Experiences, Changes, and Growth Through the COVID-19 Pandemic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a significant paradigm shift in how social service organizations operate and manage personnel. The crisis has fundamentally altered the dynamics within employee, manager, and client relationships, rendering established modes of on-site and replacing them with new remote-based protocols. These changes may alter the way organizations and employees are managed for the foreseeable future. In this essay, I share reflections, lessons learned, work role changes, and growth opportunities that occurred because of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, with emphasis on my experience of transitioning into a remote work organization.

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To believe that life after the pandemic will return to normal as we knew it is unlikely. Nevertheless, I have come to terms with this realization through my voyage of the five stages of grief model (following the Kübler-Ross model). I now understand the centrality of healing oneself first and tapping into the power of a viable support system. By prioritizing self-care, I acquired a self-efficacy mindset, which enabled me to effect positive change in my personal and professional life. As a result, I gained the confidence to contribute to the organizational and operational goals of the Santa Clara County Social Services Agency during its transition to functioning as a responsive and successful remote-working organization.

As BASSC Director Dr. Sarah Carnochan, Ph.D. conveyed in her presentation "Remote Work: BASSC Critical Information Exchange," changing to a remote work organization is a complex process that can lead to an entire organizational culture change. Moreover, Dr. Carnochan's research indicates that a remote work transition plan needs to assess and address many components to ensure successful implementation. Examples of components to consider include: functional structures, employee eligibility, leadership culture, communication processes, teamwork and collaboration systems, technology support systems, policies & procedures, protocols, employee engagement, social relationships, deliverables & productivity measurements, and accountability. Primarily, Dr. Carnochan's research helps practitioners understand the correlations between employer and employee benefits and costs, along with the factors influencing the effectiveness of remote work. Santa Clara County incorporated all the above factors and more within multiple iterations of the remote work transition plan created for our internal departments during the pandemic.

From a staff development and training perspective, the remote work transition plan I participated in developing required a unique set of new technical (laptop systems, VPN, software, monitors, office equipment, printed materials) and adaptive considerations (teleworking agreements, virtual communication strategies, curriculum conversion from instructor-led to webinar or e-learning modalities, virtual meetings with staff and partners, virtual training environments, virtual onboarding protocols, virtual exams and assessments, employee evaluations, remote team management) to adequately accommodate the nuances of our responsibilities and staff needs. Of these two sets of considerations, technical and adaptive, we faced the largest challenges and greatest learning opportunities when addressing the need for adaptive management and team leadership in the operational remote work environment. Although there are many resources such as periodical publications, popular articles, and books written about remote work or teleworking, few academic studies or peer-reviewed articles have been generated regarding leading remote organizations during a pandemic. Fortunately, most organizations and leadership teams are aware of the unprecedented changes brought forth by the pandemic, understand the extraordinary circumstances, and willingly invest in and equip their management staff to ensure a successful transition and implementation process. Likewise, it is essential to recognize a considerable

gap between the theoretical and practical application of remote work methodologies.

Not surprisingly, learning how to manage and lead a team remotely was simultaneously humbling and rewarding, providing me with an immensely introspective and invaluable growth opportunity. Furthermore, having participated in the BASSC program, I had the serendipitous chance of receiving a lecture by Evelyn Hengeveld-Bidmond, on the topic of "The Manager as a Leader." The timely lessons learned from this lecture on supporting an organization in achieving its mission and goals, managing people and productivity rather than managing tasks, conveying a compelling vision, setting and communicating goals, providing support and encouragement, and providing positive reinforcement and feedback all proved highly pertinent to managing a high-stress, remote working environment. Thus, this presentation helped me set the foundation I needed to mitigate the unexpected issues that would soon arise from managing a remote workforce and developing my own new, virtual management style.

Another important lesson I learned is that employees with appropriate autonomy are more likely to have higher job satisfaction, improved performance, reduced stress, improved work-life balance, and lower inclination to leave their jobs, helping minimize county employee attrition rates. For example, according to researchers, "Through independently managing her own process to complete work tasks, the remote worker with control over work process can minimize the resources used through most effectively allocating the energy, time and attention needed to complete work tasks" (Kiburz, 2016, page 20). To accomplish this goal, it is essential to establish effective, clear communication channels, feedback loops, and expectations between supervisors and staff. However, it should be noted that providing too much autonomy without well-established guidelines can lead to work inefficiencies, a reduction in productivity, and a loss of workplace accountability.

From a personal growth perspective, the changes to my role in response to COVID-19 have provided me with many new opportunities to participate in profoundly rewarding extracurricular projects. Each new project and responsibility I have acquired has challenged my capacity, confidence, and competencies while helping me expand my exposure within the agency and build new, valuable skill sets. For example, as a member of the Program Support Research & Evaluation (PSRE) Days of Service Project Design Team, a small team and I closely partnered with the Donor Experience Coordinator team from Second Harvest of Silicon Valley to organize and launch a fundraising campaign. This task required extensive research, planning, cross-functional collaboration with the community-based agency, approval from the Board of Supervisors, marketing strategies, agency-wide advertisement, and public service announcements.

The campaign was a success and quickly surpassed its goal of raising over $5000, equaling more than 10,000 meals to help address food insecurity for individuals, families, and communities in Santa Clara County impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, this project has gained the Board of Supervisors' attention, fostering their intention to scale up the project scope in the future to include county-wide applications.

Conclusion

Reflecting on all of the lessons I learned since transitioning to a semi-permanent remote work environment and leading a team virtually since earlier this year in March of 2020, I can confidently say that I have grown as a person, a manager, and a leader. Additionally, I have learned through my personal experiences and the feedback I have received from my unit to acknowledge and act responsively to the advantages and disadvantages of working remotely for an extended period. Many of these lessons and life skills are applicable in any leadership situation, such as understanding that employees perceive opportunities of higher autonomy as a reflection of trust, value, and improved relationships with their managers. Above all, I have learned that even the most turbulent and unprecedented times can have

a silver lining and incredible opportunities for individual personal and professional growth, alongside positive societal development.
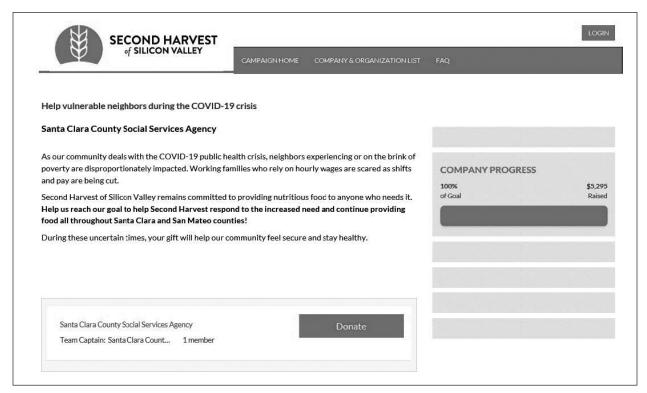
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Addendum

1. PSRE Days of Service Design Team Fundraising Campaign with Second Harvest Food Bank:

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B.

C.