



THE RETURNING TO WORK
HANDBOOK
REFLECTIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS

ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

Organizations across the globe are going through a period of great change and uncertainty. Entire teams, departments and businesses have been forced to adjust the way they work by employing new tools, learning new processes and solving new problems. As a manager, it is likely that you are on the forefront of this experience, navigating your team and organization through difficult decisions and uncharted territory. While riding these waves of transformation, it is important to remember that this will not last forever. Planning for the future when your organization will return to a level of normalcy is key to ensuring that lessons learned during this period do not go to waste.

Managers bear a lot of responsibility in the transition to “normal.” It may not be the normal you were accustomed to before, but it will be a transition to something more permanent and stable. You will be responsible for maintaining performance and motivation while your team grapples with another shift in the way they work. This transition and new normal will be different for every organization. Although the specific leadership challenges you face will be unique, the fundamentals of leadership are the same. To ensure success and engagement within

your team, you must communicate consistently and effectively and provide clarity to your team. However, it is during times of rapid change that people often struggle to take the time necessary to reflect on what experience has taught them. To create a strategy for successful transition and establishment of a new normal, leaders must reflect.

This handbook is designed to guide every manager navigating this transition through a new lens, by providing strategies influenced by your own reflections. You will begin setting a base by processing the change that has occurred before moving on to evaluate your team's goals and performance during this period all while considering strategies for your team's transition to a new normal.

Maintaining your team members' success and engagement throughout this transition will enable them to develop even while facing unpredictable challenges. Situational Leadership® provides a framework through which leaders can maximize their skills and confidently lead under any circumstance. Effectively influencing others and driving behavior change will give you the agility you need to change leadership styles for any situation.

PROCESSING CHANGE

It can be easy to get caught up in the whirlwind of responsibilities associated with organizational change and transition. However, it is paramount that you take the time to reflect on this experience so that you can effectively process the changes your organization experienced and move forward. Your team members will be looking to you for clarity during this transition phase and, to provide them with that, you first need to establish it for yourself.

“Diagnose” is the first of the four key competencies in Situational Leadership®. To effectively diagnose, you need to reflect on the situation and approach it with a clear mind.

PROCESSING CHANGE: REFLECTION

Use the reflection questions below to compare where you are today versus where you were before your organization went through this shift. Use the space below each question to record your thoughts.



How has your day-to-day work experience changed? Think about your physical work setup, the type of work you do and with whom you communicate.



How has day-to-day communication changed within your team? Consider the mode of communication, frequency and content.

PROCESSING CHANGE: REFLECTION



How has organization-wide communication changed? How do your employees know what is going on in the organization as a whole? Consider the mode of communication, frequency and content.



What does work-life balance look like on your team today? If work-life balance has changed, think about what caused this change and the role you play as a manager.



How has the team you manage changed during this period? Consider the number of team members, the type of work they do and the expectations set for them.



How would you describe your team's current engagement? Are your employees motivated and how are you measuring this? How does this compare to their levels of engagement under normal circumstances?



How have identifiers for success changed for your team? Many employees' annual goals may have been seriously derailed through no fault of their own. What variables do you consider in measuring those employees' success?

After considering those questions, it is likely that several of the changes on which you reflected were positive. While change can be uncomfortable and prolonged periods of uncertainty may never be welcome, change often provides opportunities for growth and positive transformation. It can also shine a light on areas that need improvement. Consider the strategies on the following pages to assist you and your team members in contemplating the change your organization has experienced. This will provide you with valuable information when considering adjustments for your transition toward a new normal.

PROCESSING CHANGE: STRATEGIES

- **If you noted any positive changes when considering the Reflection section, document them.** Determine what you can do as a manager to maintain those positive changes as your team transitions to your permanent team culture or work process. Not all changes may be transferable, but the ones that are could cause your workforce to be more engaged and productive than ever.

- **If you noted any negative changes when considering the questions in the Reflection section, document them.** Though change can bring about innovation and opportunities, not every idea works or should be made permanent. Managers also found themselves under unusual amounts of stress that may have caused them to create situations that do not accurately mirror

their organization's culture. Though there is no shame in making mistakes, it is important to be firm in ensuring that those mistakes do not have permanent ramifications, such as loss of trust or talent. Document those negative changes and consider how you can prevent them from bleeding into your team permanently.

- **Openly communicate your experiences with your team.** Your team is looking to you for leadership more than ever. As you prepare to transition past this period, take the time to talk to your team members about what you have experienced. Vulnerability with your employees builds trust and may provide them with the confidence they need to voice their own experiences or concerns. Remember, this is not a performance discussion or an excuse to vent your frustrations, but simply a way to keep lines of honest communication open throughout the transition period.

- **Solicit productive feedback from your team.** To get a complete vision of how this change has affected your team, it is important that you provide them with an outlet to give you feedback. It is also crucial to be thoughtful about this process so you can gather productive input. You may consider an anonymous form through which your employees can indicate new processes that worked for them and those that did not or a reflection session where you prepare areas of discussion to solicit your employees' opinions. For this to be successful, it is key that your employees trust you and are confident they will not incur negative consequences for respectfully voicing their honest viewpoint.

EVALUATING YOUR GOALS

It is unlikely that, at the beginning of the year when many organizations make their goals, any organization expected to experience so much disruption and confusion. For most organizations, it may be unrealistic to expect teams and individuals to adhere to goals they set at that time. However, it's important that your employees know what they are working toward and, as your workforce transitions to its new normal, you will need to be prepared to communicate the organization's goals as well as individuals' goals to your team members. To effectively communicate new goals to your team, you need to make sure those goals are clearly defined and be prepared to give your employees the bigger picture of where your organization started this year, where you are now and where you will finish.

Situational Leaders assess both ability and willingness when considering an individual's Performance Readiness® to perform a task. The same principle can be applied towards the tasks necessary for an individual to complete a goal.

EVALUATING YOUR GOALS: REFLECTION

Use the following reflection questions to consider your previous goals and jump-start conversations around new goals. Use the space below each question to record your thoughts.



What were your organization's main goals before this period of change? How was your team connected to those goals? If those goals are unattainable now, have new goals been clearly communicated?



What were your team's main goals before this period of change?

Will you still be trying to achieve any of these goals?

EVALUATING YOUR GOALS: REFLECTION



Which of your team's goals are still attainable? Do you need to adjust any timelines? Have you communicated this information to the necessary parties?



Which of your team's goals are no longer attainable? When will these goals be attainable, if ever? Have you communicated this information to the necessary parties?



Have your team's priorities changed? Sometimes change reveals new opportunities that may alter your team's focus. For example, if you have identified a need for an online service for your customers, you may want to adjust your goals accordingly.



Have you identified any new goals for your team? Was your team consulted in establishing these goals? Have these goals been communicated to your team?



What were your individual team members' goals before this period of change? Are they still expected to achieve any of these goals? Have you discussed their goals with them recently?



Have you established any new goals for your team members? Were they consulted about these goals? Have these goals been clearly communicated to them?

EVALUATING YOUR GOALS: REFLECTION



What factors will you consider in your individual team members'

goals? The previous variables by which you measured your team members' success may no longer be the best way to accurately quantify their success in their role. For example, if sales numbers will not accurately reflect the contribution a salesperson is making on your team and organization, how else can you calculate their impact?

It is important to understand that these reflection questions are not designed to establish new goals for your team, but instead help you look back on the past several months and consider where communication gaps may have occurred or additional clarity may be helpful. Communication and clarity are of the utmost importance when establishing goals on an organizational, team or individual level. As a manager, it is your responsibility to confirm that your team members know exactly what is expected of them and that they are working toward realistic goals. Use the following strategies to set clear expectations as your team transitions to their new normal.

EVALUATING YOUR GOALS: STRATEGIES

- **Ensure the information you have about the organization's, team's and team members' goals is correct.** When everyone is grappling with the day-to-day challenges of change and transition, it can be tempting to rely too heavily on unspoken understandings or even spoken understandings that are interpreted differently by different parties. As you prepare to communicate any new goals with your team members, it is important to be 100% sure that you are communicating the same goals as other team leads. This may be as simple as a clarifying email with all necessary parties or as involved as a dedicated meeting to establish new goals.

- **Review your team's goals.** If you haven't already, take the time to look at your team's goals from before this organizational change and honestly evaluate whether or not they are attainable now. Consider what would need to be done to make these goals achievable (e.g., timeline shift, adding resources, hiring additional employees, etc.). Alert the necessary parties and reassess the goals that need to be adjusted.

- **Manage expectations.** It can be tempting to want to keep your team on track for the goals they established at the beginning of the year. However, being an effective manager and leader means being consistent and reliable. If your team is going to be unable to meet their goals at the necessary level of quality, be upfront with the necessary parties and be proactive in setting new, achievable goals. If not, you may risk losing the trust of your team members by putting them through unnecessary strain.

EVALUATING YOUR GOALS: STRATEGIES

- **Proactively communicate new goals.** Your team relies on you to keep them in the loop. There may never be a perfect time to do this but do whatever you can to be proactive in providing clear, concise communication around your team's goals. During this transitional period, it is more important than ever that they understand the organization's vision and what they are working toward.

- **Be consistent in describing your organization's, team's and team members' goals.** As your team members return to business as usual, it's likely that they will have a lot of questions around what the goals and expectations are moving forward. It's important that you are able to give clear, consistent answers every time. You could do this by keeping documentation of all relevant goals on hand. It could save you and your team members a lot of confusion and provide confidence that everyone is on the same page.

- **Check in on individual goals.** If you haven't recently had a meeting to ensure same-page status for your individual team members' goals, it's important that you do so during this transition period. Whether the individual's goals are changing or not, it's important to check in and gain clarity on any concerns your team members may have about their ability to meet their goals. In some cases, you may need to rethink all of an individual's goals for the year. Regardless of the level of change, consistent communication is key to providing clear, achievable objectives.

ASSESSING TEAM PERFORMANCE

You led your team through unprecedented change and that alone is cause for celebration for everyone involved. However, in the rush to get back to normal, it can be too easy to gloss over individuals' performance during this time. Even if your organization doesn't have a formal performance evaluation process, this is a good time to reflect on the individuals on your team, their performance when faced with intense change and what you can do to lead them through this transition and enable them to develop.

Assessing Performance Readiness® is an important part of the Situational Leadership® process. To be successful, make sure you're breaking the task down to its specific parts.

ASSESSING TEAM PERFORMANCE: REFLECTION

Use the reflection questions below to prompt evaluation of your team members' performance and identify where you need to step in. Use the space below each question to record your thoughts.



Do you feel your team was successful during this period? How do you measure this success (e.g., revenue, products developed, customer feedback, etc.)?



What were some of your team's standout accomplishments? Have you voiced these opinions to your team? Why do these accomplishments stand out to you? Are there any connecting factors between these accomplishments?



What were some of your team's failures during this period? Have you discussed these with your team? Are there any connecting factors between these failures?



Were there any individuals on your team who went above and beyond, exceeding expectations? If so, did you reward their efforts in any way? How can you keep their momentum going?



Were there any individuals who performed poorly and displayed a negative attitude that harmed the team? If so, did they face any consequences? How can you prevent this behavior in the future?

ASSESSING TEAM PERFORMANCE: REFLECTION



Was anyone on your team unable to work at all? If so, how do you plan to reengage this individual as you return to normal?



Do you feel your team maintained a positive attitude during this period? If so, how will you reward them? What can you do to maintain this positivity as your team transitions to a new normal?



Do you feel your team displayed a negative attitude during this period? If so, how will you address this with them? What can you do to improve their motivation as your team transitions to a new normal?



Did you learn anything new about your team members during this period? This might be a skill or professional interest you did not know they had. It could also be an area of insecurity in their performance.

It is important to give your team members recognition for their hard work, especially during times of uncertainty. Many employees put in the extra effort even while under intense personal stress to help their organization through these difficult times. However, it is also important that employees understand that poor performance or attitudes did not fly under the radar. Honest, accurate evaluation of your employees is the only way to encourage development and stop regression. Use the following strategies to start conversations with employees and maintain success and engagement throughout the transition to your new normal.

ASSESSING TEAM PERFORMANCE: STRATEGIES

- **Celebrate your team's victories.** It is important not to brush your team's wins aside in the eagerness to get back on track. Even if it's simply verbal recognition or an email shoutout, do what you can to make sure your team knows their hard work is appreciated.

- **Discuss areas of improvement with your team.** Even though your team may never face a situation like this again, it is still important to learn from the mistakes that may have been made. If anything, periods of change can often bring unforeseen problems to the light in a way that allows your team to grow immensely if addressed. Have an open and honest discussion with your team about areas where you need to improve as a group. This isn't about calling out individuals in front of the team, but about collaborating as a team to find out how to boost the entire group.

- **Reward individuals who went above and beyond.** If you haven't already, think of what you can do to show your appreciation to those team members that went the extra mile to make your team successful during a period of dubiety. Meet with them one-on-one, in-person or through video to recognize their accomplishments and discover what you can do to encourage their development.

- **Address the performance needs of individuals who struggled.** Not everyone can manage their performance effectively during times of change. You may have a team member whose performance

slipped or who displayed a negative attitude that hurt your team. It is important that you have a one-on-one meeting with this individual to address their performance needs and find out what you can do to improve their engagement as you prepare to transition.

- **Maintain open lines of communication with sidelined employees.**
As your team returns to working normally, any team members that were unable to work under the unusual circumstances will be expecting to hear from you. Whatever your decision may be regarding working with them moving forward, it is important that you keep them up to date on all relevant information. Confusion can quickly lead to frustration, so being upfront and honest about any information you have is essential.

- **Establish expectations around processes that changed during this period.** Your team may have begun using a new tool or applying new skills when they needed to adapt to a new way of working. If those changes had a positive impact and you want to employ them moving forward, be sure you communicate your expectations to your team clearly. Likewise, if there were any tools or processes used during this time that you do not want to continue applying when working normally, communicate your expectations to your team.

ASSESSING TEAM PERFORMANCE: STRATEGIES

- **Assess your team's success and engagement throughout the transition.** Leadership is never a one-time event. It's important that you continue to take a pulse check for your team's success and engagement as you transition back to normal. Don't assume that just because things are returning to normal that success and engagement will improve on their own. Everyone reacts to change differently, and your team members need you to be able to step in if their performance begins to slip.



EXECUTING THE TRANSITION

Transitions by definition mean change. Even if it's returning to something familiar, your employees will once again have to upend their way of working to change to a new normal. This will look different for every organization and for every employee within each organization. Regardless of the specifics of your organization's transition, what is most important for your team members is that you have a plan and it is clearly communicated to them.

“Adapt” is one of the core competencies of Situational Leadership®. During times of change and disruption, it's important to be flexible and to adapt to the current circumstances.

EXECUTING THE TRANSITION: REFLECTION

To help you think about the different ways your organization's transition may affect your employees, consider the following reflection questions. Use the space below each question to record your thoughts.



Will your team members be going through this transition simultaneously or separately? Whether employees are transitioning from remote work to an office, part-time to full-time or any other change, timing is important.



Do your team members have a way to communicate their transition preferences? Individual employees may have specific concerns about their situation. Are they involved in their personal transition plans?



Have you communicated to your team the specifics of their transition? How are you going about this communication? Is there a communication standard across your organization?



How long will your official transition period be? Do you have a specific date by which you expect everyone to be in some semblance of a permanent work life?



Have you adjusted deadlines to accommodate a transition period? Are your employees expected to keep the same level of productivity?

EXECUTING THE TRANSITION: REFLECTION



What do you consider to be different about the new normal? How would day-to-day life change for you and your employees?



How will you measure a successful transition? What are the variables that determine whether this transition is a success or a failure?



How will you measure an individual's success during this transition? This could be speed of transition, upkeep of performance levels during transition or whatever aspect is most important to your organization's goals.



Is there anything you learned from transitioning at the beginning of this crisis that you will apply to this transition? Consider some of your reflections on what worked and what did not from the previous sections. Do any of them apply here?

The purpose of reflecting on the past several months and on the positive and negative changes that occurred is for you to be able to take that information and make more informed decisions in the future. As you transition, remember that this is not just back to normal but to a new normal. It is rare that, as a manager, you get an opportunity to bring your team back to square one and assess what works and what does not. This is your chance to set your team up for even greater success than they could have achieved without disruption. It all comes down to how you navigate this transition. Use the following strategies to guide your team and allow them to return to work stronger than ever.

EXECUTING THE TRANSITION: STRATEGIES

- **Ease your team into transition discussions.** During a time where everything seems to be constantly changing, the last thing your team needs is for you to spring a sudden transition on them. Start communication early and get an understanding of your team's concerns. The earlier you can involve them in these conversations the more the transition can be tailored to their needs within reason. You don't want to wait until after a company-wide email has gone out to find out that one of your key members won't be able to transition within that schedule.

- **Be sure to check with the appropriate parties before communicating specifics to your team.** Your team is likely to have a lot of questions, especially as other businesses begin to transition. However, it's important that you are confident that any information you give is correct. Confusion caused by different sources giving different information will only make the transition more difficult and cause unnecessary frustration. As such, it's better to keep your team members waiting and ensure them that you will let them know as soon as you can than it is to give them what you've heard most recently.

- **Provide clear, specific communication.** Communication for the transition may be company-wide, but if you are responsible for your team's transition, make sure you always provide clear communication that they can easily refer back to, such as an email or an official document. Be prepared to answer questions, but always check with the proper source if you are unsure.

- ❑ **Clarify performance expectations during transition.** What may seem obvious to you, may not be obvious to one of your team members. If you expect certain deadlines to be met regardless of transition activities, make sure the team members involved are aware. Likewise, if there are some assignments you don't want your employees stressing over while they adjust, let them know.
- ❑ **Provide your team with what you consider the metrics of a successful transition to be.** Your team probably wants to transition as successfully as possible. However, their definition of success may be different than yours. Make sure you are on the same page by letting them know the variables that are most important to you during this transition.
- ❑ **Set expectations around what you want to see in the new normal.** If there is something you want to see from your employees that is different than the expectations for them before the crisis, make sure that is clear. Each employee may interpret this transition differently, and some may expect things to return to the way they were before. It's your responsibility to get your team on the same page and check in with them often during this transition to make sure your expectations are being understood.
- ❑ **Don't be afraid to overcommunicate.** During times of change, it is always better to overcommunicate than under communicate. Though there will certainly be a time where your team will operate more autonomously again (and there may be individuals who are ready for that earlier than others), for a successful transition, it is extremely important that each team member is confident they are on the same page as you.

Effective leadership is more important NOW than ever.

Managers need to utilize the four competencies of

Situational Leadership®:

**Diagnose,
Adapt,
Communicate
and Advance**

to help performers develop through

times of extreme change.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

To further improve your leadership skills while navigating the unique challenges organizations are facing today, please download the **Remote Manager Handbook: How to Manage Others and Maintain Engagement**. In addition, look out for the **Returning to Work Handbook: Reflection and Strategies for Employees**, which will be released shortly, and future change management content developed by The Center for Leadership Studies.

Situational Leadership®: Building Leaders provides leaders with an action-oriented framework that increases both the quantity and quality of performance conversations by matching an individual's Performance Readiness® for a specific task with the appropriate leadership style.

If you are interested in additional resources about how to lead more effectively by utilizing the Situational Leadership® Model, visit **[situational.com](https://www.situational.com)**.