

# Support Our People in Challenging Times

To get through the current crisis, hoteliers can support their people by staying in touch with them and keeping a positive tone.

By Mark Ricketts

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We have many difficult issues confronting us at present, none more important than how we relate to others. How we fare in this regard impacts our short-term recovery, as well as our long-term reputation and legacy as hospitality organizations.

So far, our industry has done an outstanding job in addressing the people side of our business: coordinating with lenders, strategic partners and the brands; staying engaged with guests and communities; and looking after our people. Most entities have kept up pre-pandemic employment levels as much as possible, which has included strategic use of the Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program. In other cases, hospitality groups have helped furloughed individuals who can't wait out a return to active hotel employment in applying for work in comparable service industries.

Regardless, not every pre-pandemic staff member is back to work. And those at work are understandably concerned about safety at hotel properties, as well as personal issues like watching over older relatives or children home from school. Many of us with younger children are learning more than ever how demanding it is to be a schoolteacher.

## Stay in touch in multiple ways

A sound approach to supporting our teams in such stressful times has two key aspects or approaches: regular formal and informal communication within the organization, supported by "stress breakers" like special third-party hotlines or access to professional counselors.

Daily corporate communications can include encouraging news about team members and inspirational messages that reinforce our group solidarity, along with property updates. At a time like this, accurate information and realistic assessments are valuable, respected antidotes to uncertainty and fear.

The current situation is prompting all of us to expand our communication modes, which can include emails, videos and video conferencing, and increasingly popular messaging apps, as most everyone carries a smart phone with them. Some of these apps are commercially available as part of human resources packages, or larger organizations can sponsor their own proprietary ones.

These efforts can be supported by direct phone calls to staff members, at work or those furloughed, by the human resources department, asking how they are doing and how they might be helped. Additionally, some of these initiatives can be organized into formal “We Care” programs to demonstrate our ongoing concern for the wellbeing of our people.

Hospitality organizations can also sponsor non-judgmental, third-party help for their team members and aid in accessing community resources. An example of the first is taking advantage of social workers and counselors, either community-based ones or through national programs like Marketplace Chaplains. Any conversations are confidential and can go a long way toward relieving personal stress while also directing people to needed resources. Astute hospitality groups can also help team members keep abreast of community developments, including available assistance programs.

### **Tone is everything**

Just as with our guests or partners, we must “say what we mean, and mean what we say.” These are complex and, sometimes, contentious times, unlike anything most of us have ever experienced—or ever hope to again. Regardless, with so much on our hospitality plates, we still must exercise social awareness and “connect” with our staff by taking broader issues seriously at both the community and national levels.

Certainly, there’s a lot on our collective plates these days, whether it is keeping up with our rent or mortgage, community policing, access to COVID-19 testing and treatment, how our children will be educated, or diversity and inclusion. This may be the time to accelerate our

own diversity programs or devote time and resources to better understanding issues that directly impact many staff, such as access to childcare services or transportation.

We cannot solve every issue, personal or social, but we can treat each person or concern with respect, sensitivity and in a positive manner. This is what leaders do, and we intend to lead our industry to brighter days—always.

Mark Ricketts is president and COO of McNeill Hotels.

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