

Lessons Learned During a Pandemic

In May of 2020 as I wrote my missive to the board of trustees of Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (NWTC) few expected that in May of 2021 we would still be in the throes of a coronavirus pandemic that shuttered thousands of businesses, schools, and entertainment venues. Like community technical colleges across the nation, the negative impact on NWTC and its students was rapid and severe. The population of students served by these colleges was particularly and disproportionately hard hit by the pandemic. Low income, BIPOC, rural, and first-generation immigrant students typically attend colleges such as NWTC. These same populations, however, were those heavily employed in retail, entertainment, restaurants, and hospitality, the very businesses to be shut down by the pandemic. Faced with unemployment, children left home by school closings, and substandard access to technology it is no wonder that foregoing college was one of the first sacrifices made. This decline in enrollment was exacerbated by high school graduates deciding to wait a year until higher education returned to “normal.” While less than many colleges, NWTC experienced the highest decline in enrollment of the past twenty-five years, minus 7.5%.

The staff and faculty of the college responded to this crisis in amazing and successful ways. Maintaining its pin-point focus on student success and its transformative transition to eight-week sessions, the college turned to remote delivery of services and learning, blended classes, and safely delivered on-campus, hands-on learning. There are many lessons to be learned from the changes that were made. Some of these changes resulted in improvement in processes, teaching, and learning that will continue long after the pandemic subsides. Social scientists and historians will be studying the impact of the pandemic for years to come. I offer my early and, necessarily, incomplete thoughts (in bulleted fashion) on some of the lessons learned about leadership and the work environment during a pandemic.

Leadership

- When there is no choice, rapid and transformative change can happen.
- Maintaining an institution’s intentional culture in an environment with more work being done remotely requires new strategies. These are still emerging.
- Transition to a remote work environment disrupts the existing informal internal communication and information gathering pathways. New methods of communication, including rumor control, must be intentionally established.
- Maintaining a high level of institutional energy in a remote work environment is difficult.
- Remote work requires a high level of trust in the employee and leader. If broken, it will be more difficult to regain in a remote work environment.
- It is possible to do more work remotely successfully and productively than was thought possible.
- The lack of “in the hallway” connections and relationship building inhibit partnership building.

- Likewise, essential external meetings with businesses; community initiatives, boards, and committees; and other educational institutions, suffer from the lack of in-person attendance. The typical informal knowledge transfer, personal and professional relationship building that occurs before and after the meeting, and the discovery of unplanned partnership opportunities is often missed.
- There is a need to intentionally create relationships, connecting activities in a remote environment, internally and externally.
- There is an increased risk of employees and leaders experiencing feelings of isolation, depression, or anxiety.
- The role that fear plays in a person's decision and actions even when you believe the fear is unfounded cannot be ignored.
- Sometimes you must act (spend money) to alleviate fear and/or show that you care even if you feel that the fear is unfounded or an over-reaction.
- The pandemic impacts all aspects of a person's life and therefore amplifies its impact on work as the employee adjusts to other changes in their life.

Work Environment

- Normative/acceptable behavior is different in a remote work setting vs in-person. What this new normative/acceptable behavior becomes is still emerging.
- Employee distractions at home are different than at work (family, pet, interruptions)
- Attendance at college-sponsored meetings (advisory committees, team meetings, cross-functional teams) increases and costs of meetings (food, etc.) decreases.
- There is an increased ability of the employee to attend external (to college) meetings. The cost to the college and time saved by the employee increases productivity.
- New behaviors, facilitation strategies, and "understood" norms of team/committee participation will emerge unintentionally unless intentionally addressed and reinforced.
- It is easier to anonymously disengage from a meeting and attempt to multi-task.
- Without being able to see non-verbal communication, ensuring that one's verbal communication is being understood by the listening party or that one is understanding the verbal communication of the sending party is subject to a greater propensity of misunderstanding.
- New email and instant messaging protocols need to be established.
- Use of chat, Jabber, open Teams or WebEx can increase flexibility and response time for Q & A.
- People (employees, students, public) will say things in print that they would not say verbally. This may lead to greater and more frank discussion from every person thereby improving decision-making and innovation. However, there be an increased propensity to use inappropriate, abusive, or offensive language.
- Providing services remotely has resulted in greater person-to-person contact – fewer missed appointments, fewer group sessions, more individualized assistance.
- Person-to-person contact takes more time and resources but may lead to better results.

- There is a greater reliance on metrics demonstrating output, level of activity, and goal attainment given that visual cues (such as attendance) and the reliance on observable behaviors is limited in a remote work setting.
- Work/life balance for employee changes and may become more difficult when work is done remotely at home. This will require intentional strategies by the employee, employee colleagues, and supervisors in separating at-work from off-work.
- There is an increased risk of employees experiencing feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety. Strategies need to be implemented that create a sense of belonging, affirmation, and purpose.

While these initial thoughts are necessarily incomplete, perhaps they can serve as the beginning of a robust discussion that ultimately will strengthen the college, leading to the successful acquisition of higher education and skills by all students regardless of the environment.

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