

Team Connection During COVID

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1. Background

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to protect patients and staff, the clinical trials office (CTO) made the decision to work primarily remotely. This shift created a new team dynamic and an array of unique challenges for managers. There were employees feeling isolation from the team, but also at home in their personal lives. A number of staff members had recently been hired, some just weeks or days prior to the sudden remote work situation. Others hired during the past year had to learn the job and meet the team they are working with solely through a remote connection. Managers have had to deal with burnout, discouragement, and disconnection with the employees they are supervising. In order to combat these challenges, our program managers and project administrators implemented creative initiatives and activities to promote connection within their teams.

2. Goals

We hope the team connection efforts with leadership and employee engagement during this remote time period will lead to decreased turnover, increased job satisfaction, maintenance of a team element, productivity (accrual rate), more help between team members being offered, and less burnout with the efforts to maintain our team connection. Our plan is to create online surveys with both open-ended and Likert Scale questions that will be sent to the employees to gather qualitative and quantitative data on the impact of their management's team connection and employee engagement efforts.

3. Solutions and Methods

Approaches implemented to facilitate team connection include conducting weekly or bi-weekly team meetings with cameras on (if available) to help establish a personal connection. Meetings may include: discussions on CTO updates, standard operating procedures (SOP) reviews, team goals, team games (House Party, etc.), "getting-to-know-you" activities, trivia questions, team lunches, coordinating help between employees/teams, guest speakers, study spotlights, service projects, team building activities, and shout-outs to team members going above and beyond. Other activities include individual weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly manager check-ins with each team member; weekly assignments for team members to reach out to an assigned team member one-on-one; after-hours virtual team get-togethers, including employees' families and significant others; and department retreats where gift cards for food delivery are provided, which would allow for a departmental lunch.

4. Outcomes

From the limited data collected at this time, and written comments from team members, it appears that activities designed to facilitate team interaction do have a positive impact on the team and individual's work satisfaction. In the one team surveyed, the average of a self-reported "joy" indicator (scale of 1-10, with 10 being the highest) improved from 5.75 to 6.33 after the implementation of several team activities including an after-work virtual get-together, check-in questions during the team meetings, and weekly reach-out assignments for one-on-one team interaction. Additionally, on an anonymous survey,

73 percent of employees that had attended bi-monthly optional team-building activities said they were a worthwhile way to connect as a team, with the remaining 27 percent saying that they were somewhat worthwhile.

5. Lessons Learned

It does appear that continuing to hold activities that promote team connection and employee engagement is in the best interest of teams, individual employees, and the institution. From early observation, it does seem that when such activities are optional, the attendance is lower, which in turn lowers the number of people impacted. Our plan is to continue to work on creating team connection activities and implement department-wide surveys to measure the effectiveness of those activities. As local regulations allow, we will also be implementing periodic in-person events.