yorkers access benefits like SNAP and Cash Assistance from the safety of their homes is literally saving lives. Because of your efforts, our fellow New Yorkers do not have to choose between possibly going hungry and putting themselves at risk by traveling to a center.
- Emphasize these factors when talking to your team about the work they do. Don't forget to remind them that they are helping all of us together get through one of the most difficult periods of our lifetimes.
- Many staff doing new work of this kinds are afraid of making mistakes, and this fear can actually reduce their productivity. Remind staff that there is a supervisory review process that exists, not to get staff "in trouble", but to ensure that any mistakes that may impact the client are corrected. Be understanding with staff that a new process can be daunting to learn, but also remind them that making a mistake is still better than not doing the work at all.
- If you can, draw on success stories. If your staff are conducting phone interviews, encourage them to share positive interactions (without identifying clients). If staff are having frustrating interactions, be empathetic to what they have gone through.
- Empathy fatigue is a real risk when dealing with high-stress situations. People often come to HRA for help because they are in crisis, and they may be frustrated, impatient, confused, or angry when speaking to you or your team. Remember that any applicant, whether they are eligible for benefits or not, is dealing with an extremely difficult situation.
- Give your team space to share these difficulties when discussing work, but also be sure to reinforce that we are all doing very important work for people who are in serious need of help, and that it is important to balance caring for clients with self-care.

Part 3: Teambuilding

- There's no denying it, building a cohesive team when working remotely and adjusting to new work assignments is a challenge. It will require extra outreach to help people build connections.
- Make sure you meet regularly. Different groups will have a different needs and standards for how often to meet, but ensure that meetings take place on a regular schedule is key to maintaining connections. Even if there isn't much to cover, it's good to keep a regular meeting on the schedule just to check in.
- Make sure to have both regular group and 1 on 1 meetings to ensure that people are being heard and connections are maintained.
- Encourage everyone to participate in meetings. It can be difficult, especially in audio meetings, to know when someone has something to say, so it can help to metaphorically 'go around the room' and call each person by name to invite them to speak.
- If someone tells you something over email that you think would be good for the group to hear (e.g. a positive client interaction or how they found the solution to a technical issue), write to them before the meeting and ask if they mind sharing it with the group.
- If you can, ask team members to take specific roles in meetings to encourage more participation.
- If some staff members have more experience and/or a good understanding of the work and aren't overburdened, ask them if they would be able to informally advise or help out some of the other staff members.

- Start your meetings with an icebreaker – choose something light and fun that won't make anyone uncomfortable. **See the appendix for a list of suggested icebreakers to choose from.**
- Strive to be a coach to your team – give them a game plan and trust them to complete their tasks. Help them set goals and come up with ways to achieve them, and avoid micromanaging every aspect of how people approach their work.

Part 4: Problem Solving

- If people are having a difficult time meeting their job commitments, speak with them privately. Avoid calling out people in a group meeting.
- Offer a mix of praise of what a team member is doing well and constructive feedback on what needs improvement, opening and closing on a positive note.
- If someone is having trouble with a task, demonstrate it for them.
- If team members feel they still have questions about completing applications, remind them they can call the Office of Policies, Procedures, and Training (OPPT)'s special training hotline at (929) 221-0010 with access code 6891# to receive help.
- See if you can break down overall tasks further into smaller goals, and give staff who are struggling a more detailed plan and schedule for hitting milestones.
- If necessary, set deadlines and follow up on them.
- Take any concerns your team raise with you seriously – help connect them to ITS, HCM, EEO if they need assistance from those programs.
- Your team may often face issues that are beyond your ability to solve, but it's always important to listen and offer sympathy.

Appendix: Icebreakers to Use in Remote Meetings

1. What Shoes Are You Wearing?

This ice breaker is good for helping team members get to know each other and team building. Before the meeting starts have each member upload a picture of their shoes (or a favorite object in their work-from-home space). This could be in a chat or they can share their screen. When the meeting starts have them “tell the story behind it”. Why did they choose this object? Why is it important to them? What does it say about them? Ideally this would establish common ground or at least curiosity about each other.

2. Virtual Polls

Virtual meeting software platforms (e.g. Teams, WebEx, Zoom) often allow for the meeting admin to post polls and have the results come in live. The admin would ask a question and the meeting attendees will post their responses. The question should be related to the topic or purpose of the meeting. An example could be a list of questions related to the topic of the meeting and having the participants vote for the question they want answered most. This is also a good way to get a sense of how the participants feel about the topic of the meeting. A variation would be to have participants submit questions and have the participants vote on them. Another would be to have each participant submit a few fun but obscure facts about themselves. The admin would tell the participants and then have them guess who the fact is true about.

3. Small Group Work

Many virtual meeting platforms also allow you to create break out rooms. Break the participants into teams and place them in separate rooms. Have them all work on the same issue or question and then bring the group back together to share their ideas. What they work on in their small group can range from a simple trivia question to a larger issue the company is facing. Encourage the small groups to be creative in how they present their ideas or findings such as creating a PowerPoint.

4. Where Do You Work?

Have each participant share a picture of their workspace and explain what they like about their space and what they wish they could add. This would be a great way to get an idea on the challenges the participants may have working remotely.

5. Happy Time

Before the meeting starts have everyone bring a drink and snack of their choice and share a pic of it. Then engage in lighthearted conversation not related to work. This is more of getting to know each other activity.

6. One Word Game

The One Word ice breaker allows you to provide initial context into a meeting's topic and get everyone in the right mindset for discussion. To play, you'll want to divide meeting participants into smaller groups. Then, tell them to think for a minute or two, and then share with their group one word that describes X. For instance, let's say you're leading a meeting on culture. Tell the groups to describe work culture, or your office culture in particular, in one word. Once they've shared with their groups, you can invite them to share their word with the entire room.

This game encourages everyone to think about a certain topic in smaller groups ahead of time, which could increase participation during the meeting.

7. Pop Quiz

To successfully loosen everyone up and get them in the right mindset for a meeting, you might consider putting a short Pop Quiz on your screen. If your goal is simply to encourage team bonding, your quiz can be more fun -- like, "Match the lyrics with this 80's song". However, you might also use the Pop Quiz as an opportunity to introduce participants to the meeting's theme. If you're discussing company changes, for instance, maybe you'll start by quizzing team members on company history facts (i.e. "What year was this company founded?").

8. Would You Rather

A classic game played at summer camps everywhere, "Would You Rather" is actually an excellent, quick ice breaker for the workplace. Next time you're settling into a meeting or team bonding outing, take turns going around the table and asking each person a "Would You Rather" question. Here are a few "Would You Rather" questions to get you started:

- Would you rather only have summer or winter for the rest of your life?
- Would you rather go on a hike or see a movie?
- Would you rather never use social media sites and apps again, or never watch another movie or TV show?
- Would you rather have a horrible short-term memory or a horrible long term memory?

9. 18 & Under

18 & Under is an engaging and unique way to encourage team members to share fun or interesting stories with one another. Before a meeting, simply go around the room, and ask each person to share one accomplishment they had before they turned 18. Undoubtedly, you'll get some of lesser importance, like "I bought a skateboard," but you never know what hidden skills you might discover in your colleagues.

10. Two Truths and a Lie

One of the more classic ice breakers in the list, Two Truths and a Lie can be used anywhere from family parties to company events. To play, you simply ask each person to brainstorm three "facts" about themselves -- two of the facts will be true, and one will be a lie. For instance, I might say, "I once auditioned for a TV show. I have three brothers. I ziplined in Switzerland once." Coworkers can take turns guessing which is the lie. Two Truths and a Lie is a fun and engaging game, and more importantly, it can help your team learn facts about one another, so they can begin forming deeper bonds.

11. Fun Questions

Asking fun questions is an easy and effective ice breaker game. To play, simply go around the room and have each person provide an answer to a fun question. The questions are up to you, but if you're stuck, here are a few ideas:

- If you're stranded on a desert island and have the option of bringing three items with you, what three items would they be?
- If you could be any animal, what would you be and why?
- What was the first concert you ever went to?
- If you could have any celebrity over for dinner, who would it be and why?

These questions serve two purposes -- first, they allow your coworkers to get into a sillier, more creative mindset. Second, they encourage conversation on topics typically reserved for outside the office, which enables members of your team to get to know one another on a deeper level.

12. Personality Quiz

This ice breaker can promote team bonding, and it's one of the easier options in the list. Simply choose a brief personality quiz on your phone or computer (if you're stuck, [here's a list](#)), and pull it up on a projector or send the link to everyone. Once everyone has completed the personality assessment, have each colleague mention one thing they agree or disagree with in their results. This game allows your team members to gain a new perspective on their peers, and it's also a fun and easy way to get an interesting conversation started.

13. Who is it?

Have everyone write a **unique, strange, or unexpected fact** about them and send it to the meeting host. Then, have the host read each fact and allow the team to try and guess who wrote it. After they guess, ask the employee who wrote the fact to identify themselves and give any further context if necessary. This could be a great way to get to know surprising new things about your teammates.

14. Choose Your Favorite

For this icebreaker, all you have to do is answer the question about your favorite things. You'll ask your team to choose their favorite movie, song, T.V. show, etc. The question can change every week. This icebreaker helps your team get to know each other even when they work remotely and can spark conversation on what everyone likes or dislikes.

15. Trivia Game

If you're looking for a remote icebreaker that's more of a game, and less discussion based, you can host a trivia game. **Kahoot** is a trivia platform you can use for free (hosts up to 10 people). To get started, all you'll need to do is sign up for a free Kahoot account. Then, you can choose a featured trivia game to play. To run this remotely, you'll want to share your screen with your team. Everyone will need to have a separate device to use so they can enter the game and submit their answers.

16. Share an Embarrassing Photo

For this game, have everyone bring in an embarrassing photo and tell the story behind it. Doing this is a great way to build connection remotely. To show the photos, you can have your team members share their screen or send a file to the team leader who will have them pulled up. To make this more interesting, you can have people guess whose photo it is before your team member shares their story.

17. One Word Pulse Check

For this icebreaker, have everyone on your team go around and share a word or phrase that represents how they feel that day. The purpose of the exercise is to give people a chance to release and/or reveal emotional setbacks, obstacles, wins, highlights, or anything else that might be impacting how they show up to work that day.

Icebreakers can seem cringeworthy, but are actually a great way to build trust within your team. Even if you work remotely, team bonding is an important part of running a productive, effective team.