**Remote leadership: Taking care of one another at a distance**

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I don’t typically have too much to offer in the world of advice for our association’s membership since I am not an attorney. For those association members who don’t know, I served for 22 years in the Army before settling in Pennsylvania and joining the Bucks County Bar Association. During those Army years, I had the tremendous honor and privilege of leading and serving with Soldiers all over the United States, South Korea, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The recent changes to all of our lives and the new ways in which we are living and working brought to mind some of the lessons I learned from my deployments to those overseas locations.

The beginning of any lengthy deployment certainly brought a lot of stress for all involved. The deployments I went on were each one year long. As a leader, I observed the shifting dynamics both for service members and our families as we all adjusted to a new way of doing business both at home and overseas. For those deploying, everyone was on ‘high alert’ – adjusting to the new threats, adapting to new workspaces, developing new daily schedules, and using new technologies to communicate. The families at home also adjusted to new ways of communicating around the world, additional stresses for the spouse who didn’t deploy, and worries about the safety of family members in harm’s way. Many of this may sound similar to what you are seeing as many of these memories feel familiar to today’s dynamics in my microcosm.

As everyone was transitioning to working from home, dealing with school and business closures, and keeping tabs on our family and friends that are now in harm’s way, much of this felt oddly familiar to many of my previous experiences. It is certainly not the same but many similarities definitely exist.

**There is risk in transitions**

Leaders generally measure risk by looking at the likelihood that something bad will happen and the severity of the consequences if that bad thing happens. In all of these Army experiences, one thing leaders learn as part of this risk management process is that there is increased risk in transitions. Certainly, the transition from training in peace to operating in a hostile area highlights this - new environment, new schedule, new way of doing things. If someone operates a new piece of equipment incorrectly, they may get hurt. If someone does not understand new procedures then they may cause a mission to fail. Anytime an organization goes from one version of ‘steady state’ operations to

something very different, leaders help manage this process, reduce the risk, and ensure that the mission is accomplished. I think many, if not all, of us have been part of something similar since the beginning or middle of March as the current health crisis really came to a head and forced massive adjustment in the profession.

**The next transition is here…but it is less obvious**

While the adjustment for everyone in the first 30 days is obvious, the next transition is a little less so. Leaders certainly spent a lot of time figuring out technology and new schedules to keep our organizations moving forward together. However, at some point, all of the new ‘things’ will become routine. Learning about emojis and custom backgrounds on Zoom will be less exciting and Happy Hours on-line might get a little stale, all of the ‘extra’ time to catch up on projects around the house gets old.

Additionally, for those working remotely, we are perhaps connected to our mission even more than before. While the use of our smartphones may have kept us connected on a small screen to our work, now our entire office may be in our house (where it was not before). For those with smaller children, they may be attempting to simultaneously manage their work with getting elementary school children set up for online school and take care of a pre-school age toddler. Daunting to say the least. Since we surged on the number of hours to get things started, we may not have reduced hours and are working more than before we transitioned. All of this connection and this surge in activity is necessary but may not be sustainable and may come at a price that creeps up on us.

During deployments, we learned that while at home and deployed, we all can surge for a few weeks, stay on ‘high alert’, and take care of those around us. However, we cannot stay at this high level forever. An additional challenge comes with being surrounded by those in a profession that attracts

‘Type A’ folks that are not used to asking for help.

I joined an Army unit in South Korea just after our first son was born. As sharp as I thought I was and as much as I thought I was doing by calling home each day, I failed to pick up on the fact that my wife was suffering from post-partum depression and it took her friends some time to pick up on the issue and literally kick down her door to make sure she was well. (I only found out about this years later.

Husband and dad of the year.) It is much more of a challenge to assess the well-being of those we care

about using remote means than it is when we are used to being face to face.

In the next month or two, there might also be some more serious issues that creep up… and they may be hard to see especially as we work separated from one another. Some may be facing monetary issues for those who have seen reduced business or who have been laid off or furloughed. For those without

work, the anxiety of not knowing when work will begin again or the perception of losing one’s purpose may be increasingly stressful. For those with young kids at home, the stress of balancing work, kids’ school work, and house chores may build. It is likely not any single issue for any one individual but the accumulation of many small and large stressors that will increase anxiety.

**We must take care of one another….and ourselves**

So as leaders – of families and law firms and nonprofits and other organizations – we must now shift our attention and focus on those things that are harder to measure. Based on my experience, *we must take care of ourselves*. We must continue to emphasize the routine, stay active, get some fresh air, and all of those other good habits that we are all (re)learning. Good sleep and physical activity are critical.

We must also take care of those around us. Who is at home alone? Who is at home and never gets a break because they are taking care of multiple young kids? Who might be having monetary issues?

Overall, we must stay positive and support others to help them stay positive. In the spirit of one of my favorite authors, Jon Gordon, this is not a Pollyanna, fake, positivity but one that is grounded in faith and hope. Reach out, connect, and support one another. We must acknowledge the seriousness of the situation – there are many in our community who are hurting - but we must also have the confidence that we will get through this together.