

# Lead your team in troubled times



What an expert says about showing appreciation during a time of crisis.

## An interview with Dr. Brad Shuck

Associate Professor  
and Program Director of  
the Human Resource  
and Organizational  
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University of Louisville

We are quickly heading into new territory as we lead our teams through challenging situations. Some of us are supporting healthcare workers in the vital task of patient health; others are managing teams that are keeping the supply chain up and running; and others are looking for ways to recognize those supporting the front lines, many of whom are working remotely.

Walter Ruckes, Vice President of the Life Sciences Division at BI WORLDWIDE, spoke with Dr. Brad Shuck, Associate Professor and Program Director of the Human Resource and Organizational Development program at the University of Louisville and an internationally recognized expert in employee engagement.

First of all, let's talk **big picture**.

### W. Ruckes:

What are some best practices you see organizations doing in light of this unprecedented crisis?

**Dr. Shuck:** Organizations that are doing this right are investing in their people first and then talking process. There is no doubt that we need a plan, that we have to talk processes and we have to get back to productivity, but right now, stress, confusion and exhaustion are at the front of our minds – and ultimately what is driving energy levels in work. Here, leaders should start with a presence of confident compassion and then inspire toward the plan. These two things can be done simultaneously, not as separate events. A kind word, an acknowledgment that we are all stressed and we are in this together can go a long way in setting the context around a plan and a process. It is a very simple step – easy, actually, and that is what makes it so powerful.

**Here is why this works:** Things can feel pretty stressful and rushed. And, in the midst of stress, employees look for a sense of safety and comfort, physically, emotionally and socially. As leaders, we have to find a way to signal emotional safety through openness, transparency and an obsession for good communication. Psychological safety is the foundation for trust and one of the three pillars of engagement. That starts with people, and then follows with the plan. A team that trusts each other is a team that remains resilient

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in the most challenging of times. This starts with personal safety and team safety. Leaders who insist on starting with a plan first create noise and clutter. Our minds are not wired to handle a plan first in a crisis situation; instead, starting with a people-first strategy and then shifting to the plan creates long-lasting buy-in at all levels and fosters trust.

In chaos, confusion and a lack of context, we can all feel like a cog in a wheel. Another number. One more shift. Another employee. We have to maintain a human connection to drive mission. Leaders can create that drive through storytelling, relentless commitment and unselfish humility in the moment.

**W. Ruckes:**

While many businesses have shifted to working from home, there are just as many who remain open to provide essential services. Do you have any advice for those managing workers on the front lines? Is there a right way to show appreciation today and in the future?

**Dr. Shuck:** My advice for recognizing the front line workers in any industry, whether it's healthcare, food service, manufacturing or others, is twofold: (a) do it now and (b) keep it simple. This is about helping people feel seen, heard and acknowledged. No one is counting overtime; they are counting how many how many lives they can save, how many shelves they can restock, how many deliveries they can make. Here, a kind word, encouraging someone to step away for a minute to catch their breath, get rest, etc., can go a long way in ensuring the long-term vitality and emotional reservoir our employees require on the front line. Take action. Without meaningful recognition, we can expect disengagement, depersonalization and exhaustion – all markers of severe burnout.

One solution for this is to reward in ways that build capacity and space – offering things that employees don't have to think about, but really need right now. Before COVID-19, we were already living in a world where many of us had trouble keeping up with our daily lives, and now, that level of being over capacity is extreme. Here, building capacity is about the little things. Make sure there is coffee or tea in the break room, bring in lunch or snacks, step in for a shift or rotate shifts in a way that builds time back into the day, or designate a quiet space in a part of the building where employees can go when they need a minute.

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This seems trivial but is well grounded in theory. If coffee is available, I don't have to think about it, I just get it; if lunch is around, then I can eat when I have an extra five minutes and I don't have to think about it. If I need a retreat for five minutes, I know there is a place I can go. That small amount of time puts capacity back into my day.

Another solution, based on research that we did in the healthcare space just a few years back, includes developing opportunities for employees to collaborate in pre-event, or post-event—debriefs that foster opportunities to discuss how each employee's effort contributes to the success of the team (i.e., meaningful work). Five-six minutes tops – a quick huddle meeting. Our research showed this had a positive connection with team development and the expansion of team-based support and readiness for organizational change-management initiatives that could be needed at a moment's notice. Meaningful connections, even briefly, had exponential impact. For healthcare professionals specifically, they might also routinely meet with pastoral or counseling services to offer a dimension of spiritual wellness and promote healthy self-care, when needed.

**W. Ruckes:**

In light of this new reality, is it better to recognize individually or in teams?

**Dr. Shuck:** Recognition has perhaps never been more important, but it needs to be personal – a real human connection – and recognizing both individuals and teams remains critical. Recognize teams for goals that impact the organization and/or the Unit, and individuals for outstanding performance on a shift or over a period of defined time. I would encourage leaders to find a way to recognize everyone on their team. Everyone. That can be in a pre-shift meeting, or in the moment when someone steps up and steps into a situation.

This is not just about the leader, though. This is a time for team members to recognize colleagues in a peer-to-peer environment. Ask colleagues in a debrief meeting if they want to recognize anyone they counted on that day, or if there is someone on their team they were thankful to work beside today and why. These small human moments can push us through difficult circumstances, create engagement and help inoculate against burnout in exhaustion.

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**W. Ruckes:**

How about those supporting the front lines? Many of them are now working remotely, which takes some adjustment. Any suggestions on supporting those dealing with this change?

**Dr. Shuck:** This is all very different, even for those who have done it before. I have transitioned to working from home myself. What a change, in every way. At first the idea of it was amazing, but my family quickly struggled to find routine and get into our groove. The advice I give to leaders of those working from home is (a) lead with people, not process, (b) give compassion when needed, (c) and relentlessly recognize. Showing appreciation is a memorable experience that inspires in the moment. It should be personal and meaningful, in a way that builds capacity in the moment. Authentic recognition is essential.

One solution for this is to check in with teams and place more of an emphasis on the right communication, not just the volume of communication. It can be tempting to increase the quantity of communication, but simply over-communicating can be the wrong strategy. Leaders need to make sure they, and their team, are intentional about communicating with precision and transparency across the group.

Another solution is to leverage technology. Create a dedicated channel for communication and collaboration. A leader could have everyone on their team share what they are focused on at the beginning of each week: what is the one thing each person is trying check off their to-do list? Then, create a channel where everyone on the team individually writes their response to that question at the beginning of each workweek and then checks in at the end of the week. This also promotes collaboration and support from a distance and builds in micro-levels of accountability that are socially driven, which can be a very powerful in nudging behaviors.

Leaders might also consider curating an engaging news feed of the most important information everyone in the company needs to know. Bulleted lists, quick bursts of communication — not long drawn out paragraphs.

Finally, employees have a need to feel they belong; the physical distance can be hard and being physically distant can create a sense of disconnection. Leaders should regularly reassert their organization's mission and values through visual cues and storytelling.

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**W. Ruckes:**

Thanks for your insights and your willingness to share your thoughts at a time like this.

My only other question is longer-term: Can you share anything positive? Anything encouraging for all of those hit so hard?

You hear so much about the anxiety and concern, a worry about getting sick and transmitting to our families. But we are starting to hear great stories about how communities are coming together to help each other. Families and organizations are donating and making masks; moms and dads are learning to have a balance with school while many are working from home; and neighbors are connecting in personal ways that look very different than we have before.

And you are also hearing about innovation and creativity. Creativity in healthcare is born here. Epidemiologists, infectious disease specialists, physicians, nurses, ER doctors, lab workers and many more are rising to the occasion to help their patients in new ways.

So there is reason to be encouraged. Stay connected. Share a kind word. Check in on those around you. Resist the feelings of anxiety and panic. This is a time for us to celebrate our neighbors and those in our circle. Reach out, and when possible, help those around you. As we emerge from social distancing, we will be better and more connected as a community because of it.



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