



This section is set up to provide a ready-made Brown Bag Session for you to use with employees and/or managers. Use as is, or adapt this information for a general employee group. You may reproduce as many copies as needed.

## Leading in Uncertain Times

### *Helping Employees Cope with the Pandemic*

*Quint Studer says how leaders behave right now will be remembered long after this crisis has passed. Here are some ideas for the EAP (and HR) to pass along for business leaders of their corporate clients, and in turn to keep their employees calm, focused, and informed.*

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we've all been impacted in various ways, many of them pretty dramatic. Everyone is feeling more than a little fear and anxiety about the future. If you're a business leader, says Quint Studer, lots of people are looking to you for guidance – and you have a responsibility to help those around you cope with the uncertainty.

“As human beings and as citizens, we are in this boat together, and we're all struggling with the same emotions,” says Studer, author of the *Wall Street Journal* bestseller *The Busy Leader's Handbook: How to Lead People and Places That Thrive* (Wiley, October 2019, \$28.00).

“But we're also *leaders*, and that means we can't just think of ourselves and our immediate families. We have employees, coworkers, and customers to consider as well. They're our family, too—and right now, more than ever, they need us to truly lead.

“As leaders we actually *can* have a positive impact on the employees who count on us,” Studer adds. “This is both a human responsibility and a privilege.”

So, what should business leaders do? First and foremost, says Studer, involves the need to be focused and intentional about how they are responding to the pandemic. “What you do and how you behave over the next few

weeks (or possibly months) will stay with your employees for a long time to come.”

Studer offers the following strategies for EAP practitioners to share with leaders of their corporate clients, recommendations not only for those in the C-suite, but also advice they can pass along to employees to keep them calm, focused, and informed.

**Create a plan for the business.** There's no specific advice here, as different sectors (retail, manufacturing, travel and tourism, etc.) are being affected in different ways. So are different types of employees: Some can work from home while others can't. The business leader must think through the plan and manage a response carefully. “Give it some serious attention. Don't make rash decisions—but also don't leave things to chance.

“Even if you risk a misstep, I find life usually rewards action,” Studer adds. “You may have to modify your plan as events unfold and that's okay.”

**EXERCISE:** *What is YOUR business doing differently in terms of doing business and/or managing employees as a result of the pandemic? What's working well? What needs improving?*

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**Communicate often and communicate well.** Bring everyone together by video chat or phone and communicate the plan. Hold a daily meeting if necessary. When employees



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hear nothing, they expect the worst. *They'd rather hear the truth, even if it's bad news, than live in uncertainty.* Keep the lines of communication open and make it clear you are always available to talk.

**EXERCISE:** *Not communicating often enough because "there is nothing new to report" or not communicating "well," sending memos and press releases that are vague and don't really say anything are some of the worst things that employers can do. What is YOUR business doing to keep employees informed so the rumor mill doesn't take over? Because without FACTS, gossip WILL run amok.*

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**Be honest about what you know, but don't pile it on.** Embrace the "facts, not fear" mantra you've probably seen all over the media. Discourage others from discussing the worst possible scenarios, advises Studer. "There is too much speculating, myth-spreading, and general negativity swirling around without leaders adding to it. Be the voice of calm rationality."

**EXERCISE:** *While it's important for business leaders to communicate to keep employees informed, it's vital to stick to the basics and not inundate them with too much information. With today's 24/7 news cycle, employees can hear enough on their own. They're probably already overwhelmed – they don't need their workplace to contribute to this. What is YOUR business doing to be a voice of reason?*

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**Encourage people to know the facts, but not overload on the news.** Explain that constant exposure to bad news affects our psyche. It keeps us distracted and unable to concentrate. It feeds anxiety and fear. This is not good for job performance, and even worse, it feels bad. It keeps us from enjoying our life.

**EXERCISE:** *There's a reason why major news networks usually end the broadcast with a more light-hearted feature story. They understand that too MUCH "bad" news can have a negative psychological impact. What is YOUR business doing to inform staff about the importance of NOT being "plugged in" to the news 24/7?*

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**Read up on what's going on.** The business leader needs to have a good grasp on the virus, customers, their industry, and the economy in general. "You don't have to be an authority, but you do need to know enough to help give perspective.

"This could be a full-time job in itself," notes Studer. "There is so much information out there that having a few trusted resources to turn to is key. I suggest taking advantage of membership in groups like the Chamber of Commerce and relevant trade associations. These institutions are great clearing houses of information and can effectively and efficiently keep us connected."

**Equip frontline supervisors with answers to FAQs from employees.** This is likely where employees will feel most comfortable talking. They should be shared on a company intranet.

**EXERCISE:** *What are some commonly asked questions that employees are asking? For instance: “Can I take FMLA during this time?” “I miss socializing with my work-mates. When will the break room reopen?” “Can we still have a corporate social gathering of some kind while still observing social distancing?” Ask employees what’s on their minds, and then be sure to share their responses.*

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**Relieve anxiety whenever possible, even if it’s not work-related.** This pandemic has far-reaching implications. It doesn’t just impact people’s work life; it impacts their health, personal finances, and family. As much as possible, business leaders need to be aware of employees’ worst fears, what they care about more than anything else. “This will help you calm them in a way that truly resonates.”

**EXERCISE:** *What is that employees are worried about most? Hygiene in the post-pandemic workplace? Fears over the businesses’ finances? Working remotely? NOT working remotely? Such vital information needs to be shared both individually and on a company scale. Allow respondents to remain anonymous if they would rather not be identified.*

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**Build up an emotional bank account.** *What a business leader does to keep people’s lives easier really counts right now.* Some employees may have trouble with kids when schools are shut down. Others may need to

care for elderly parents who become sick or who just need extra help with shopping and chores because they’re staying at home. “Be sensitive to individual needs and accommodate where you can,” advises Studer. “It’s a good time to build relationships.”

**Think about what the company does already that could help those impacted by the virus...** For example, some pharmacies are waiving home delivery fees for prescriptions for the elderly and others at high risk. Certain cable companies are offering free access to Wi-Fi for 60 days to students who need to move to online learning, and a moving truck company is offering to store students’ belongings for free (as they rush to vacate dorms). Some restaurants are delivering meals to high-risk people.

“Helping at a time when people really need it builds goodwill,” says Studer. “It also helps employees feel better...and it’s just the right thing to do.”

**...or find other ways your team can serve.** If the company doesn’t have a product or service needed by those who are struggling, they can still help employees can help in other ways. Examples might include delivering food or care packages to those who are quarantined. Or a team could help out nonprofits that are experiencing volunteer shortages because their usual volunteers (often seniors) are staying home. This may dramatically boost morale. “We all feel better when we can give back,” Studer explains. ■

*Quint Studer is the author of “Wall Street Journal” bestseller “The Busy Leader’s Handbook” and a lifelong businessman, entrepreneur, and student of leadership. He not only teaches it; he has done it. He has worked with individuals at all levels and across a variety of industries to help them become better leaders and create high-performing organizations. He seeks always to simplify high-impact leader behaviors and tactics for others. To learn more, visit [www.thebusyleadershandbook.com](http://www.thebusyleadershandbook.com).*

## Additional Suggestions

One of the best things a leader can do is to remind people that the coronavirus won't last forever, says Quint Studer, author of *The Busy Leader's Handbook*. "Things will get better. Helping people put this moment in time in perspective may help more than we realize."

"Tough times make great leaders," Studer adds. "People have long memories. Reputations are often built during times like these. Once this pandemic has passed and life returns to normal, employees, coworkers, and partners will remember how you behaved. They'll remember whether you held things together and led them through the hurricane... or whether you made a bad situation worse."

"We're all making choices right now that build our reputation and impact our company's brand," concludes Studer. "We owe it to ourselves and to those we lead to choose wisely."

Other tips include:

❖ **It cannot be overstated: The pandemic won't last forever.** Remember your present situation is only temporary. Rather than dwell on what you can't do right now, think about how much more you will enjoy something simple when the pandemic has passed. Going to a ballgame perhaps? Giving someone a hug? Think about those things, and how good they will feel!

❖ **Reach out to friends and family.** Lean on supportive friends for assistance – especially positive, impactful people. Stay away from negative folks as much as possible.



❖ **Limit the news.** As noted in the main story, it's good to be informed, but scrolling through pandemic post after pandemic post online, and/or leaving CNN on 24/7 is likely to make you feel worse! Turn on the evening news, then focus your attention elsewhere!

❖ **Keep in mind tough times you've gotten through before.** Death of a parent? Divorce? A job loss? Remember times in your past when you've gotten through difficulties and that you'll get through this, too!

❖ **Use humor.** What makes you laugh? Don't be afraid to binge watch some favorite TV shows (or movie) that really leave you laughing. Sometimes humor really is the best medicine.

❖ **Embrace your spiritual side.** Regardless of your religion, denomination, etc., embracing faith and hope has gotten many a person through a rough patch in life. Talk to a counselor, pastor, and/or take advantage of this time to really look within. ■

*Additional source: Brad Hoefs, founder of Fresh Hope (<https://freshhope.us>)*