

Maximize

YOUR LEADERSHIP POTENTIAL



University of Florida Training and Organizational Development, Office of Human Resource Services

Returning to the Workplace: Leading through Transition

Is there a playbook for our return to campus?

Since 2010 the [University of Florida Leadership Competency Model](#) has been the foundation for developing our leaders. Administrators, faculty, physicians, researchers, and supervisors have honed their skills to effectively lead our institution for over a decade.

Fast forward to January 2020, we found our campus – our world – had changed overnight with the COVID-19 pandemic and its range of impacts on work and life. Our leaders must follow strict guidelines to, above all, keep employees safe as they return. There are several resources available to guide the practices for returning safely. For a good starting point, see the [step-by-step guide](#) on the UFHR web site.. The second priority, though, is how to lead during and after the transition. What needs to come into focus now for leaders who have developed worthy competencies based on prior lessons from credible thought leaders? Nothing like what we are currently experiencing has happened before in our lifetime and many may wonder if “what got us here” will be adequate going forward.

So, what do leaders need to consider? How do they adapt and lead in this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous new world? Do leaders need an entirely different playbook? Most philosophers believe that when complex challenges exist, all things being equal, simpler solutions are often better. That takes us back to the **UF Leadership Competency Model**.

The four quadrants of the framework are as relevant now as they were before January 2020. However, leaders may want to focus more narrowly on a few critical competencies as they begin this evolution. The following offers some “Phase 1” suggestions that may be helpful for UF leaders as we redesign our campus life, one step at a time.

Building Trust in Phase 1

A leader’s ability to create an environment that is grounded in trust is foundational to institutional success. Every nook and cranny of our campus is comprised of humans interacting with one another. Their ability and willingness to trust will impact the effectiveness of their interactions. The leader’s role in understanding the behaviors of those they lead is critical in being able to influence. This insight enables leaders to align employees towards common goals and ultimately the achievement of purpose and vision.

Why it matters?

Change is challenging even in the best of times. Layer traditional organizational change with an unprecedented pandemic that threatens every corner of our world, and the manual has yet to be written to help leaders navigate this effectively. We are figuring this out together and as we evolve and learn, it is important to remember the competencies that promote a trusting, safe, and mission-driven workplace culture.

One of the biggest drivers of a leader's ability to achieve departmental success is their capacity to recognize whether they are truly aware of their own behaviors, habits, patterns and beliefs, as well as any assumptions they may hold, which might or might not be true. The competency of **emotional intelligence** is unquestionably the most important focal area for leaders to consider as we begin reopening our campus.

Leaders should take some time to reflect on the impact this crisis has had on them personally and professionally. Talking with a trusted advisor can help you process the experiences you have had and offer different perspectives. Before you can be fully accessible to your returning employees, prepare yourself emotionally for this potentially demanding role. Not all employees will need extra care and attention, but those who do will require your patience and empathy and the stability and clarity that can only come after your own period of introspection.

Another competency helpful during Phase I is **role-modeling**. Employees are still facing uncertainties and doubt as they transition back. How each employee singularly manages change will be at full play as they leave their home offices [[change cycle](#)]. They will bring their insecurities, fears, and stresses with them. As a role model, a calm, unflappable leader can be the safe harbor where employees draw strength and hope as they navigate the disruptions to their personal and work life. Expect that many could be hypervigilant in observing your behaviors, responses and modes of adaptation and will use them as a cue for their own responses.

It is worth noting that all the competencies within the Build Trust quadrant remain important: advocacy, integrity, transparency, and humility. But in these unprecedented times, **emotional intelligence** and **role modeling** are essential. Leaders will be remembered for providing a stable and compassionate space for employees to ease back into a new, evolving and, sometimes, scary reality. However, human beings are amazingly resilient when they can operate in an environment of trust. Employees look to their trusted leaders to signal that their lives will be OK and that there is support and guidance to participate in creating a hopeful future.

Application Tips

- Reflection – Use the following questions to think about and either journal responses or discuss with a trusted advisor:
 - How has the pandemic changed my approach to leadership, if at all?
 - How has working from home impacted me on a personal (emotional) and professional level?
 - What are some insights I will use from this crisis to become a better leader?

Creating and Communicating Vision in Phase 1

A clearly understood vision should still be intact post-lockdown. Where the work unit is going remains the same; it is how we get there that might need some readjustment. A short-term path forward needs to be designed and **communicated** clearly and frequently to your returning employees. It may feel overwhelming to see too far into an unpredictable future. In fact, some management experts suggest leaders set priorities every four hours as they acclimate¹. That may be extreme, but the point is well taken that flexibility and open-mindedness is the new standard for communicating as things unfold. Transparency about what is known and what is not known is foundational to building a resilient workforce (and will reinforce trust as you show your own vulnerability). Communicating that goals and plans will evolve as the department forges ahead telegraphs that change will be constant at least for a while and we will get through it together.

The competency of **problem-solving**, though, may be most relevant for campus leaders to focus on during Phase 1. The pandemic and its effect will be present for a while. Leaders still need to be flexible, strategic, and savvy, while having the capacity to manage ever-changing priorities and modulate plans as they navigate the impacts of returning. The ability to problem-solve, and the openness to seek input and invite different perspectives, will be an essential survival skill. While making routine decisions pre-lockdown may have been appropriate, these times will call for lightening-speed determinations to tackle the potential rash of challenges and consequence that could crop up. Teams will need to plan for

uneven performance, reduced productivity, and unexpected absences from work. And, when those things do come up, compassion and grace along with the ability to move through the process of brainstorming options, evaluating pros and cons, choosing the best options, and then implementing them will be a superpower. And the opportunity to engage your teams in problem-solving solutions will create lasting cohesion, not to mention higher productivity and grateful employees.

¹ <https://hrexecutive.com/setting-priorities-every-4-hours-the-new-normal-for-leaders/>

Application Tips

- At one of your first team meetings, communicate your vision for what will be different and what might remain the same as we return to the workplace; include any insights you have had about your leadership or about the significance of your team's accomplishments during the crisis. Asking the team how the priorities may have shifted and how often the team should be discussing any future shifts will provide opportunities for much needed communications.
- Engage your team in a dialogue about a decision-making process that will enable everyone to become more flexible, responsive, and creative.

Generating Alignment in Phase 1

Generating alignment is also as important as it was pre-lockdown. The competencies of fair and legal management, financial management, judgment, accountability, and execution comprise this quadrant, but focusing on a culture of **accountability** in Phase 1 could be particularly critical.

Most leaders did not hit the pause button on accountability during lock-down. Work had to continue, and results needed to happen. Effectively holding others accountable for delivering on desired results is a continuous, dynamic process that involves establishing expectations, creating alignment among individuals and teams, and responding when existing results do not match organizational goals. In building a culture of accountability at UF, we stress four critical leader behaviors: clarifying expectations, connecting authentically, coaching for success, and celebrating wins. We will add one more behavior to the list that is key for leaders in this transitional environment: **coalesce** by uniting to form one community. The word derives from the Latin word "coalescere" meaning **grow together**. Imagine multiple beads, mirrors and rays of light coming together to form a kaleidoscope of spectacular beauty. Leaders today have a unique opportunity to engage their employees in defining a culture where we all grow together to drive new ways of working effectively. It may mean establishing new expectations or building new team norms, but it's all driven by a shared commitment to making things happen, giving purpose a voice and making vision a reality.

Bring people together to talk about and discover how the team has evolved during the lockdown. Perhaps increased virtual collaboration and communication occurred; or, maybe the team learned a little more about each other as individuals as webcams provided glimpses of makeshift offices or pets who made guest appearances during Zoom meetings. It is very possible that we have become more mindful about the needs of our colleagues or our own limitations. Leaders can use all this newfound information to **coalesce** the culture towards a higher level of performance.

Application Tips

- Take [SCS05 Accountability in the Workplace](#) course if you haven't already done so to learn more about the four critical leader behaviors.

- Hold a team meeting that focuses on creating return-to-work norms that address the wearing of masks, in-person versus zoom meetings, what to say if you feel someone is violating a safety policy, and any other behavioral interactions that will facilitate a greater sense of security about returning to the workplace.

Cultivating Talent in Phase 1

In this quadrant, you find resolve, talent selection, coaching and mentoring, collaboration, and facilitative decision-making. Pre-lockdown, all these competencies were important for managing our great human resources. Leading through our transition, though, will call for deliberately balancing the “old” and the “new.” Many leaders will crave returning to the past solutions that worked before and provided a sense of certainty, steadiness, and a comfortable reminder of past successes. Others will find operating in ambiguity has provided a welcomed freedom and will relish the chance to try new ideas and methodologies. As we enter the second half of 2020, leaders will need to discern when to lean into “old” and when to move toward “new” as they lead others in a unified direction.

The competency of **resolve** is often overlooked as a strong leadership skill. But it is this ability that will be invaluable in the coming months. Resolute leaders combine humility, courage, and laser-like focus to align team performance and build a healthy organizational culture. Resolute leaders are always looking for the sweet spot that balances both humanity and accountability within the decisions and processes they will be making. Their humility will keep lines of communication open, encouraging the sharing of insights, and celebrating mistakes that were made in the spirit of learning and innovation. Most importantly, resolute leaders will cultivate and raise up other leaders around them without feeling threatened or fearful of losing power and status. These leaders will model the inner strength to give employees courage during hard times.

In this transition many things will compete for a leader’s attention. There are five principles for resolute leaders to draw upon: uncommon discipline, unwavering values, strength in adversity, relationship building, and a passion for the future. Leadership strength is revealed and developed in adversity. Most decisions are easier when things are going well. Difficult and uncertain times require leaders to make more difficult choices. Courage and resolve are the most valuable accessories to have for this transition. After all, leaders lead change. They are not hired to preserve “status-quo.”

Application Tips

- Engage your team in a conversation about team values, identifying them and discussing the behaviors that demonstrate them.
- Meet one on one with your employees for the sole purpose of checking on how they are doing emotionally as they return to work and offer support or resources as needed. Let them know you genuinely care about them.

Final Thoughts

Institutions do not recruit some leaders for good times and a different set of leaders for difficult times. That is why leadership has never been for the faint-hearted; you don’t know the cards you’ll be dealt but you are committed to staying in the game. These unprecedented times demand that leaders pay special attention to what it takes to keep employees safe, first and foremost. But it will be a particular set of competencies that leaders use to address the holistic and complex needs of bringing employees together in a way that is very different from the environment we were all accustomed to.

The UF Leadership Competency model is still a solid playbook. In the history books, our campus leaders will be remembered as the pioneers building the bridge while employees crossed over it into a bold new world. Today, they are the self-aware leaders who bring boundless patience and empathy to the evolving workplace while fortifying trust; the leaders who communicate the known, as well as the unknown, and guide employees in a steady direction forward; the

daring leaders who bring employees back from their individual, makeshift home offices and coalesce a culture where the team grows and thrives together; and, courageous and resolute leaders who have the strength, humility, and courage to lead their teams through the most uncertain times and emerge resiliently hopeful.

References:

Blakely, L. (2020, May 18) *Fear of Returning to Work: When You're Ready but Your Employees Are Not*. Inc. <https://www.inc.com/lindsay-blakely/post-covid-leadership-employees-fear-return-work.html>

Bowden, T. (2020, April 29) *Making a Comeback: How to Lead Your Team's Post-COVID 19 Return to Work*.

GovLoop.

<https://www.govloop.com/community/blog/making-a-comeback-how-to-lead-your-teams-post-covid-19-return-to-work/>

Cassidy, F. (2020, April 7) *5 Ways Leaders can Help Employees during COVID-19*. Raconteur.

<https://www.raconteur.net/business-innovation/leaders-mental-health-coronavirus>

Harter, J. (2020, March 23) *COVID-19: What Employees Need From Leadership Right Now*. Gallup.

<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/297497/covid-employees-need-leaders-right.aspx>

