Managing Talent Through Tough Times

Successful strategies for advancement talent leaders during a global crisis
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Over the past two months, talent management leaders globally have had to develop untapped skills in order to lead their organizations through the ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. After successfully and rapidly adjusting to remote operations, talent managers are now looking ahead to what the advancement team of the future looks like.

The following offers insights from talent managers at organizations spanning many states, budget sizes, type of institution, and centralized and decentralized structures for how they are weathering the storm. It offers key considerations for planning, recommendations for best practices, and innovative examples from colleges and universities that respond to teams' physical, mental, and emotional needs as we transition to new models.

Logistics of Working from Home and Eventual Re-Entry

- **Reentry Plans**: With re-entry plans varying state to state, talent managers have underscored the importance of developing parameters for a plan that works for *your* team. Develop a short-term, mid-term, and long-term strategy. There are an array of models to choose from for how new office structures and schedules can take shape, from alternating days of the week to shifting to regional teams.

  - Given the high anxiety and stress associated with reentry, organizations should provide support and resources for those who have concerns. Allow everyone the opportunity to make a decision that's best for their family, their health, as well as their role and responsibility.

- Keep an eye on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I) in making decisions. Not everyone will be affected by salary cuts or layoffs equitably. Not everyone has an ideal setup at home for ongoing remote work with childcare or constraints on shared space with partners or roommates. For urban institutions, considerations for commuting, including public transportation and campus shuttles, need to be taken into account.

- Stress is created when personal and organizational values and demands are in conflict. Therefore, have a one-on-one conversation with each professional and discuss individualized work arrangements and develop a reentry plan without having them feel guilty about any challenging timelines.

- **Working from Home**: Talent managers have started to assess who can continue to work from home, (e.g. frontline fundraisers). Explore who is thriving and who is surviving in this space and understand why. Pay attention to both and discuss what we can learn from both. Also, some institutions are now re-evaluating their office space, looking at physical reconfigurations or making the decision to cancel leased space, which in turn is a cost savings. Continued equipment and technology assistance will be needed in any arrangement determined.

- **"Zoom fatigue"**: More recently, employees have voiced complaints about lower back pain, eye strain, headaches, and exhaustion due to both screen fatigue and continuous sitting – typically at a makeshift table without a proper desk chair. In an office, staff members have the opportunity to get up and go to meetings, so talent managers should encourage staff to hold "standing meetings" and take breaks. One university offered morning virtual yoga sessions and meditation classes to pay attention to this new need. Be intentional about scheduling non-screen activities.

Budget Constraints and Professional Development Spending

- **Across the board, some advancement shops have made budget cuts or restricted spending** – and many are looking at trimming underperforming projects and programs, as long as they are not a part of the strategic plan.

- While many organizations have implemented a "cool chill" on hiring (as opposed to an outright hiring freeze), others are still actively hiring. Most are not creating new positions for the next few months unless they are critical senior or leading roles.

- Because of stay at home orders and budget constraints, many advancement teams are foregoing conference spending. But with decreased travel and meeting time, many teams have invested in robust virtual training, utilizing senior staff or affordable third-party consultants to provide internal professional development to staff. Remote trainings have included topics like conducting virtual donor visits or DE&I. One university encouraged employees to take its university's management training and change management courses. Many organizations note that

attendance at remote trainings was near full participation.

Hiring and Onboarding Virtually

- **Even if you are on a "cold chill" with hiring, remain in touch with candidates**. The freeze won't last forever; deploy consistent communication with applicants.
  - If you're currently conducting a search, there is no need to offer a play-by-play update, but customize communication to each candidate and let them know that they are active and front of mind. If you are unable to move the search forward in the immediate-term, continue to share brief updates about the success of the team (e.g., campaign accomplishments, leadership changes) and the excitement of their candidacy.
  - Be transparent. Candidates who are actively looking will need brief updates and additional timeline information so they can make a decision that's best for them.
- **If you make a hire, think critically about your virtual onboarding practices**. Convert your welcome packet to a PDF. Make sure that you schedule virtual meetings with key members of the team in their first two weeks to 30 days, and some organizations have ordered lunch for delivery to their new hire's home. Check in frequently the first week to make sure that the new team member feels supported.

Management, Metrics, and Performance Reviews

- **Address anxiety around performance reviews**: Instead of staying firm on gift officer metrics, consider using a 9-month timeline (pre-COVID) for evaluations. This provides a clearer picture of actual accomplishments and reduces the anxiety of performances being hindered by the pandemic. Looking ahead, most institutions' goals and priorities haven't changed but their projections have shifted slightly. Redefine new goals based on everyone's new normal.
- **Lean into managing more than ever**, especially around performance reviews. Ask team members, "Do you have what you need to do your job?" Show that you care about their well-being and check in often, but in a more meaningful way, versus just asking "How are you doing?" Many are conditioned not to complain because others in the world may have it worse, so instead ask, "What is one new habit that you've developed?" or "What do you know now about remote work that you wished you had known in the beginning?"

Inclusivity and Belonging

- As Fosslien and Duffy state in their book *No Hard Feelings*, "**Diversity** is having a seat at the table, **inclusion** is having a voice, and **belonging** is having that

voice be heard." As a rule of thumb and to help manage stress levels, consider everyone's voice and remain inclusive.

- **Keep employees engaged, positive, and feeling authentically included**. Proactive management – and training for managers – as mentioned above are important components in keeping staff engaged. We cannot assume all managers have the ability to manage during a time of great change, so provide the support.

- **Brainstorm innovative ideas with the team. Be inclusive and include all organizational levels and areas.** Take the time now to schedule a series of virtual retreats so that everyone can be involved with the strategic planning or DE&I efforts – now is an ideal time, especially at the beginning of fiscal year.

- **Communication to everyone.** Task every leader within the organization to check in on each member. Share weekly updates and create access opportunities for dialogue so that everyone's voices are heard.

Spend Time Strategizing
Now is an ideal time to:

- **Conduct research on peer organizations**. Whether it's fundraising, alumni engagement or messaging, now is an ideal time to explore what others are doing in the industry.

- **Reassess your brand**. Charge your inclusion council (i.e. DE&I committee) or create a team to evaluate and update how your organizational culture and values are expressed throughout the organization and its various channels. Examine your web site and social media presence and conduct focus groups with volunteers to get honest reflections. This will boost employee morale and assist with engaging future employees and stakeholders.

- **Reassess your employee hiring processes**. How can you make applying, interviewing, the candidate experience, and onboarding a positive experience? Think about your HR practices as marketing for your organization: how well are you reinforcing your brand?