

Clinical workforce well-being playbook

Leading through the COVID-19 crisis and beyond

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Supporting clinicians and organizations through the COVID-19 crisis

Health care delivery organizations, which have a great responsibility to the communities they serve, are being challenged in unprecedented ways by the COVID-19 pandemic. Health care staff and clinicians are indispensable to the care of the patients and communities affected by the outbreak, but they themselves are facing many challenges, both personally and professionally. News coverage has focused on clinicians in difficult “surge” situations, but even in hospitals that are well-prepared for the surge, clinicians are under significant stress, as are those who are facing illness, loss or income reductions due to low patient volumes. We created this playbook to inspire health care leadership that supports the resilience and well-being of a health care delivery system’s most precious resource: its clinicians.

Vizient® is committed to conducting ongoing research into our members’ leading practices, federal and regulatory guidelines and evidence-based interventions to support the well-being of front-line clinicians. Promoting the engagement, preparedness and resilience of clinicians is a vital and ongoing focus of work for health care delivery organizations. In times of crisis, different areas of focus are necessary. The purpose of this playbook is to offer our members critical information, emerging practices and recommendations to enable them to provide the best possible support and care to their clinicians during these extraordinary times, and to rebuild after the crisis. Together, we can navigate the current crisis and build healthy and engaged cultures and teams to serve our communities well into the future.

The current climate has provided opportunities for organizations to innovate and adapt. We invite you to share your feedback, innovations and resources with us by sending them to clinicalworkforce@vizientinc.com.

Leadership matters

Leading a team requires an entirely different viewpoint and action plan during times of crisis. Instead of focusing on enabling clinicians to grow professionally and on fostering joy at work, crisis leaders must concentrate on keeping team members healthy and safe and providing them with the tools they need to maintain their resilience in the face of unusual challenges. Data has shown that leadership qualities of physician supervisors have direct and measurable impacts on the well-being and satisfaction of physicians, underscoring the importance of effective leadership during crisis.¹

Clinician burnout in the U.S. is growing at an alarming rate. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 50% of physicians reported significant symptoms of burnout. It seems likely that this rate will increase as clinicians navigate the current situation. The negative effects of burnout are far-reaching and can include reduced job performance, high turnover, and increased incidence of medication errors and clinician suicide. Organizations can intentionally foster clinician well-being by promoting a workforce that is engaged, effective and high-functioning as an interdisciplinary team to provide the best possible patient care.²

Health care employees do not view their organizations as simply financial or strategic entities; they find moral significance in the organization’s actions. Employees respond emotionally and cognitively to organizational meaning, and these perceptions influence their attachment to the organization and their future behaviors. Small actions seen as virtuous during challenging times take on larger significance in translating the meaning of the organization to its employees. There are numerous accounts from the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks of the significance of small moves that organizations made to comfort and care for employees.

Similarly, small actions seen as unvirtuous (i.e., inhumane, unjust or cowardly) may do lasting damage to the bond between employees and the organization. When organizational actions are viewed as humane, just and courageous, citizenship behavior, willingness to cooperate and intention to remain in the organization all increase.³

Finally, you cannot lead and be a resource for your team if you yourself are not well. Be intentional about creating space to keep yourself healthy and resilient. Supporting other leaders in your organization is also critical. Provide resources for leaders on your team and seek out support for yourself from peers and professional organizations. Being a leader in a time of crisis can be isolating and exhausting. During this challenging season and throughout the recovery period, consider finding peers who can serve as thought partners, and leverage the insights and resources available to you through Vizient Member Networks, Community groups, and list servers.



“It’s hard to document the positive effect that organizational compassion has on employee retention and productivity, but it’s clear that employees will reward companies that treat them humanely.”⁴

What employees need most during crisis

Researchers from Gallup, who have studied employee needs for decades, have identified four core needs that are universal even in crisis situations: trust, stability, compassion and hope.⁵ Below are some practical ways to meet these needs in the midst of challenge and uncertainty.⁶

Trust

Most health care workers view their profession as a calling. The feeling that there is a greater meaning in their work can help sustain employees through a crisis.⁴ To maintain trust, employees need to believe that the organization shares in the calling and is committed to doing the right thing for both patients and staff. To foster this belief:

- Communicate often and be visible. Staff are hungry for information during scary or uncertain times. Provide employees with frequent status updates and explain what the organization is doing in response. Use existing communication channels and create new forums as needed (e.g., weekly employee town halls, daily email or voicemail updates, information hotlines, intranet updates).
- Communicate with transparency and vulnerability. Admit what you don’t know. Be honest about bad news, so staff can be as prepared as possible.

- Invite feedback and make sure leaders and clinicians feel heard. This shows the team that they are valued and can help them feel more in control.
- Manage expectations. It is important not to transmit false hope or commit to timelines you cannot meet. Your organization won't look the same following this event, so avoid making statements like "it's going to be fine" that belittle the seriousness of the crisis.⁷
- Communicate and reinforce your organization's mission and values. Remind people of the larger purpose of their work even as they strive to make sense of the situation and its impact on their lives.

Stability

Staff don't expect leaders to predict the future, but they need to know that leaders are making thoughtful decisions and showing up in predictable ways. To demonstrate stability:

- Create stable cadences for communication (daily huddles or rounding, weekly voicemails or town halls, etc.)
- Repeat yourself. In times of crisis, your message may not be heard clearly the first time. Don't be offended; this is a by-product of stress. Make it a habit to pass on important pieces of information multiple times and through multiple avenues. Not everyone absorbs information by hearing it so consider sending an email, too.
- Ensure that leaders are visible in surge areas to show appreciation and support for overworked staff. Leaders should be more visible than ever during this time.
- Be alert to fault lines. Areas that provoke conflict on an average day will be magnified under stress. A strong team is essential to functioning, survival and success. Address conflict as soon as possible and promote community rather than "we" and "they."⁷
- Work to create predictable and stable expectations during the crisis period and throughout recovery for staff who are in the midst of shifting assignments and needs. Make sure all team members understand their responsibilities and any adjusted expectations, and that they know how to access information and get their questions answered.
- Be stable. Erratic behavior or decision-making discourages trust, as does promoting fear and negativity. It is okay to be human, but exude stability and confidence when addressing your team.⁶ Foster awareness of yourself and when you may need to pause, reflect and re-center.

Compassion

Compassion at work reduces the suffering of those affected by trauma and increases their attachment to their colleagues and the organization. For those who observe or participate in acts of compassion, the effect is just as great: caring gestures contribute to their own resilience and attachment to the organization. While it's much easier to avoid others' pain, a leader's ability to elicit a compassionate response directly affects the

organization's ability to maintain high performance in difficult times. It fosters an organization's capacity to heal, learn, adapt and excel.⁴ To encourage compassion:

- Set an example and show your own humanity — express feelings.
- Show compassion and empathy in your interactions with others and do not take their emotions personally. Each person reacts to trauma differently. If you observe a member of your team being angry, flat or flippant, remember that these can all be manifestations of stress.⁶
- Use your influence to support those in need. Cut people slack when they need extra support. Assign backups for the work to support people in difficult circumstances.
- Be willing to adjust business as usual based on human needs. Provide time and space during meetings or work hours for people to share and express pain.
- Be present, physically and emotionally. Acknowledge what people are going through; comfort them and allow them to comfort each other.
- Create the organizational infrastructure to reinforce and institutionalize compassionate acts.⁴

Hope

Research on emotional intelligence shows that employees look to their managers for cues on how to respond to sudden changes or crises. To promote an environment of hope:

- Express and spread positivity and hope. Especially in the midst of a negative news cycle, staff need leaders to help them see the bright spots and the long-term view.
- Remind employees that they are part of a larger community, that you will get through this together, and that there is a bright future for the individual, team and community.



Be hopeful. Even during trauma, a leader can transmit the hope needed to keep a team resilient. Fear is contagious, so take steps toward confident faith in the team you have created, the care they are providing, and the shared humanity of this crisis.

Addressing relevant needs of your clinicians during a crisis

Caring for patients during the COVID-19 pandemic is an extreme situation. Whether your clinicians are experiencing surge conditions or are dealing with reduced patient volumes and their related impacts on work and income, it's a stressful time for all, making support for clinicians especially vital. Outlined below are practical ways to provide such support during this crisis, organized around specific areas of need.

Support clinicians in surge areas

- Implement a triage committee to make decisions about allocation of scarce resources and to help communicate difficult decisions to families. Front-line clinicians should be spared the trauma of these decisions.⁸
- Optimize staffing by ensuring that all clinicians on the team are working at top of license and scope. Remain flexible; consider moving staff to new areas or temporary roles as appropriate based on their education and skills. Policy and reimbursement changes are often enacted during a crisis, so watch for details on such changes in your state. Successful expansions of scope during a crisis can be a catalyst for longer-term expansions of roles.
- Shift responsibility for all nonessential and nonurgent tasks away from front-line employees who are working in surge areas.
- Provide food during shifts or food and groceries for staff to take home after work.
- Seek creative ways to ensure that in-demand clinicians are available to work when schools and other community services are closed: Partner with child care and elder care agencies, work with students to provide child care services, or create an online forum for the community in which individuals can volunteer their services.

Help clinicians manage risk to themselves and their families

- During pandemics, limit exposure to disease by having staff who are able to do so work from home. But keep in mind that these newly remote employees may feel isolated or disoriented and are juggling new demands. Schedule frequent check-ins, provide flexibility and be a constant source of encouragement.
- To limit exposure of their families, provide clinicians with scrubs and a showering and changing space. Consider providing housing by partnering with local hotels and universities.
- Limit entry into patient rooms as appropriate and screen patients via telemedicine when possible.
- Establish drive-through testing sites and telephone triage hotlines for employees.
- Provide appropriate help and training for staff to lift, turn and place patients in various positions, especially when prone positioning, to ensure the safety of both staff and patients.

Optimally manage furloughs and compensation changes

- Sometimes a crisis involves reduced patient volume in certain areas. Consider what accommodations you are willing and able to make in provider compensation models and communicate these proactively and transparently.
- When difficult decisions are made to implement labor cost reductions, ensure that leaders share the impact appropriately. Some organizations have implemented significant temporary compensation reductions for their leaders when staff furloughs are necessary.
- Organizational leadership should ensure that communication about labor costs and necessary reductions is thorough and transparent, and adequately explains the rationale for the action and any efforts being made to minimize the impact.
- Work with human resources and union representatives to ensure that employees know what resources they have access to whether they are employed, redeployed or furloughed.
- Help employees navigate unemployment benefits and any other federal or state aid that may be available.
- When possible, continue to provide medical coverage for furloughed staff.
- To enable quick reengagement of furloughed employees once they return, maintain open communications during furlough and establish a clear point of contact for employee questions. Provide periodic updates on status and recovery planning but keep the updates brief and passive — i.e., not requiring action or follow-up. Ensure that employees aren't engaging in uncompensated work while on furlough.⁹

Foster clinician resilience during stressful times

- Follow the example of the military, which employs a “battle-buddy” approach in training and combat situations, to foster accountability, team-building, and mutual support¹⁰: Consider assigning a buddy to clinicians working in challenging conditions and to leaders managing your organization's response.
- Redirect any attempts to assign blame and focus on solutions instead. People naturally want to blame others when they are under stress, which increases fear and negative feelings. Acknowledge the anger, but redirect that energy towards finding solutions and moving forward.⁷
- Identify those most at risk for mental health issues. Some of your team will be affected by this crisis more than others. Those at high risk include clinicians with past trauma (personal or professional), those exposed to crisis conditions for longer periods or at higher intensity, and those personally affected by the crisis. Be aware of those who are at highest risk and provide assistance in obtaining treatment.¹¹
- Provide crisis support services early and often. As soon as possible during and after a crisis, make mental health and psychosocial support services available (emotional support hotlines, employee assistance programs, access to chaplains) and facilitate staff access to them. And be a role model: use these services yourself.¹²

- The stress of being physically and psychologically unsafe is a catalyst for post-traumatic stress disorder. As debilitating as post-traumatic stress is, the pretraumatic stress of waiting can be equally so. The potential impacts may be similar to those of previous crises, such as 9/11, and strong crisis management resources should be available and accessible.¹³

Thriving after crisis: leadership for organizational and individual healing

Leaders who excel at leading compassionately and effectively in times of crisis help people make sense of terrible events and allow employees to move on. Tragic circumstances occur during times of public crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, but also, on a smaller scale, for individual employees at various points in their lives. Pain carries over into the workplace as people search for meaning and hope. Compassionate leadership involves taking some form of public action, however small, that is intended to ease people's pain — and that inspires others to act as well. By taking the actions described below, leaders can help individuals and organizations heal by demonstrating compassion and “unleashing a compassionate response throughout the organization.”⁶

Facilitate recovery through compassionate leadership

- Create an environment in which people can freely express and discuss feelings, process pain, seek or provide comfort and find hope.
- Hold employee gatherings to acknowledge by name teammates who were lost in the crisis or who lost immediate family members.
- Symbolic gestures, such as a moment of silence or a candle lighting ceremony, can be powerful; include them in meetings or staff gatherings to allow people to pay respects and mourn.
- Reach out to family members of lost teammates personally and include them in the public acknowledgements of their loved ones' service.
- Publicly acknowledge the sacrifices and contributions of team members. Commit to leader rounding, and thank people in person.
- Assess the impact of burnout on point-of-care clinicians to understand its extent and your organization's specific drivers. Consider using a well-being or burnout assessment tool or an employee pulse survey to identify opportunities for leadership intervention.
- Allow staff time and space for grief and healing as needed; if someone is there in body only and deprived of opportunities to heal, productivity will be low and loyalty to the organization will erode.⁶
- Continue to help your team focus on the positives throughout the recovery period: patients who have recovered, improvement in the organization's financial status, pride in the community care that was provided during the crisis, jobs being reinstated, etc.¹⁴

- Use storytelling to build resilience, highlight shared values and inspire a shared vision and a commitment to the profession.¹⁵



Leaders have the power to “help individuals and organizations begin to heal by demonstrating their own compassion, thereby unleashing a compassionate response throughout the organization.”⁶

Investing in clinicians — for your future and theirs

As you rebuild after the crisis, focused efforts may be needed to re-engage clinicians in your mission and strategic direction. Your desired culture will need to be communicated and fostered in an intentional and effective way. You will need to create a workplace that cultivates resilience and inspires people to do their best work and remain committed to the organization. The proven strategies below can provide lasting benefits for your clinicians and your organization.

Invest in the engagement, resilience and retention of clinicians

- Focus on any employees who started at your organization during the crisis and therefore may not have had an optimal orientation and onboarding experience. Provide any training and connection opportunities that they missed.
- Engagement and retention starts at the beginning of the employment relationship. Clinicians need significantly more support during their first year of employment to be effectively assimilated into the culture, build personal and professional support systems, align with the organization’s norms and expectations and engage with its mission and vision. Assess your clinician onboarding process and ensure that it is robust, lasts six to 12 months and is consistent across the organization.
- Clinicians who are new to practice have unique needs as they navigate not only a new organization and role, but a new profession. Transition-to-practice programs for nurses and advanced practice providers have been shown to significantly improve first-year retention, reduce stress, support resilience and strengthen commitment to the profession.
- As health care has changed rapidly in the past decade, many organizations’ infrastructure for care teams and leadership has lagged. Assess your organization to see how all members of the care team are utilized, led and supported and make any changes necessary to meet present-day needs.

- Teamwork is increasingly essential in health care, yet many barriers exist. Create an infrastructure and culture that promotes highly functioning teams. Invest in developing communication skills and emotional intelligence for clinicians and set an example as leaders.¹⁶

- Invest in leadership training. Understand which leader behaviors are constructive and which are destructive.¹⁷

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Solutions to help improve resiliency in your organization

Vizient partners with members to improve clinician engagement and retention, and to optimize team-based, higher quality, cost-effective care. Through Vizient solutions, you have access to national expertise and leading insights, enabling you to improve faster together.

To learn more, contact clinicalworkforce@vizientinc.com.

Clinical Team Insights

Ensuring effective and efficient care delivery is essential to meet today's value-based health care demands. Advanced practice providers, including physician assistants and advanced practice registered nurses, are an integral part of the clinical team and are projected to continue to grow and expand. Health care organizations benefit from creating an infrastructure to support the clinical care team and ensure each clinician is working to the top of their scope of practice. Clinical Team Insights takes a data-driven approach to identify opportunities for improvement within your organizational structure and operations.

Physician and Advanced Practice Provider Onboarding Program

Physician shortages are increasing and advanced practice providers are being more widely employed. Yet turnover for both groups is significant — perhaps in part because these critical members of the care team are rarely onboarded in an intentional, thorough and consistent manner. Our program includes a leading-practice structure, curriculum, delivery resources, mentor training and advisory support.

Nurse Residency Program

New graduate turnover within the first year of practice is a significant issue. The Vizient/AACN Nurse Residency Program™ is an evidence-based program developed in collaboration with the American Association of Colleges of Nursing that focuses on leadership, patient outcomes and the professional role of nursing. The program offers curriculum and resources to support new graduate nurses, enabling organizations to align care teams to ensure high-quality, efficient patient care. Increased retention is a signature outcome — the first-year retention rate for nurses who have gone through the program is 90.2%, compared with the national average of 82.5%. More than 100,000 new graduates have completed the program nationwide.

Vizient Member Networks

Vizient Member Networks comprise tightly connected, highly interactive, and trusted communities of leaders who come together to share common experiences and challenges, learn from each other and from industry leaders, resolve pressing issues by creating solutions together, and innovate to advance the vitality of their own organizations and their communities. Participants in our networks have access to cutting-edge research, relevant data, actionable insights and proven expertise to help address critical priorities, including clinician engagement and well-being.



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As the nation's largest member-driven health care performance improvement company, Vizient provides solutions and services that empower health care providers to deliver high-value care by aligning cost, quality and market performance. With analytics, advisory services and a robust sourcing portfolio, we help members improve patient outcomes and lower costs.