

a VITAL WorkLife article

# How to Lead Your Organization Through COVID-19

By Liz Ferron, MSW, LICSW



## Coming up in the article:

- Strategies for helping your healthcare team members understand and cope with the pressures of COVID-19
- What the primary role(s) of leadership should be during these unprecedented and unpredictable times
- An inside look at the steps of a “pandemic playbook”

The pandemic has taken a heavy toll on frontline workers in healthcare, placing them at both tremendous physical and mental risk as they work to treat those stricken by COVID-19. As a new study of frontline healthcare workers from Prudential insurance puts it: “Healthcare workers are doing what they must to treat and save the lives of COVID-19 patients, because it is who they are. They’re going into battle every day and experiencing loss and trauma, and this is taking a great mental health toll on them. A majority of the workers in this study are experiencing anxiety, fear and difficulty sleeping.”<sup>1</sup>

All who treat coronavirus patients labor under a heavy mental and emotional load; they’re worried about their own exposure to the virus and the potential to transmit it to loved ones, especially in areas where PPE is inadequate. In “hot spots” where wards are at capacity and new cases are flooding in, the struggle to give adequate care—and offer companionship to those suffering—under intense time pressures takes a heavy toll. Physicians, advanced practitioners and nurses “drafted” from other specialties into COVID care may feel inadequately prepared for their new duties.

1. “How Employers Can Support Frontline Healthcare Workers.” Prudential, May 05, 2020.

## A Silver Lining?

As Penelope Hsu, MD, a pediatrician and certified coach who weathered the worst of the COVID spike in New York City, says, “the uncertainty can be debilitating. With a disease so poorly understood, with guidelines from public health bodies changing constantly, you just don’t know what to do. Physicians are used to knowing what they’re doing! But the uncertainty—what it does to a physician’s self-confidence is profound.”

“If there is a silver lining to all of this,” says Dr. Hsu, “it’s the recognition that the mental health of healthcare workers is important—and we’re finding it more acceptable to say we’re stressed out, burned out, having a hard time. My coaching clients are saying, ‘I need help and I feel less stigmatized in getting it.’”

This is a sentiment widely shared among physicians, drawing parallels with similar events shaping how mental health is discussed within healthcare. In an interview conducted recently by JAMA<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Eileen Barrett, MD, MPH, speaks about the loss of a colleague to suicide during the Ebola crisis. Dr. Barrett details the struggles faced by physicians under immense stressors, including anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, loneliness and survivor’s guilt, making it painfully clear that physician well being had to become a higher priority at the organizational level.



<sup>2</sup>. Abbasi J., “Prioritizing Physician Mental Health as COVID-19 Marches On.” JAMA. 2020

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*Penelope Hsu, MD*

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## What Healthcare Workers Want from Management: A Pandemic Playbook

If you lead a healthcare organization, you want to do right and well by your people. But in the face of a disease nobody fully understands, with resources stretched thin and your staff struggling, how do you help?

We have answers.

Prudential's report underlines the finding that "the perception of management support had a significant impact on workers' overall moods. Those with little management support felt angry, disrespected and betrayed. Those with management support still felt anxiety and fear but used more mental health coping techniques and described less mood instability."

So, what forms should management support take? It should probably come as no surprise what workers are looking for is the set of cultural values around physician well being VITAL WorkLife has been promoting for many years—this time, in emergency mode. Under the pressures of the pandemic—whether those pressures are time, patient loads, equipment shortages, falling revenues, uncertainties about your organization's future or other worries—you can still make time to support your physicians' mental and emotional health. As these strategies show, a little can go a long way.

### **Be present.**

Workers who believe that leadership is on their side are better able to cope with stress, the Prudential study confirms. One of the participants in the study said, "If we feel like they have our back, that will be the biggest emotional impact." Another suggested that management should devote some time to walking along with frontline workers in order to experience what they experience and to understand what they're dealing with day-to-day. Dr. Hsu asks leaders to, "Lead by example. We need to see leadership's faces, rather than just email after email. Do a Zoom rounds where it's just the leadership saying, hey, we're here, we see you and hear you."

## Recognize and reward employees.

Leadership “just being on the floor and saying, ‘thank you.’ It helps,” said a respondent to the Prudential study. And Dr. Hsu concurs. “There’s one hospital where I work,” she says, “in which leaders appear in short videos simply saying thank you to staff for their work. It takes a few minutes, and it means a lot.”

## Listen.

For Dr. Hsu, the strategy of simply listening, like the others in this list, is really a core value leaders should exhibit even under the best conditions and is especially important in COVID times. “Leadership needs to listen to staff with the intent of being an ally,” she says. “This may involve taking a hit—hearing from a physician, ‘you’re not doing very well in this area.’ But we understand nobody can do well all the time under these conditions! So, let’s be honest and support each other.”

“It comes as no shock, especially now more than ever, healthcare leadership is quite often pressed for valuable time. However, any interaction with team members can end up going the distance,” says Tracey Hoke, MD, chief of quality and performance improvement for UVA Health. “With my team, I like to share agendas and materials when appropriate, and I hold a regular in-person meeting to review what was shared. I also write and send minutes and check in one-on-one to see how messages are percolating in the organization. When a gap is identified, I am quick to clarify.”<sup>3</sup> This multi-layered approach addresses issues on multiple levels while ensuring the message is heard loud and clear.

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<sup>3</sup> Kelly Gooch, “10 healthcare leaders share tips for effective communication,” Becker’s Hospital Review, January 24th, 2020.



### Offer mental health support.

In a way, all the above are forms of mental health support for your staff, but certain measures focus specifically on relieving anxiety and stress in the moment.

All the participants in the Prudential study said it was important to be able to talk about what they have experienced. According to one participant, "We just need to get it out." Setting up time for peer-to-peer debriefs and debriefs with leaders is one good way; pre-shift huddles is another.

"This allows nurses and doctors to talk about the previous shift," the study says, "and any concerns or anxieties they may have about the current shift. Huddles can also create an opportunity for management to come by to check in and listen."

"Another silver lining in the pandemic," says Dr. Hsu, "is practically every hospital has some form of online mental health resource, meditation breaks and so on. The problem is many of them are too hard to access. You have to click on this link, that link, spend twenty minutes to set up a membership for access. We don't have that kind of time! Making resources really easy for us to grab on to is crucial."

The hospital Dr. Hsu cited for its gratitude videos from leaders also had user-friendly resources, she says. "They put short exercise videos directly on the newsletter they send out. It was, 'press here,' just once, for a five-minute video to stretch out your neck. And two-minute meditations, right off the newsletter as well, with one click. I actually found myself using them!"

She also urges leadership to make time for staff to access resources. "You need to carve out the time," she says. "You could end clinical hours at 4:30 and spend a half-hour doing yoga and let that 30 minutes of revenue go for the sake of your staff."

## ABOUT VITAL WORKLIFE

VITAL WorkLife, Inc. is a physician-focused national behavioral health consulting practice supporting all dimensions of well being in the workplace with a multitude of solutions. Serving the U.S. healthcare industry since 2007, our national team of certified physician peer coaches and senior behavioral health consultants deliver life-changing well being solutions.



### LIZ FERRON, MSW, LICSW

As our Physician Practice Lead, Liz Ferron manages Physician Well Being Resources for VITAL WorkLife, as well as oversees all solutions of our healthcare clients. Liz provides training, consultation, counseling and coaching to healthcare

administrators and individual practitioners in many areas, including stress management, change management and conflict resolution. Liz is a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker and received her MSW degree in clinical social work from the University of Minnesota. She was also a consultant for the Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing at the University of Minnesota. She has served three terms as President of the Minnesota Employee Assistance Program Administrators and Counselors (MEAPAC) and is a former adjunct faculty member at the College of St. Benedict.

#### Sources:

1. [Tait Shanfelt, MD et al., "The Business case for Investing in Physician Well Being," JAMA Internal Medicine, Sept. 25, 2017.](#)
2. ["Well Being Playbook: A Guide for Hospitals and Health System Leaders," American Hospital Association and AHA Physician Alliance.](#)
3. [Kelly Gooch, "10 healthcare leaders share tips for effective communication," Becker's Hospital Review, January 24th, 2020](#)

## Be flexible and transparent.

Above all, says Dr. Hsu, leadership should exhibit flexibility and transparency. She cites the case of a hospital, desperately short on PPE during the worst period of the virus in New York, where workers obtained masks from a source but had to hide them from leadership because they were in danger of being confiscated for not meeting US standards. "But they were better than nothing, which is what we had," she says. "Flexibility on the part of leadership is so important. This pandemic is so different from anything you could have prepared for. A really good leader will think outside the box and be open to new sources of information, of PPE, of everything."

And, she adds, "transparency and real communication is key. The hospital I mentioned sent out updates every week on the number of admissions, the number of beds, the PPE status and so on. And yes, they knew they were falling short, but they conveyed what they were trying to do about each situation.

"It may sound strange, but that was actually more reassuring for us than if they had 'the solution.' We knew that it was hard for them and their honesty showed that they were in the struggle with us. That lifted our spirits."

These five tips constitute a set of best practices and can be used in a variety of situations to support your frontline workers. Not all use cases require a pandemic of global proportion and by using them in other critical occasions—or in general practice—your healthcare team will be better for it and grateful for your support.

### For more on these issues, view the following webinars:

[Effects of COVID 19 on Healthcare Workers and Physicians: Research and Consultant Findings](#), hosted by VITAL WorkLife with Prudential.

[Leading Through the Stress of COVID-19](#), hosted by VITAL WorkLife with Paul DeChant, MD.

[The Leader's Role: Identifying & Addressing COVID-19 Drivers of Stress](#), hosted by Constellation with VITAL WorkLife.

