



CONNECT



PRESENT



A COVID-19 Virtual Ideation Experience

Team Topic and Number: Workplace Wellbeing – Team 3

Team sponsor/chapter (if applicable): IA Interior Architects

Team Lead: Diane Rogers

Team Members: Diane Rogers, Heather Kampa, Mandy McGill, David B. Bueckert, Rex Miller, Terri Johnson, Allison Stratton, Gordon Macdonald, Jill Johnson

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High Touch, Inc. is a professional services firm specializing in personalized client interaction. In 2019, the leadership team made a bold move to elevate workplace well-being to one of its core values and competitive advantages. Their vision is to create a culture where every employee can bring their whole self to work, do their best work every day, return home happier and healthier, and look forward to coming back the next day.

Just after the firm started seeing the new values take hold, the Coronavirus crisis sent High Touch into a financial tailspin. The move to working from home and the prolonged shelter-in-place sent shockwaves throughout the company. Federal support will provide some stability, but that buffer will end when it is time to bring people back to the office.

CEO Iremia Stinson, remaining committed to the well-being principles, recognizes the financial and logistical pressures that might overshadow these new habits. She sets four goals: financial stability, an efficient and predictable transition, a pivot to a more resilient business model, and a strengthened culture by keeping well-being a top priority.

She appoints Jillian Foster to lead the financial stability task force, Jerome Kitirio to lead facilities preparations, Benjamin Makrinos to lead the workforce business strategy and Dr. George Jernigan to work with each task force leader to balance the pressures of making quick, difficult decisions while protecting the mental and physical health of the employees.

Jillian Foster is tasked with finding ways to reduce High Touch's costs quickly and effectively. She takes this challenge on with a big heart and passion for the firm's newly adopted, humane, compassionate values.

To model leadership's dedication to the firm's success and workforce stability, Foster recommends starting with Director- and Executive-level pay cuts before resorting to lay-offs. If necessary, the next step might be enacting a part-time work week and partial pay across the company. Thanks to a webinar Dr. Jernigan delivered to the taskforce about engagement and happiness in the workplace, Jillian is aware of the undeniable positive effects of providing workers with choices. This partial work week would allow employees a choice between multiple scenarios of allocating their reduced hours across a work week. Another option she entertains is for volunteers to donate unused PTO hours to a pool to help coworkers who are temporarily furloughed.

Jillian was also tasked with looking at ideas for a more resilient workforce once back at the office. To prevent employees from coming in when they are under the weather, she recommends moving to a sick time model where workers do not have to take PTO or track the hours they miss due to them or those they care for being sick. This would save thousands of dollars in healthcare costs. High Touch will also enforce the use of vacation days within a reasonable timeframe to encourage recharging and self-care.

To save on real estate expenditures, Foster socializes a 50/50 in-office vs. work-at-home workforce model. Moving the physical office space to an amenity dedicated to collaboration and knowledge sharing allows for the company to re-allocate money from real estate to health and wellbeing benefits such as lower premiums, home office set-ups, and elder and child care benefits.

Dr. Jernigan emphasizes the importance of emotional security and perceived physical safety in uncertain times like these. He recommends that facilities manager Jerome Kitiro send out a quick form for each employee to fill out to assess how they feel about returning. They find that many people are yearning to get back to their second family - their coworkers. However, a sizable population still has reservations about how safe the workplace will be for them and their loved ones and cannot picture how to utilize the spaces in a way that would not jeopardize their health. Some folks are open to coming back into the office immediately, where others are not sure they will ever feel comfortable working outside of their homes.

In response, Jerome posts videos on High Touch's intranet website - one each week leading up to their re-entry to the office. The videos are cheeky, just like his personality; one that his coworkers have grown to love. They demonstrate the changes his team made to the workplace to ensure a safe return to desk and collaboration work. The camera scans the open office, showing the implementation of sanitation stations complete with wipes, masks and hand sanitizer in strategic spots throughout. His narration explains that the introduction of plants and other hints of biophilia not only creates buffers, but also improves the indoor air quality.

He sends email blasts with photoshopped images of multiple Jeromes practicing physical distancing in conference rooms with half the chairs or queuing up at a temperature check station in the lobby. The Jerome clones wave to each other rather than shake hands or hug. They wear masks to meetings. The e-mails encourage these measures of safety as caring actions to take for their coworkers' wellbeing. He attaches to these e-mails videos or links from manufacturer's websites showing how to make easy adjustments to the free address workstation desk heights, ergonomic chairs, and personal lighting.

He also promises to implement a facilities concierge service for those working at home and in the office. Jerome will arrange for delivery of their on-site task chair, monitors, laptop dock and other peripherals to their home. If someone receives a package at the office, he will offer to ship them to their home or arrange a gloved and masked hand-off at the office. With these communications and programs in place, he hopes that everyone feels they have control over their own health and re-entry experience.

To kick-off planning the business strategy for High Touch leading up to, during, and after the return to the office, Benjamin Makrinos led virtual focus groups with leadership across the enterprise. He heard managers' concerns around continuing to leverage remote work after shelter-in-place is lifted. They find it difficult and time-consuming to make sure work is getting done in an efficient and timely manner. The effort to coordinate as a team and keep morale high is taking a toll on their own mental health.

Feeling for his cohorts' struggles, Makrinos yearned to find tools to lighten High Touch's upper and middle management mental- and workloads. He met with Dr. Jernigan to discuss an easier to manage work-from-home model, as he understands that leadership would like to leverage work-at-home to limit the number of people in the office in the beginning.

First, Dr. Jernigan recommends implementing a course of leadership skill training in the weeks leading up to unveiling the strategy for returning to the office. He helps management develop skills in leading with vulnerability and empathy. They learn ways to manage with an open ear to feedback and to assume positive intent in all their employees. They practice communicating with clarity and techniques to uncover the voices of quieter contributors.

After receiving this training, each manager schedules one-on-ones with each of their direct reports. These are informal chats to understand how their employees feel about how work-at-home has been going for them, what their readiness level is to going back to the office, and how their personal and professional lives have been affected so far. The leaders respond to their concerns and questions in their communications moving forward. They remedy the pain points that can be immediately dealt with and try to learn from wins that can be replicated for others' success.

Dr. Jernigan also recommends an incredibly simple yet effective protocol of turning cameras on during virtual meetings. The ability to read others' facial expressions and postures when working together makes communication more human and efficient. He also recommended starting each meeting with a personal touchpoint across all participants – by stretching together, pausing to find themselves in the moment, or simply asking what their plans are for the weekend.

Benjamin partners with a selection of managers to develop a model to help leadership focus on results versus time spent at their desks. They create a portal where employees can jot down their goals for the week and submit to their managers for review. This allows for the managers

to correct course in a timely manner if they are not aligned on what an individual sees as their priorities. At the end of each work week, users can log back into the portal and provide updates on where they are at with each goal. The beta version of the portal will be implemented with a select few teams three weeks prior to the return to the office to collect feedback and make changes.

By keeping High Touch, Inc's new core values around well-being and authenticity as their North Star in planning their post-COVID-19 strategy, Iremia Stinson and her task force leaders feel a sense of integrity and pride moving forward. There will be growing pains and lessons learned, but with a lens of empathy and compassion, they will work to solve them in lockstep with their employees.