



*Leading Through* **COVID-19**

## LEADING THROUGH FURLOUGHS

Hospitals face significant financial vulnerabilities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most pressing issues health care leaders will confront is the possibility or probability of furloughs and layoffs. This is incredibly difficult to comprehend when it impacts the philanthropy team since philanthropy is a proven revenue source and can provide immediate financial relief to health organizations. Health care is at the forefront of people's minds, resulting in numerous donations of PPE, medical equipment, supplies, food and money. It is essential for philanthropy executives to be the link between the hospital's mission and the desire for community members to offer assistance. Now is the time to advocate for your foundation and your team members, while making the case for philanthropy as a critical revenue source.

Some organizations see furloughs and layoffs as a system-wide solution during a financial

crisis. Many philanthropy executives face the difficult decision between pushing forward and advocating for their departments or acquiescing to support leadership's vision. When facing staff reduction, there are tough choices to consider. How we navigate this process will define us as leaders.

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If the difficult decision has been made to furlough or lay off team members, it is important to remember leaders set the tone for guiding their entire staff through this process. This is a time to exhibit compassionate and confident leadership. Empathize with and assist those who will experience the reality of temporary or

permanent unemployment. Provide resources that may help them with next steps.

Remaining team members also need your guidance through these challenging times. They will experience a wide range of emotions including concern for the well-being of co-workers, as well as the fear of the unknown. They wonder if and when they will be the next to leave. They assume they will accept added responsibilities and wonder how they can take on more. There is also a grieving process for all involved, but great leaders can successfully set the tone and direction through these unsettling times.

### **Highly effective leaders dealing with furloughs or layoffs should consider the following:**

**Communicate honestly and authentically.** Talk to your team as soon as information can be relayed. Delaying these conversations allows rumors to abound and stories to be fabricated. Be honest. Explain the “why” behind the layoffs, which increases employees’ trust in your leadership and in your organization. Share facts as you understand them. Listen to your team’s concerns, and address them as they develop.

**Readjust workloads.** Readjusted workloads are huge stressors in times of uncertainty. Carefully analyze each person’s present workload to determine projects that can be postponed and essential tasks that need to continue. Next, reassign duties to fill the void left by furloughed employees. Make sound restructuring decisions based on talent, skills and availability. Allow team members to participate in the process, and give them the opportunity to ask questions and share concerns.

**Allow time to accept the change.** After a furlough or layoff, it can take time for employees to adjust. Morale may be extremely low. Some will transition through the uncertainty more quickly than others. Be patient. Be fully present and refrain from judgment. Create a safe space to allow opportunities for team members to express themselves. Imagine the situation from their perspectives and validate their emotions.

**Reassure employees of their value.** In times of uncertainty, people often feel vulnerable and question their value at work. Point out the growth opportunities before them and remind them how they contribute to building a brighter future. Reassure employees by investing in their growth and providing continuous guidance and support.

**Manage expectations.** Manage expectations with your leadership team. Goals, outcomes and financial forecasts need to be adjusted to align with reduced staffing, and revised expectations should be communicated regularly.

**Lean into the change.** As their leader, you set the tone for accepting the new reality. If you are the example of positivity, others will follow. Embrace this new opportunity and present yourself with enthusiasm, courage and professionalism. Lead by example to help build morale and support.

Layoffs and furloughs are hard on everyone—from those making the tough decisions to those furloughed and those remaining. Be confident and strategic as you steer through the changes to ensure an even stronger team emerges through the transition.

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About the Author: Lori Counts is a Principal Consultant and Certified Executive Coach with Accordant. You can reach her at [Lori@AccordantHealth.com](mailto:Lori@AccordantHealth.com).