



**ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST
AND RETURNING TO THE OFFICE
AFTER COVID-19** Dr. Andrew Temte, CFA

I'd like to extend an open apology to everyone I've ever infected by venturing out of the house with a cold or flu in the past.

Like many in our society, when I got sick, I'd load up on over-the-counter meds and power through. Powering through is expected. It is the norm, but it's one we have to break.

On a Sunday morning in early March 2020, at a time when there were only a handful of known COVID-19 cases in the country, I found myself in a fever-induced daze, recovering from a bout with what I suspected was the flu—testing was not yet available, and to this day, I have no idea whether or not I was infected with COVID-19. In that moment, however, it hit me how incredibly selfish I've been in the past to venture out in public when I've known, or should have known, I was contagious.

I lay there listening to the latest COVID-19 rumblings on TV, thinking about all the meetings, dinners, and events I've attended while under the weather. "Was my presence at Tuesday's staff meeting so important that the risk of infecting others was outweighed by my contributions? Did my attendance make or break the fund-raising gala I was convinced I had to attend?"

The answer is a resounding no. If I infect even one person, I infect that person's family. I potentially infect their friends and colleagues, some of whom might be more susceptible to the potential damage an illness can cause. My choice to show up when I'm contagious negatively impacts the productivity of many other people and inappropriately puts them at risk. How do I know if Billy in accounting is immuno-compromised? How do I know if Sally has her grandmother living in the basement with lung disease? I don't.

If you're not convinced that your performance isn't what you think it is when you power through, I've got news for you. On that Sunday morning during my fuzzy fever time, I did a little work on our personal taxes to try to stay productive. I thought I was making reasonable headway, just moving a bit slower than normal. The process culminated with my getting several IRS forms ready to pop in the mail the next day.

I woke up the following morning to discover my fever had broken overnight. My wife, Linda, brought me the envelopes I'd prepared the day before and asked me to look at them. After a few moments of getting oriented, I realized I had put the stamps in the upper left corner! I then had to open each envelope, review the forms for errors and repackage everything. What a waste of effort.

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The lesson is that even though you think you're being productive when you power through, the probability of making mistakes rises. I'd have been better off spending my downtime playing another game of Scrabble® against the computer.

We're coached from a young age to power through. We strive for that perfect attendance record. We're told to sacrifice for the team. "Suck it up, buttercup" is a common refrain. Illness is viewed as a sign of weakness, and we go to extraordinary lengths to cover it up when we're sick. We are bombarded with advertising by over-the-counter pharmaceutical manufacturers that attempt to convince us to consume Product X, and our symptoms will be sufficiently masked so we can get right back to our routines.

The implication of these messages is that all that matters is you—that you feel okay and are back in the game as quickly as possible. There isn't nearly enough emphasis on ensuring you're no longer in transmission mode when you re-enter your social circles.

Now, let's extend the argument against powering through to our interconnected world. The global economy is built on social mobility and interconnectedness. Trade, entertainment, travel, education—almost every aspect of our economy depends upon the free flow of goods and ideas. Human interactions and experiences are essential to how we view the world.

Although there are some individuals who would like nothing more than to close borders and return to a less connected and less diverse time, I believe such a regressive step would be tragic for all of us who live on this unique, pale blue dot. We mustn't succumb to paranoia and retreat into the past.



However, with the interconnectedness of the modern world comes the heightened risk of new biological threats. We can no longer blissfully imagine we're somehow immune to the threat or think there won't be another pandemic after COVID-19 fades into the rearview mirror of our collective consciousness. We have an obligation as citizens to change how we think about the norm of powering through. I believe we can make an impact by changing our viewpoints and behavior as follows:

Use sick days for their intended purpose. As a leader, I can't tell you how frustrated I get when I hear colleagues or neighbors tell me with a wink that they're using a sick day to recover from a long party weekend. Then, when the real thing comes along, the individual has burned through their bank of allotted sick days, powers through, and infects the whole office. On the flipside, there are those who wear the fact that they haven't taken a sick day in years as a badge of honor. Here, the result is the same—they feel their presence is so important that it's worth the risk of infecting others.

Ensure cross-training and coverage for your role. Many people power through because there isn't proper cross-training or coverage for their role if they do get sick. It's management's responsibility to help team members feel safe enough to take sick days when they need to.

Even if you're like me and prefer to work in an office environment, make sure you're set up to be productive working from home. One fortunate outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic is that working from home has become more ubiquitous and acceptable. Those who are set up to work remotely won't have to struggle with the decision of whether to show up to work when they could potentially infect others, because they can be just as effective from home.

Be proactive about your health. Do what your mother told you to do—exercise, eat right, and sleep. Eliminate excess stress from your life, and take stock of potentially unhealthy influences on your body’s defenses. Being active and engaging in a healthy lifestyle help promote a stronger immune system. That stronger immune system will come in handy when cold and flu season comes around.

If there’s a benefit to the global challenges faced as a result of COVID-19, it’s that many of us will have a heightened awareness of how disease is transmitted and will be more in tune with our personal role in its spread. We won’t be able to completely prevent the spread of disease and illness. However, being more aware of our own impact on those around us, and actively working to break down the norm of powering through, will go a long way toward keeping us all safe.

It is our job to lead by example. Show others that you take their well-being seriously by staying home when you’re ill. Sometimes we don’t know we’re contagious until it’s too late, but I’m committed to being more careful in the future. I care about you and your family’s well-being.

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During the early phases of the pandemic, I had a socially distanced conversation with a friend about returning to work as the government began to ease Safer-at-Home orders. She told me her company was recalling all employees back to the office who had been working from home since mid-March, effective the next week, which was in mid-May.

From previous conversations we'd had about her job and employer, I knew enough about the work she did to know that it was not essential for her to be on-site. Curious to understand the root cause of her leader's order to bring everyone back together so soon, I started asking the "five whys" from my Lean training. Created by Toyota founder Sakichi Toyoda—who is often referred to as the Japanese Thomas Edison—the five whys are designed to get to the root of any problem. With each "why," the source or motivation of a problem or decision becomes more clear, and by the fifth "why," a solution is likely to emerge.

My first question was, "Why are they bringing everyone back so soon?" To this, she indicated that the team was highly collaborative and handoffs between work streams were more efficient when everyone was physically together. To gain more clarity, I asked about her team's efficiency during their seven weeks of working from home. She replied that there had not been any challenges to getting work done in a timely manner and that some on her team felt they were more efficient than when they worked at the office.

I thought to myself, “something else is going on here. The unknowns that surround the novel coronavirus would lead me to keep as many people home for as long as possible if teams and individuals were able to be as, or more, productive than when they were in the office.”

This seeming contradiction led me to my second “why.” I asked, “If some teams are more productive working from home, why are they bringing everyone back and not limiting the first round to the factory and production personnel who are necessary to build and ship products to customers?”

Her reply this time was less confident, and I sensed a waver in her voice. “I guess they just want everyone back together to make sure all the work is getting done properly,” she said.

“Ah ... we’re starting to get to the root cause,” I thought to myself.

Then I turned the conversation to productivity measurement in a work-from-home environment. We discussed how, if you keep all else the same, it’s hard to “hide” low productivity when working from home, because over time, subpar performers begin to stick out like a sore thumb relative to those who are more skilled and efficient. She agreed that unless there are known reasons why one individual’s work-from-home experience should differ from another’s (e.g., lack of proper work environment, uncontrollable distractions, etc.), it would quickly become clear that a particular individual was not pulling their weight.

One more why ... This time, I simply asked the question again: "Why do you think they want everyone back in the office?"

Her response? "I guess they don't trust us."

Myriad articles, books, and other publications speak to the subject of trust. A cottage consulting industry has been thriving on the subject for years. Healthy organizations have been shown to perform better than their peers and exhibit higher levels of employee engagement and retention. Trust is a central component of any effective organizational health model.

Trust within a team and between colleagues is built over time and is a two-way street among peers, managers, and subordinates. For example, if Billie and I work together at different points along the value chain, trust is built with effective and consistent communication. Trust grows with high-quality handoffs that are repeatable and reliable. Trust builds when I admit failure to Billie, own my mistakes, and learn from challenges. If Billie falls down, she does the same.

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With the right accountability, communication, and process-flow frameworks in place, trust should be the baseline assumption. If a teammate doesn't follow through or reliably deliver quality work, a culture of communication, accountability, and candor can shorten the climb back up the trust ladder. Clearly defined responsibility matrices are also an essential ingredient in building organizational trust.

Alternatively, if accountability, communication, responsibility matrices, and process-flow systems are not in place or are ineffective, organizational trust is much harder to establish.

In low-trust environments, processes live in people's heads and not on process maps. Communication happens around the water cooler, messages are twisted to serve individual interests, and no one knows who's on first, second, or third! Suspicion surrounding motives abounds, and mistrust becomes the baseline assumption between teams and team members. Even if everyone wants to trust each other, building trust is damn near impossible because a few steps up the trust ladder are negated when a process or communication failure occurs.

Now, transport yourself back to early March 2020. The novel coronavirus is just taking off, and businesses that can send employees to work from home have done so with only days of planning. Businesses that have established high levels of organizational trust are, in relative terms, much better off than those that have not. These organizations have invested in management training, employee engagement, process definition, and communication systems. They have clearly defined goals and have established responsibility matrices that align with their goals. They can measure productivity and have a good handle on customer satisfaction through rapid-feedback systems. Trust is the baseline, and productivity/engagement is as high as possible given the circumstances.

Imagine for a moment the opposite. It's early March, and an unbalanced organization needs to send everyone home for an undetermined amount of time to ride out the storm. In this case, anxiety among both employees and managers runs high. Managers are freaking out because they have no idea what their people are doing minute by minute. They're accustomed to looking over their employees' shoulders to ensure the work gets done and manually intervening in process flow because of all the organizational uncertainty and system breakdowns. In this type of business, managers are fixers and overseers, not talent developers and coaches.

Similarly, employees are freaking out for all the obvious reasons: They've never worked from home before. There's a silent killer on the loose. Their kids are home from school. They've been thrust into substitute teacher roles. They're also freaking out because they've become accustomed to an unhealthy work environment where their every move is tracked and suspicion in people and systems runs rampant. What happens now?

In this environment, both parties want to get back to the physical office as quickly as possible so everyone can keep an eye out for problems, protect their jobs, and watch their backs.

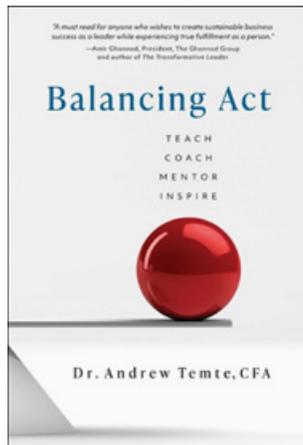
If you're a leader who pushed to bring your teams back into the office as quickly as possible, ask yourself: Why did I rush? What were my motivations for pushing the envelope? Ask yourself as many "whys" as you need in order to arrive at the root cause of that decision. Allow your open mind to consider all possibilities.

If this exploration has led you to a place of vulnerability and the root cause centers around a lack of organizational trust, then begin working immediately to adopt the principles of continuous improvement and organizational health. There's no better time than the present to begin taking meaningful steps up the organizational trust ladder.

The post-COVID-19 new world order is still highly uncertain, at least at the time of this writing. However, companies that have established organizational trust and operate within a management operating structure of continuous improvement and organizational health will likely fare better than their counterparts who operate in an environment of ill-defined processes and organizational suspicion. 📖



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As President and Global Head of Corporate Learning, Dr. Andrew Temte, CFA, spearheads Kaplan's efforts to prepare today's workforce for the future world of work. A thought leader on issues related to professional education and workforce skilling, his decades of higher education and professional education experience give Dr. Temte a unique perspective over the issues surrounding the future of employment and workplace relevance. Dr. Temte has over 14 years of university teaching experience in the areas of corporate finance, investments, and international finance. An accomplished musician, he is active in numerous fundraising events and committees in the La Crosse, WI community.

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