

The following template can be tailored to the audience at your practice(s).

There's no doubt you've seen news reports on COVID-19, also known as Coronavirus; I want you to know the leadership team has also been following the situation closely.

Our Top Priority is Your Health and Safety

While we're working to mitigate impacts to our practice, we want to be crystal clear: your health and wellness is our top priority, now and always.

- **Stay home if you have cold- or flu-like symptoms.** Please take the necessary time to get better, seek medical advice as necessary, and prevent the spread of illness. If you've had a fever within the last 72 hours or have a persistent cough, do not come into the office. Work with the leadership as needed.
- **Take normal hygiene precautions.** Wash your hands often, don't touch your face or eyes, and clean and disinfect your work area frequently.
- **Know your resources.** We're monitoring what others are doing and listening closely to advice and directives from the [Centers for Disease Control](#), [World Health Organization](#) and other leading health organizations, and we suggest you do as well.

We know times like this can be stressful, both at home and at work—especially with the “always-on” news cycle. We encourage you to keep news in perspective, take care of yourselves by following all hygiene guidelines, getting plenty of sleep and doing what's right for you and your families. The leadership team is here to support you.

(INSERT: Statement about the Practice)

NOTE: *This will depend on your business. It could be used to show commitment and your support; what they can expect; share relevant updates or facts about the business and its status—the operations, schedules, viability, etc.; what you do know or don't know for now—(such as next steps, business hours, impacts to the staff, etc.). Consider sharing the financial health of your practice and what specific goals you will prioritize. These goals will not be the same for every practice. For example, if goal is to save jobs while meeting bank obligations, share that. If it is to make a series of changes or options to help with job security, over other, slower changes, be clear about that.*

Employees look to the leadership team during times of crisis. All leaders play a pivotal role to help relieve concerns and be a positive influence – as an individual and to the business. **Communication, behaviors, and actions must be timely, clear, frequent and supportive.**

While we personally (likely) can do very little to affect the broader crisis, we can have a meaningful impact on our own and others' experience or reaction to the crisis. Doing so helps us as much as it helps them.

Here are some ideas and actions to help reduce concern, build trust and boost productivity.



Create a crisis communication plan. To ensure the potential impacted people are informed (i.e. employees, patients, partners, vendors, community) – create a crisis communication plan. Others will be looking to the leader(s) of the practice for a response to the crisis, guidance and regular communications.

- Establish a core group and one decision maker that will manage the crisis. Assign roles (i.e. operations, communications, legal, messaging, IT security). Create one “voice of the practice” (key messages and one place to rely on updates). Identify one person to speak to the media (just in case). Address all necessary audiences and adapt messaging as needed.
- Carefully consider messaging. It must be clear - state the facts, outline the impact, and share health/safety measures. Share the practice’s priority goals and where the focus will be.
- Develop three key messages (expressing concern) for all publics (simple, no more than 9 words each – 6th/8th grade level)
- Develop both internal and external communication plans to outline how, when and what to communicate to others inside & outside of the practice.
- Keep electronic communication at the forefront of the plan. Remember that anything electronic can be shared with others in a few seconds.
- When it comes to messaging, don’t be silent. Don’t let rumors or second-guessing start. Be the first on social media to broadcast something internally and externally
- Never lie in messaging or place blame
- Don’t ignore the press or miss a deadline. Don’t reply “no comment” or say “off the record”
- Don’t speculate or fill in the gaps
- Review and adjust any policies, practices, and operations; create ways to help mitigate the situation.
- Break complex problems down into manageable parts
- Use an issue log to track & manage action items
- Communicate small wins as they happen



Share how much you care. To set the tone and make intentions clear, communicate both verbally and in writing to show care and looking out for their best interests. It will go a long way and will help settle worries knowing someone in leadership cares.



Be real with a calm delivery. To best ensure others have trust with the leaders and to build more comfort with the situation, it is important to state facts in a calm way. Escalating voice, tone and mannerisms along with sugarcoating the truth, will make the situation worse. If the answer or next steps is unknown, say something like, “At this time we don’t know, and are looking to the officials for guidelines” or “We wish we knew the answers, we are currently researching alternatives and are open to your ideas.”



Keep timely updates flowing. To be efficient and ease others’ minds, at minimum of once a week, establish a cadence for written updates so others know what to expect (i.e. Tuesdays and Thursdays at 10am). For key updates, share as soon as it is known. Share what the practice is doing, how it will happen and what is likely to happen next. Help employees feel confident potential scenarios have been discussed. Use all available communication channels including the internet, intranet (if applicable) and any other systems in place. Research options for no-to- low cost using “teaming” technology to stay connected



Share internal and external benefits. To capitalize on resources, make it easy for employees to take advantage of what’s available. For example, if a benefit is an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) rather than highlighting the term "EAP," let employees know how many visits they have at no cost to them. Sharing resources such as a state website on how to file unemployment will show good faith in looking out for their best interest. During these times, it’s helpful to share a personal success story, self or a friend, who had success using the resource. A list of a few helpful public websites listed below:

- Medical/Health Data, Tips and Guidelines:
 - [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#)
 - [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#)
- Crisis Communication Plans - [Department of Homeland Security](#)



Establish group and/or 1:1 live check-ins. To reinforce caring and continue to ease minds, create a time at least once a week where others know they can connect to ask questions, share concerns, get resources, etc. Knowing they can check-in and provide real-time feedback will help them adapt and give them less worry. Remove obstacles. Gauge how employees are feeling and identify shifts and adjust communications as needed. For example:

- “What do you need?”
- “Tell me more about that.”
- “How do you feel right now?”
- “How can we best support you?”



Share mutual fears in 1:1s and create a plan. To connect with employees and show concern, establish 1:1 dialogue. Create an environment where they feel comfortable having open dialogue to share their concerns. For example, it is okay to role model and share personal fears with others in a 1:1 setting if there is a meaningful discussion and/or an action plan to help mitigate employees' fears as articulating helps concerns to subside. Be prepared to discuss ideas and have some resources available. Showing expression of concern and understanding by validating fears and offering help will let others feel heard and supported.

- "I wish you didn't have to go through that."
- "You're making total sense. This must feel scary."
- "You are in a tough spot now. I can see how you feel."
- "You are totally right. I would be asking the same questions you are."

Asking others their ideas first with asking open-ended questions (who, what, when, where, how) helps build confidence and critical thinking skills when they come up with their own solution.

- "We're here to support you, let's talk about what we can do to help move forward".
- "What ideas do you see as that would help the most?"
- "How can we help?"

Only share ideas after they have shared theirs. If you have an idea that may also help, keep the messaging open-ended.

- "That's a great idea. What are your thoughts if you/we were to do X?"

If both are stuck on how to move forward in the 1:1, agree to think about things for a small time period (no longer than a day) with the expectation both come back with some potential solutions.



Encourage and develop both personally and professionally. To ensure continued development during tough times, think about and create a plan for self and others to turn crisis into an opportunity. What key skills or projects can we focus on while working from home or while other previous priorities and/or the office has been slower or closed? Identify and share development "best practices" or resources. So many are available from VSP Global, universities, professional associations and internet searches.



Operate and act on what can be done. To ease concern and feel more empowered to reach towards solutions and heal - mentally, emotionally, physically, financially—help people identify what they can do to control the situation vs. what they can't do to control it. Collaboratively coming to solutions, both personally and professionally, will be a huge help and will aid in building resilience, connection, and trust.

As leaders in a crisis, we're obligated to make responsible decisions to keep our practices viable. Those who manage the effects of a crisis in a clear and compassionate way will create more value and will come out stronger than ever before. As a result, we will be more competent in reducing the impacts of the crisis, and proactively reduce the pain and duration of the crisis.

1. Be Mindful and Honest with Ourselves, then Others



- As leaders, during a crisis we tend to prioritize emotional turmoil of our employees first, but it's essential we first tend to ourselves.
- Taking the time to identify and acknowledge our thoughts and feelings in difficult times will help us and ultimately others to better process current events and move towards safety, which helps to reduce stress. When we are in an unbalanced state we don't think clearly, which can result in negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

Diagnose – Ask and process on our own. Then, collaborate with the leadership team on steps #2 & 3.

1. What am I thinking or feeling about the crisis?
2. How does this crisis impact the practice?
3. How does this crisis impact the team?

2. As a Team, Make an Initial Plan



- **Consider the big picture** – Focus on the greater vision and key objectives to achieve at the end of the crisis. Think about where the practice will be and what the business will be doing a year from now.
- **Act carefully and quickly with an initial response** – safety and security are the #1 priority. Delays can be perceived as incompetence or not caring, both of which can intensify a crisis. When more time is available to consider possible solutions, take it. However, remember that 'careful and quick' must be executed together at this juncture with courage.
- **Adjust the "norm"**— do what is needed to focus only on what's necessary. Prioritize initial actions and create a strawman plan to address – concentrate on what's most critical in operations and cancel or delay the rest. Keep the plan updated and fluid as things will continue to evolve outside of our control. Take time to explore different scenarios and how they could affect the practice in the short, medium and long term which will help with the response strategy.

3. Get Perspective, Give Perspective



- **One day at a time** – with changes happening so quickly, it is important to take things a day at a time to work the plan. All scenarios/issues must be brought to the table and weighed, no matter how difficult or undesirable they might seem. Deliver all information promised as soon as information is known. We won't have all the answers; however, we can commit to doing things in our control to keep the team updated. Ensure key spokespeople are informed of crisis events and key message points. Employees need to know ***what's happening, what they should do, and how the crisis will affect them.***
- **Get the facts** – ensure the leadership team is in alignment and information is from credible sources before sharing news or making business decisions.
- **Be transparent, yet positive** - our words, tone and behaviors will be what the team, patients, and customers will follow. A calm, hopeful manner will go a long way. Transparency and a positive vision will increase trust, stop the rumor mill and can lead to others to “we are in this together.”
- **Communicate, listen and offer resources** – it is imperative to have timely, clear, honest and frequent communications. Treat people with respect by being attentive, listening and offering information and resources to help them through their worries. (*Refer to “Premier Crisis Communication Tips” for more information*).
- **Give each other a break** – with personal and business disruption, expect things to not be ‘normal’. Be compassionate with self and others. Whether others now must homeschool while still working from home, or others cannot freely socialize with friends and family, things and people’s reactions will be different. Encourage others to take a few minutes each day for personal relaxation such as exercise, breath and meditation; don’t expect full engagement from the team; and give grace that everyone is doing their best, which will go a long way to build and maintain trust, respect and loyalty.

4. Stay Focused and Re-Calibrate



- **Forewarning-** once the action plan is set into motion, there will likely be further challenges and setbacks that surface. It’s natural to feel doubt and fear as issues pile up. Time to think about gratitude for what is working and keep a resilient and brave outlook.
- If we start to lose focus on the big picture, it might be necessary to take step back from the situation and reassess it, or even seek outside advice. All is not lost. If the plan is sound and our intentions are good, then continue through the discomfort and uncertainty. Keep in mind – smooth seas don’t make good sailors.