

# WORKING THROUGH COVID-19, TOGETHER

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By: Eliassen Group Directors –  
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# Change is rapid, and the world is looking for guidance.

At Eliassen Group, our purpose is to positively impact the lives of our employees, clients, consultants, and the communities in which we operate. We live that purpose in the world of work. Every day we seek to find meaningful work for people, to bring talent to our clients, and to help our partners mitigate risk, maintain compliance, and improve their business agility. However, as we all know, today is unique. Today our clients are asking us to help them navigate the challenges they face in carrying their businesses forward while responsibly playing their part in slowing the spread of COVID-19. This article details some of the counsel we are providing.

## What We're Saying

While Eliassen Group is a thought leader in our core competencies, at a time when the word 'unprecedented' has been used an unprecedented number of times, we defer to health experts. Eliassen Group has suspended all non-essential travel and instituted a work-from-home policy for all employees, and we are encouraging our clients to do the same.

[The World Economic Forum](#) posted a [recent video](#) introducing a Red Cross Health Chief who addressed the four key ways employers need to respond to this Global Pandemic.

### **Help your employees protect themselves, and their family, friends and communities.**

Demonstrate leadership by emphasizing the importance of action at this time. Encourage employees to wash their hands often and practice social distancing, and do so vigilantly with signs throughout your workplace, formal announcements, and frequent e-mail reminders.

### **You need a plan for when someone on your staff gets sick.**

Which includes preparing to close your entire office if necessary and move to a fully remote-work policy.

### **Add to your business continuity plan and immediately adopt changes to working proximity challenges.**

If employees are working together in tight or enclosed office space, it is critical to use all your available resources to distance your workers from one another, including adopting telecommuting / work-from-home policies, or moving to shift work.

### **You need a plan for the meetings and conferences you have scheduled for the next few months.**

Start working on this immediately and consider all factors when weighing whether you should hold the meeting virtually, postpone the meeting, or cancel it entirely.

### **In short, if you have a strong business continuity plan, now is the time to follow it.**

If you don't, now is the time to create one. Either way, you'll have an opportunity to assess the successes and shortcomings of the plan in real time over the coming weeks.

# How to Make It Happen

## **Lean in and embrace remote work as a new normal.**

In advance of the Coronavirus outbreak, the Quit Rate – the rate at which workers voluntarily leave their jobs for another opportunity – was at a 15 year high. It has been a “talent market” for several years, with talented workers choosing their employers based primarily on better pay, growth opportunity, and flexible working arrangements.

## **Eliassen Group President, Josh Nazarian, recently wrote an article about this topic.**

He emphasizes that embracing remote work is beneficial to both employees and employers when executed correctly. Nazarian specifically observes that Eliassen clients that have adopted the most flexible policies for working arrangements enjoy the most consistent success in attracting and retaining the marquee talent on the market.

For employers hesitant to move away from the office-based workforce they have leveraged for the lifespan of their organization, Nazarian cites some key data points to address concerns.

*“In a FlexJobs survey of 5,500 professionals, 66% said their productivity improved when not in an office and 76% said there are fewer distractions outside of offices.”*

And, “in a 2017 Stack Overflow survey, over half of IT developers said that being able to work remotely was a priority when looking for a job. The highest job satisfaction was reported by developers who were entirely or almost entirely remote. A Stanford University study showed that employee turnover was reduced by half when they were offered remote work options.”

However, the most critical component of the assertions Nazarian makes is that these adjustments cannot be made in a vacuum. Remote work cannot just be added to a list-of-benefits alongside vacation days and an office ping pong table. He states “the benefits were contingent on the relationship between the remote worker and leadership and working remote being viewed as a ‘norm’” – which suggests this is more of a cultural evolution than a policy to adopt.

*“So, you’ll need to change your leadership and communication style with your team members. The quicker that you embrace this ‘new norm’, adjust, and develop a framework for success with your remote teams, the quicker your teams will find that harmony.”*

## **You did not design or test for the situation we face today.**

This is coming together on the fly, so start by recognizing your circumstance, acknowledge impediments, and make incremental improvements. Implement daily or weekly retrospective meetings. Get your team’s feedback on what’s working and what’s not, and help each other through problems.

# Your Action Will Impact Your Business and Culture

## **COVID-19 is affecting the business world universally.**

We are all facing disruption in how we execute our work. Eliassen Group is encouraging our clients to use this unique and unforeseen time to try new things, and to practice agility and innovation. Director Brian Lucking is urging his clients to “use this time to try new technology, new processes, and create a new normal. This time may allow us to identify creative solutions for some of our current challenges. For example, address your talent gap by leveraging non-local resources and embrace flexible schedules and remote work. Then evaluate this as a potentially sustainable component of your labor force moving forward.”

More traditional companies that have not historically allowed remote work, or leveraged collaboration tools, are being forced to. Some will be open-minded to this change and will genuinely evaluate their results as a potentially new way of operating. Some will treat it as a band-aid and immediately revert to their previous procedures.

## **Director Whitney Underwood asserts:**

“We are all part of R&D right now. We are each in our own ‘innovation garages.’ Collectively we are capable of figuring this out and coming out better for it on the other side, but to succeed in this we must stay connected and collaborate. When we need to be distancing ourselves physically, it becomes even more critical to compensate with a greater frequency and quality of virtual interaction with our teammates.”

## Practical Advice

### **First and foremost, stay calm**

Channel your energy in a positive way, and be thoughtful about the perspectives of all on your team. We are required to adapt and change our manner of operation far more rapidly than we would under normal circumstances.

Below we've compiled some practical advice, best practices, and our response to frequently asked questions.

### **Most large corporations are used to having an answer to many of the problems they're facing.**

Mobilizing an entire workforce to move to work-from-home without planning and testing is bound to cause issues. Remain patient, understand that we're experimenting on the fly, and that there are going to be speedbumps.

### **One of the fundamental concerns companies have about remote work is the accountability of their teams.**

Eliassen coaches our clients to address this by shifting focus away from ensuring their people are ‘busy’ all day, and instead monitoring and measuring output. What do you need to accomplish? Organize your people into teams so they can determine how to drive the requisite outputs. The construct of these teams creates accountability.



# Practical Advice [continued]

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## **Set and provide clear expectations for communication.**

Ensure your people know what you want them to communicate, how, and how often. Again, focus on outputs, not on activity.

## **Many of our clients are suffering network bandwidth issues.**

They are addressing them with creative solutions such as moving from video conferencing on WiFi to connecting on FaceTime. We need to be flexible.

## **Companies that have established work-from-home policies are running into different challenges.**

Workers who are being told for the first time that they must work from home have been unsettled by the message. If you have an established remote work policy, be wary of this and do not assume that you can simply issue the edict and move forward. You still need to focus on communicating your message the right way and addressing the concerns of your workers.

## **Eliassen Director and Agilist, David Gijsbers:**

The reality of the Software Development world, even prior to COVID-19, is that distributed teams are a fact of life. While the Agile Manifesto calls for co-located teams, this ideal has not been a practicality for most of our clients for many years. Eliassen Agile Coaches regularly work with teams that have offshore and other forms of distribution. Our Coaches utilize tools that are becoming a day-to-day reality for most people, including video-conferencing, Agile Product Lifecycle tools and screen sharing technologies. The key to making a team work together effectively is creating a working agreement about how to use these tools. Gaining consensus about a tool-of-record, or “single source of truth” is useful to ensure there is alignment among a team.

## **People may simply be challenged to find a place to work at home.**

They are dealing with the added burden of children home from school, spouses or roommates home from work, and excited pets responding to the extra activity. They may not have a home-office, and our patience dealing with this human factor is critical.

## **Pay attention to the data available, but keep in mind there are many variables at play – so be wary of forcing correlations.**

If productivity is sub-optimal, consider that the move to a remote-work policy is not the only change at play... children are home from school, normal daily supplies are sparsely available, and there is broad uncertainty about the future.

When it comes down to it, most leaders would prefer bad news to complete uncertainty.

At least with known impact and timeline, damage can be assessed, plans can be made, and business can march forward. We don't have the luxury of blunt bad news today. We are instead saddled with raw uncertainty, impacting all industries, on a global scale, and with no timeline. Many are discovering in real time they are ill-equipped to handle such a crisis. If you feel this way, you are not alone, and Eliassen Group is here to help.

**While we spend our days hibernating from physical contact, it is imperative that we not also hibernate our mindset and our thinking about what we can learn from this pandemic.**

We can become better and more attractive employers by embracing and adapting to the environment that was forced upon us. We can uncover and test drive new ways of operating our business. We can lift the spirit of our workers and drive our business and culture forward by the way we react to the situation at hand.

Thought leader and author [Simon Sinek](#) suggested our first step in adapting should be to start with something basic: a Monday morning huddle with your team. Sinek thinks your project updates and to-do lists can be handled in a separate discussion – that this Monday huddle should be about checking in with your team and giving everyone a few minutes to share how they're feeling and what's on their mind. This is helpful to maintaining trust and relationships.

It reminds us that we're all humans,  
and we're all working through COVID-19, together.

