



# **REMOTE TEAMS TOOLKIT 3: EMPATHY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19**



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## Empathy in the time of COVID-19

Last week, I got sick.

I'd been experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 for a few days, but when the fever developed, it became impossible to work and suddenly all a little more real. As an otherwise healthy young person, I felt the expected anxieties, but front and center was when and how to tell my team at Integral, and if the needed recovery time would impact my ability to get work done.

As we talk about the impact of this illness, companies should continue their focus on prevention, but we also need to talk about planning for when people get sick. How do we create space for employees to advocate for their needs and how can companies support their recovery and re-entry to work?

To start, we can't think prescriptively. Most companies will need to communicate differently due to varying legal restrictions regarding the sharing of employees' COVID-19 testing status. Thinking holistically about your organization's decision-making framework, team support mechanisms, and guide to interpersonal interactions enables employee experience planning through a longer lens. This week's toolkit offers a roadmap of support to help you get clear about interventions your company can provide before, during and after diagnosis, and activate a culture of gratitude when we all need it most.

**What does your roadmap of support look like?  
Are you being intentional about the interventions  
your company can provide before, during and after  
diagnosis?**

*Update: For those wondering, I'm on the road to recovery under the care of a great health care provider, and easing back into work with the support of Team Integral behind me. Julia Race, Director of Strategy, Integral*

# A roadmap to recovery



## Before

1. Ensure people understand their options once sick. From managers of teams, to frontline workers, the anxieties of people concerned with their own welfare can be managed by openly communicating what they can expect if and when they become unwell.
2. If people think they've been exposed to COVID-19, create an environment in which employees feel empowered to do the best for themselves, their family, teams and society. It's critical for businesses and leaders to prioritize personal safety first.

## During

1. When someone becomes ill and communication is required (it's a good idea to review your legal practices on disclosure), do a quick empathy map of your intended audience before you draft the content.
  - Who is it you're informing and why?
  - What grief might the population feel in response? (concern for the inflicted, sense of loss for the way things were, of a predictable routine, and of camaraderie)
  - What do you need them to do differently because of the information?
  - What do you need to reinforce or reassure as a result?
2. Make the communication as personalized as possible. Right now, we're all experiencing a proliferation of informative, mass email. Take the time to make the information you're sharing feel individualized. It will help the recipient receive and process the information.
3. What plans are in place to provide direct support to the person who is ill?
  - What material and emotional support can teams offer one another?
  - What role can managers play in providing personal assistance to the person impacted?
  - What role can managers play in grounding affected teams and being a steady base for hard or negative feelings?

## After

1. How are you planning to reintegrate someone who has recovered and is ready to come back? It's important to think about the process of getting better, not a flick of a light switch, but as a dimmer that slowly gets turned back on.
  - If you imagined someone's re-entry to work following COVID-19 as another onboarding experience, how would you use your company mission or values in the process?

## Exercise: team empathy map

In recent weeks we've been reminded how deeply connected we all are as each person's experience of COVID-19 ripples outward to our larger communities. If someone in your household or workplace becomes ill, it has the power to impact an entire company. As our anxieties grow, an empathetic perspective can enable us to help each other through. Considering our lives outside of work and conceptualizing the lives of others on our teams is a way to integrate compassion into the work day of our "new normal."

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### Step 1

Write what you do from the end of your business day until you go to bed. What do you have to do? Who fills those hours? What feelings do you have? What obligations? What worries? What joys or comforts? What fears?

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### Step 2

Think about three other people on your team. What factors might be impacting their out of work life? What do they grapple with? What do you know brings them joy and comfort? What might worry them?

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### Step 3

Write down two ways you could feel more supported by your team.

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### Step 4

Write down two ways you might support one other person from your team. How can we support each other without overburdening ourselves? It could be as small as a daily email or Slack message of encouragement or praise... or just "hello, how are you?".

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## Fostering a culture of gratitude:

Years from now we'll look back on how we made each other feel and how we deepened our sense of belonging to each other. Next week, try noting the small gestures that made a difference. Pay attention to how frequently, when, and to whom you say "thank you." Validate and make space for frustrations by saying "this is really hard but I appreciate all the effort you put in." Most importantly, ask what you can do for others.

### Activation idea:

Cultivate a ritual of gratitude by calling out the actions or gestures from others on your team that made a positive impact. "Appreciation Hot Seat" is a quick and easy game to play during your next Zoom call.

### Here's how it works:

Each person in a group (large or small) will take turns as the guest of honor, while everyone else tells that person why or how they made a difference that day/week/ or on a specific project. Go around the Zoom call until everyone has had a chance in the hot seat.

### Why it's important:

Over the last decade, studies show the significance of recognition over reward. Celebrating employees for their contributions rather than compensating them with gifts or money has a greater reward culturally. ([Psychology Today, 2007](#)).

Want help developing a program, conducting training, or coaching teams and leaders for empathy? We're here to help. Just drop us a line [hello@integralcomms.com](mailto:hello@integralcomms.com)