



Leading Through Uncertainty – Supporting Police Through COVID and Other Unexpected Changes

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Introduction

The significance of COVID-19 on police operations and wellbeing is clear as Canada enters its second year and third wave of the pandemic. The prolonged public health crisis has threatened the physical and psychological safety of everyone across the globe, particularly for people who work in areas that require continued close contact with others, such as police. As with many situations involving prolonged periods of uncertainty and high operational demands, police leaders face the challenge of motivating and engaging a workforce facing burnout. The following considerations are offered to support leaders in framing COVID-19 issues effectively and expressing a clear understanding of the unique pressures police members are facing.

Emotional & Psychological Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic

The mental health needs of Canadians have been on the rise since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, with increased reports of people feeling lonely, depressed, anxious, and engaging in binge drinking. The entire population has been facing emotional and psychological challenges or pressures due to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., isolation, limited coping mechanisms, changes in routines); however, police members are also experiencing a unique set of challenges that may be less frequently acknowledged in discussions of COVID-19 stressors, including:

- An increased sense of duty during a crisis. Crises coupled with lower staffing, increases the risk of less time off and higher intensity work;
- Long shifts outside the home coupled with school closures, leading to increased work-life conflicts for police members who have children;
- Frequent close contact with the public, adding to existing anxieties among police or family members about infection risks, particularly for police who live with medically compromised individuals;
- Rapidly changing enforcement guidelines and restrictions, leading to increased uncertainty about how to exercise police powers in fair, moral, and effective ways;
- Working in or supervising teams that have blended engagement from historically “standard” office spaces, newly created home office spaces, and the field, leading to

increased logistical and technical challenges that can create perceptions of inefficiency or inequality among staff.

How Leaders Can Respond

COVID-19 is a pervasive and sustained crisis. Strong and compassionate leadership during times of crisis can help maintain staff morale and mental health through the associated operational, organizational, and personal challenges. Police leaders can support their teams during the crisis in many ways:

- Emphasize that COVID-19 is different from the repeated shorter-term, situational crises police often face, which means shifting to managing a different kind of stressor marathon. For example, ensure that there are opportunities for staff to take meaningful time off, including vacation times, as well as shorter daily or weekly breaks, re-evaluating priorities with a longer timeframe in mind, and considering whether the demands being placed on staff are sustainable if the crisis stretches beyond the expected timeline. Lead by example by setting a sustainable pace and communicating that COVID-19 is a marathon and not a sprint.
- Demonstrably recognize that the extension of work from home is new for police organizations, and as a result new work behaviours need to be established. Set effective boundaries by avoiding meetings and emails after work hours where possible. Make extra efforts to engage staff on an informal, social level during the work day to keep them feeling engaged and connected to the workplace rather than just moving from meeting to meeting. For example, start meetings off with a check-in on how your staff is doing, ask about family, hobbies, or other non-work related topics before moving into the content of the meeting. Don't forget to include recognition and discussion of the positives.
- Openly and regularly acknowledge the new work-life conflicts created by COVID-19, and offer flexibility where possible. Consider flexible deadlines and work hours to help people manage child care, education, or family supports, because doing so can help ease the new competing demands of work and home life, as well as bolster morale.
- Normalize the fear and doubt that COVID-19 has created in everyone. Uncertainty is inherently challenging for people, so acknowledge the discomfort that comes with not having clear guidelines or an end date. Provide specific directions, be transparent, and regularly provide well-informed specific steps when working to achieve individual and team goals. Recognize and accommodate the reality that shorter and longer term goals may have to shift to accommodate the dynamic uncertainty of COVID-19.
- Remember to provide clear direction and feedback for staff as their roles and responsibilities may have changed or shifted during COVID. If staff is being asked to

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take on additional responsibilities or are working in a setting they are not familiar with, regular feedback, direction, and encouragement can help increase their confidence in their work.

Building Coping Resources During COVID

Any situation that tests our limits also provides opportunities for deeper insight and growth. Here are a few examples of how the experiences gathered during COVID-19 might support improved coping:

- Provide structured opportunities to engage the community in supportive ways in addition to enforcement (e.g., such as organizing a charity drive, helping with delivery and administration of vaccines);
- Increase formal and informal recognition efforts to acknowledge the sacrifice police members are making during COVID-19 to keep the community safe;
- Construct a “thank you” message or online event for families to communicate your understanding of how they contribute to your staff’s success;
- Emphasize the importance of seeking mental health support as both a proactive measure and a means of building a sense of purpose, meaning, self-discovery, appreciation, or sense of belonging through the uncertainty they are facing;
- Communicate that it is normal and expected to be apprehensive as COVID restrictions are eased. Make an effort to equally welcome those who comply with the workplace standards as well as those who initially may decide to continue to wear a mask even when not required and are more comfortable with strict physical distancing when possible.
- Acknowledge that returning to the workplace is a challenging proposition for some and try to make the return a positive by expressing enthusiasm and providing opportunities to reconnect with coworkers. Understand that comfort levels will return gradually as workplace routines resume and acknowledge the adaptability police members have shown in the face of changing workplace rules.

Additional Resources

CIPSRT COVID-19 Readiness Resource Project - <https://www.cipsrt-icrtsp.ca/en/crrp>

CAMH COVID-19 Resources - <https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19>