



Seven Key Competencies to Lead Through What Employees Are Saying About COVID-19

Mindful leadership is needed now more than ever. We are entering a new phase of leading through adversity, looking for solid ground in this shifting landscape as we refocus our efforts and realign our teams. We need leaders who can stay calm and not reactive in the midst of disruption – leaders who can lead with courage and compassion.

Leaders who can lead through the disruption and uncertainty while also gearing up for opportunities that lie ahead – getting [“ready to jump forward in a reviving economy.”](#) (Forbes) To get a clearer sense of what employees most need, eMindful invited individual

employees (via a Pulse survey in April 2020) to share their top concerns. Not surprisingly, the responses spanned a broad range of concerns, including physical health and safety, feelings of vulnerability, concern for loved ones, isolation, mental health... Anxiety around job loss. Financial worries. Grief. Some were heartbreaking, such as this concern shared by a respondent: [“Dealing with the death of a family member \(sister\) as the result of covid-19.”](#)

Some expressed the sense of overwhelm: [“Not getting my work done at home because I’m multitasking being a mom, teacher, employee, and spouse.”](#) Many expressed fear, such as:

“The fear of contracting the virus and giving it to a loved one.” Some mentioned fear of becoming sick, being hospitalized and “dying a painful death.” Others stated fears of financial instability, citing the impact on businesses and the economy at large, concerned with “how the government will quickly improve support to medical workers and small businesses.” A number of respondents mentioned uncertainty, the challenge of not knowing what’s ahead, not knowing when or how – or whether – we will fully recover.

Many expressed concerns around their mental health:

“Maintaining my sobriety.” “Loss of connection with community.” “Loneliness and worry about loved ones far away.” Others spoke to the challenges of “staying focused, energetic, and productive” while working from home.

With these concerns in mind, eMindful came up with a set of guidelines to help you support your teams in the months ahead. You might first take a moment to acknowledge how far you’ve come

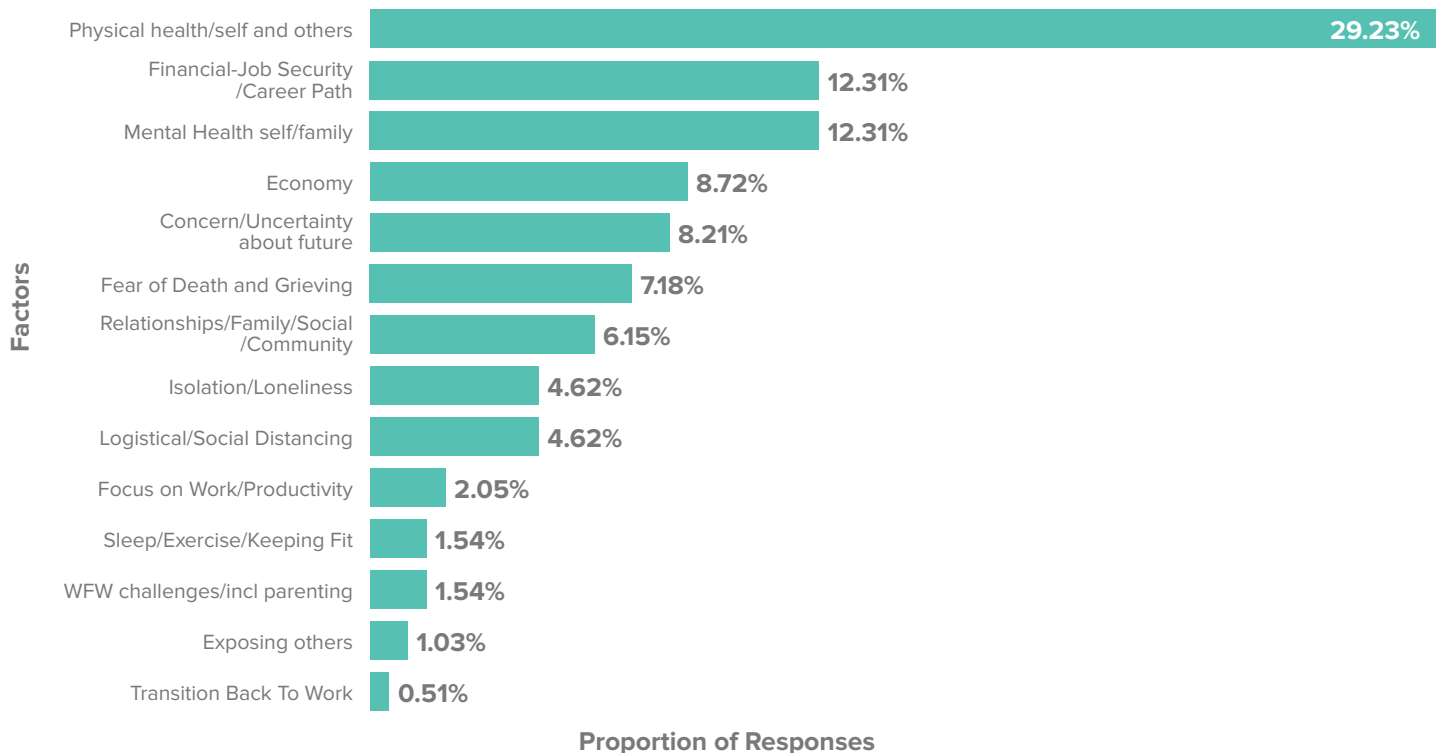
in the past weeks and months. Consider the challenges you and your team has faced. What are you most proud of? Consider the strengths you called forth – courage and decisive action, adaptability, teamwork, commitment to a greater cause... In what ways did the people in your organization rise to the challenges?

Looking ahead, what’s most needed?

The projection

As a society, we will continue to experience pervasive stress and declines in wellbeing and productivity. Looking out to the next 90 days, how can your organization meet the challenges – and even flourish through adversity? John Kenneth Galbraith said that “all great leaders have had one characteristic in common: the willingness to confront unequivocally the major anxiety of their people in their time.”

This bar chart shows the relative frequency of employees’ top concerns
COVID-19 Pulse Survey



What do your people most need, now and in the months ahead?

Individuals will need:

- Mindful leadership – leaders who listen; who are empathic, supportive, and flexible.
- Mindfulness practices to support calmness and emotional wellbeing and build resilience
- Access to health and well-being resources. EAP and other forms of support will be critical in the months ahead to help employees manage isolation, illness, death of loved ones, loss of purpose and meaning, and other life challenges.
- A positive and supportive culture, including flexible schedules and work from home options.

Family was a leading concern among survey responses – concerns related to the wellbeing of one’s children and extended family, family members who are at risk, and those who have lost jobs or are otherwise impacted. One respondent expressed concern for “my vulnerable family members and them dying... my mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, my in-laws, my brother... finances of my family members as my dad’s wages were cut by 30%... my brother got laid off from his job.”

A supportive and flexible work environment will be important to help employees balance the demands of work with the needs of their families – along with assurance that measures are in place to keep onsite work as safe as possible so that employees don’t take the virus home to at-risk family members.

Leaders will need:

- The support of their peers – structured opportunities to share challenges and learnings across the organization.
- Flexibility as they too balance the needs of their families, self-care, and work.
- Organizational planning, such as:
 - » Optional or phased return to onsite work, and blending onsite with virtual.

- » Changes to the onsite environment – social distancing, new standards of sanitation, and other protective measures.
 - » Financial resources – such as FSA/HSA, 401k, and access to financial advice.
 - » Benefits planning for 2021 – what to consider in the year ahead
 - » Ways to help employees adjust to the next normal.
- Mindful leadership skill development – such as mindfulness training and individual/group coaching – to strengthen critical competencies

Seven Critical Competencies for Leaders

1. Presence

We can define presence as the quality of being grounded in the present moment, attuned to the current reality – to what is actually happening rather than what one thinks should be happening. Presence is the ability to be with people and things just as they are – showing up authentically and listening attentively, able to relate to the experience of others with understanding and compassion.

Mindfulness practice for strengthening presence:

Pause to listen mindfully and fully. Listen with an open mind and open heart. Lean into the emotional tone as you relate to others and to yourself – present to the ‘felt’ or embodied experience of what’s happening.

2. Self-mastery

Uncertainty and disruption can trigger emotional reactivity. Mindful leaders are able to self-regulate – to be aware of and manage their emotional reactions, remain calm in the midst of disruption, and stay present with discomfort. They’re able to respond to challenge without being overwhelmed. They’re able to manage difficult emotions, and cultivate positive emotions such as hopefulness and gratitude.

Mindfulness practice for strengthening self-mastery:

Take a moment to notice your own emotional reaction – simply noticing without judging. Practice abdominal breathing as a way to activate the parasympathetic nervous system (i.e., the relaxation response). Bring to mind something for which you feel appreciation or gratitude. This creates a physiologic shift that will help you feel calmer and more grounded.

3. Clarity

In times of uncertainty, employees seek clarity from their leaders. One survey respondent asked: “What will happen once this is over, and where do we go from there?” Clarity is the antidote to uncertainty. It allows leaders and employees to make the best decisions and to move forward – despite uncertainty. Clarity doesn’t mean that leaders need to have all the answers. It might simply mean holding a broader perspective, and connecting that to what’s most important right now.

Mindfulness practice to support clarity:

Mindful movement is a way of releasing stress and getting out of your head. It can be thought of as meditation in motion. Focused attention on the body, the breath, and/or on your surroundings while being physically active helps clear the mind. Take a few moments to move (and breathe) before making a big decision.

4. Transparency

Max DePree said that “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality.” Employees want the truth, even when it’s not easy to hear. Effective leaders display openness and honesty around the current reality – addressing issues such as job security, financial impact to the organization, etc. with candidness and transparency.

Mindfulness practice to support the quality of transparency:

Practice being with your experience just as it is, with open-mindedness and receptivity – even if the current situation isn’t what you would choose. Take the perspective of employees to ask yourself “What would I want to know?”

5. A learning mindset

Imagine being in a kayak: Where the river runs more slowly, we can relax. We can see what’s ahead. When it narrows, we enter a state of heightened moment-to-moment awareness as we engage all of our skills in order to ride the current to the best of our ability. We can expect rapid changes in the months ahead. We can no longer fall back to former and familiar ways of doing things. Leaders need an agile mindset; the ability to flow with the current reality as it unfolds. Leaders can model what it means to be on “the leading edge of learning” – creating a culture of continual learning.

Mindfulness practice to support a learning mindset:

We can intentionally let go of what no longer works – those beliefs or behaviors that don’t serve the situation at hand. As an anchor for this practice, we can connect the word “release” with the outbreath. This creates an opening for what’s most needed in this moment, and the next.

6. The ability to inspire and empower others

Bill Gates said that “As we look ahead into the next century, leaders will be those who empower others.” In times of disruption, leaders won’t have all the answers. They won’t have time to make every decision. They need to communicate the mission and then trust employees to use their best judgment and make the best decisions possible. Effective leaders know that their people are their greatest asset – that they are capable, resourceful, and innovative. They can remind their employees (and themselves) that “The work we’re doing is important and here’s why. The job each of you is doing is important.” By embodying qualities such as clarity and presence, leaders inspire others. They inspire trust and confidence.

Mindfulness practice to activate qualities that inspire and empower others:

Be intentional about how you show up. What are the qualities you want to call forth? Prime yourself with words that empower and inspire you such as: Presence. Optimism. Compassion. Clarity. Integrity. Strength. Openness.

7. The ability to build a positive culture

Effective leaders connect their teams with their shared values and purpose. They uphold a vision of a brighter future. They convey that **“Together, we will get through this”**.

They bring attention to what’s going well as a way to counter the built-in negativity bias (i.e., the problem-based focus that’s known to activate a stress response and amplify problems). They show appreciation for their employees – especially during difficult times. The wellbeing of employees has become a fundamental role of leadership. Effective leaders promote a culture of care – care of one another as well as self-care. They model and advocate self-care for their teams. This survey response offers thoughts on how we can support employees’ wellbeing: **“I would love to see super short “breaks” of info on how to get away from your desk and breathe. Less than ten minutes.”** Leaders can build mindful self-care into the culture. They can ask employees what they need in order to be and feel their best.

Mindfulness practices for creating a positive culture:

Begin meetings with a mindful minute. This sets the intention to be fully present to one another – especially needed in virtual meetings. At the end of each week, invite employees to share a positive experience, express appreciation for a coworker, or offer a tip on self-care.

The months ahead will challenge us. The concerns expressed by employees are real. Mindful leaders can meet the challenges with courage and compassion, opening the way to new opportunities, growth, and a deeply shared sense of meaning.

