

THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 IN THE ECC

Metro Nashville Department of Emergency Communications lightened up its work environment in the face of pandemic and civil unrest.

By Stephen Martini

Months into this global pandemic, public safety communications professionals analyzed the impact of COVID-19 on every aspect of the ECC.

Everything changed. Daily operations. Console layouts. Utilization of alternate facilities. Incorporation of volunteers to answer phones. Implementing remote work options. Masks. Hand sanitizers. Cleaning schedules. Cleaning supplies. Cleaning procedures. And communication. Lots and lots of communication about lots and lots of changes as the situation evolved rapidly and responses developed dynamically.



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We discussed technology, facilities and supplies. We reviewed budgets, froze spending on travel or non-essential capital purchases while offsetting losses with state or federal assistance programs. We coordinated with local, state and federal directives while equipping our teams with the ability to answer caller's questions about safer-at-home initiatives.

In the midst of assessing all of these aspects, we also turned our focus to our most critical asset – our people. The most considerable and meaningful impacts of COVID-19 on the ECC are the varied and unique impacts on workplace culture.

In a 2018 *Forbes.com* article, Dr. Pragma Agarwal, author of *Sway: Unraveling Unconscious Bias*, identifies four components of healthy culture in the workplace, centered on shared values, belief systems, attitudes and assumptions by team members. Agarwal says, "In a workplace, however, the leadership and the strategic organizational directions and management influence the workplace culture to a huge extent. A positive workplace culture improves teamwork, raises the morale, increases productivity and efficiency, and enhances retention of the workforce. Job satisfaction, collaboration, and work performance are all enhanced. And, most importantly, a positive workplace environment reduces stress in employees."¹

COVID-19 required ECC leadership to take a hard look at how team members continued to interact successfully and work closely in a shared environment to achieve our mission-critical goals in an environment of unrest and instability – at a time when your neighbor may be as big a risk to you as they are a help.

How did we focus on keeping everyone encouraged, satisfied, productive, team-focused and collaborative through a pandemic response stressing distance and separation?

At Metro Nashville Department of Emergency Communications, we remained centered on our core values: preparing and equipping our team to conduct its mission-critical daily tasks with maximum efficiency, and we communicated that message regularly.

Some of the staples our team came to expect every year disappeared. Social distancing restrictions canceled the annual employee recognition banquet held during National Public Safety Telecommunicator

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Week and two national conferences. Local training courses were suspended indefinitely.

To keep our team relaxed in a time of uncertainty and confusion, we suspended the uniform policy for 90 days, allowing team members to come to work relaxed in the midst of the unknown. As travel restrictions grew, we implemented themed dress-down days – Meanderin' Mondays and Flyin' Fridays – encouraging team members to report to work wearing a fun T-shirt they picked up while traveling. These opportunities, stretching into late June, brought a little vacation into the center while we remained on our COVID-required staycations.

The Emergency Communications Board, used to funding the annual banquet, shifted funds to purchase individual packaged meals for team members on duty. Telecommunicator Appreciation Week activities returned with renewed focus on the most essential of our employees while administrative support team members followed mayoral directives to work from home. We celebrated our favorite sports teams while stadiums and arenas stood empty. We donned our concert T-shirts to respectfully mourn the absence of the Country Music Association's annual music festival, lost this year to COVID-19 social distancing restrictions. We wore colorful socks, a new department T-shirt and celebrated our favorite corner of the Disney universe. During days when everyone was asked to do nothing more than come to work and go home, rinse, wash and repeat, we attempted to make the hours in the office the most light-hearted.

At least weekly, we communicated to all team members our efforts to clean our facilities, continue onboarding new employees, safely distance existing employees, and support operations, whether on site or remotely.

Our team continued to focus on emergency work through the pandemic. In early March, days before our first COVID-19

positive patient was identified, Metro Nashville was hit by a series of EF-2 and EF-3 tornados, striking in the middle of the night. In early May, more severe weather toppled trees and power lines across the entire county, culminating in the single largest power outage ever experienced in the history of the Nashville Electric Service. By the end of that same month, civil unrest associated with peaceful protests devolved into riots, destroying downtown businesses and city infrastructure. We knew intuitively and obviously that we still had to remain ready to answer the call from whomever, whenever it came, despite seeing a dip in call volume by as much as 40%.

With that knowledge, we knew we needed to remain prepared to do our jobs, so we shifted funds identified to pay for travel and registration at both NENA and APCO conferences to pay for online training for our leadership team members (CTOs, supervisors, managers and assistant directors). We doubled efforts to review the efficiencies in functionality within our technologies to best accomplish the mission at the dispatch console, adding a variety of new features and resources (RapidSOS, internet access, improved CAD functionality), allowing telecommunicators to make the correct decision quickly. Those efforts helped foster cohesion and collaboration, and allowed us to focus on shared goals and objectives during a time of uncertainty and fear.

But we still needed to focus on individuals. Usually, we encourage our team members to leave whatever personal concerns they may have in the parking lot before starting their shift, but, given these new circumstances, we couldn't do that. Some employees had immuno-compromised loved ones at home – people they loved who they didn't want harmed if they were to bring a potentially fatal virus without a cure back into their living rooms at the end of their shift. At the same time, we had as many team members not impacted by the virus at all – not understanding the purpose of the extreme measures taken to avoid the spread of something we all heard about, but few experienced directly. So it remained part of our mission of bringing clarity to confusing situations, calming chaos and restoring order to help our team walk through their emotions in a real and meaningful way.

We offered all of our team support through employee assistance programs and

encouraged supportive, empathetic dialogue about individual concerns, with a clearly communicated plan for addressing each one. While encouraging some dialogue, we drew clear lines redirecting other conversations away from the comm center. We discouraged arguing about the merits of wearing masks or comparing the virus to other illnesses, like the flu. We remain focused on efforts that supported clarity, calm and order, even as Mayor John Cooper's team implemented a four-phased reopening plan stretching late into summer.

We continued working to onboard new employees, hiring new academies in February, April, June and August. This required even more clear communication with our newest team members, setting expectations and understanding about where our center was now and where we are going. We used multiple facilities, some of which were mostly vacant while other government offices sent their staffs to work exclusively from home, to distance our team members while still facilitating necessary training. We coordinated with our industry partners to facilitate remote pre-employment testing options and conducted some

interviews by phone to accommodate travel restrictions.

Our leadership team remained focused on seeking and finding opportunities to continue offering a high level of quality and care to both our team members, our callers and our responders in the midst of constant change. And we continued to communicate the realities of that constant change to allow understanding and encourage conversation about those aspects that remained unclear.

Put simply, coordination and communication among our team became our highest priority to ensure everyone understood their role, their importance, their responsibilities, their safety and how best to care for and support those around them.

Through the first 90 days, we faced a few scares – a half dozen or so employees exhibiting symptoms associated with COVID-19. Each time, employees remained home until tests were administered and results returned or they worked from facilities where social distancing and quarantining was effective. Each time, those tests returned negative results. Then finally, nearly 100 days after our first COVID-19 positive patient in Metro Nashville – only the second identified in

Tennessee – we received word of our first COVID-19 positive team member. The potential for panic was high, but our response was swift and our communication with all our team members remained transparent and timely. Three other team members expressed concerns and were tested, all receiving negative results, and all remaining personnel remained on duty, returning each day to answer the call. Since then, we've seen two more team members contract the virus, both from external sources, and remain confident our plan to keep the virus from entering or spreading within the ECC is effective and tested.

COVID-19 served to shift the culture of our comm center toward compassion and empathy, coordination and cooperation, despite confusion, chaos and constant change. ●

Stephen Martini, ENP, RPL, is Director at Metro Nashville Emergency Communications Center.

REFERENCE

- 1 Forbes.com, "How to create a positive workplace culture" www.forbes.com/sites/pragyaagarwaleurope/2018/08/29/how-to-create-a-positive-workplace-culture/#653542864272

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| <p>1) Responding to the impact of COVID-19 has impacted every aspect of public safety communications.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> True False <p>2) What is the most critical asset in the communications center?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Facility Employees Technology Finances <p>3) According to Dr. Pragya Agarwal, which of these is not improved by a positive workplace?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> capital spending teamwork morale productivity, efficiency and retention <p>4) COVID-19 required ECC leadership to take a hard look at how team members continued to interact successfully.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> True False | <p>5) According to Dr. Pragya Agarwal, which of these is not enhanced in a positive workplace?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Job satisfaction Collaboration Work performance Facility maintenance <p>6) COVID-19 stressed personnel in the comm center because of the critical need for people to work closely together to accomplish mission-critical tasks.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> True False <p>7) Some departments implemented unique solutions such as civilian dress down days, food deliveries to the comm center, and:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Increased communication about steps taken to mitigate the virus Bought every employee a pony Built a giant wall around the center to block out illness All of the above | <p>8) Canceled on-site training and conferences afforded the opportunity to invest in:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Online education New furniture Facility renovations None of the above <p>9) In the midst of the pandemic, comm centers also had to respond to other emergencies, such as severe weather, natural disasters and civil unrest.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> True False <p>10) Communicating COVID-19 mitigation efforts was important to which members of the ECC?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Existing frontline employees New trainees Leadership team members All of the above |
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