

# To Find the New Normal, Double Down on the Mission

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A message from MidAmerica's CEO, Jim Tormey

Like most employers, we at MidAmerica needed to take decisive action in a time of great uncertainty to protect our employees from the threat of COVID-19. But guided by our Mission—to take care of those public sector workers who take care of our communities—our teams rallied in record time, bringing us to a productive, fully remote environment in just one week.

As I've reflected on some of the successes and challenges MidAmerica has faced over the past three months, I've come to believe that we'll never go back to how things operated before the pandemic hit. While that's not necessarily a bad thing, it certainly shifts the landscape of how we must operate to effectively take care of our employees and those we serve. In that vein, I offer some insights gleaned from our experience with COVID-19. It's my hope that our stories help employers, in both the public and private sectors, keep their employees safe, happy, and engaged as we adjust together to the new normal of a post-pandemic world.

## **1. The transition to remote work can be a non-event if leaders proceed with a Mission First mindset.**

Like many, I initially worried about maintaining productivity in a fully remote work environment. Would employees remain motivated to stay on task without in-person accountability driven by a manager? Would they make the effort to connect with their teammates on critical collaboration tasks? I soon discovered my concerns to be unfounded. Any mission-driven organization naturally selects for the type of employees—at all levels—who exhibit intrinsic dedication to the organization's shared values. These values, in turn, are a powerful motivator to drive accountability to tasks and performance standards, regardless of leadership's physical presence in the workspace. At MidAmerica, all the logistical trappings of the remote work transition, from check-in cadence to ad-hoc problem-solving methods, naturally sorted themselves out over the course of the first few weeks working remotely. Buoyed by the critical nature of our Mission—more important in tough times than ever before—our team stepped up to the changes imposed by COVID-19 without skipping a beat.

## **2. Take good care of your employees; they will in turn take good care of your customers.**

In challenging economic times, employers of all stripes seek budget savings wherever they can be found. Headcount reduction through layoffs is an obvious, albeit painful way to generate needed savings. But when considering layoffs, employers must balance the short-term savings they generate with the long-term impacts they may leave behind. Layoffs can be costly and, if not handled properly, can devastate morale and leave companies scrambling to cover critical responsibilities, both for day-to-day tasks and more strategic initiatives. We've seen voluntary separation incentives act as an ideal solution—especially in the public sector—to drive people cost savings while helping employees transition securely to the next chapter of their lives. But if layoffs become inevitable—as they were, unfortunately, at MidAmerica—take the time to fully understand both short and long-term cost

impacts before proceeding. Most importantly, ensure that special attention is paid to facilitating a smooth and dignified process should employees need to be let go. Carta's<sup>1</sup> approach to this is a great place to start for those who may need to conduct layoffs remotely.

### **3. Strong cultures can continue to thrive remotely—and are imperative for keeping morale and productivity high.**

The challenges of remote work, along with rapid changes to long-established procedures, can be taxing for seasoned employees accustomed to in-office interaction and routines. Feelings of isolation and collaborative difficulties are widespread in both the private and public sectors; a USA Today poll<sup>2</sup> indicated 1 in 5 teachers are considering not returning to their classrooms come the new school year in Fall. In the work-from-home environment, it is more critical than ever that employees feel connected, engaged, and valued in their work. Small niceties and non-work activities can go a long way toward bridging the human connectivity gap, and toward retaining employees who might be considering departing the organization. We've found great success with our "Winning Wednesdays" program—a 15-minute trivia break each Wednesday afternoon that breaks up the work week and gives people a chance to interact with folks across the entire organization. We've also kept our employee recognition programs going strong with customized gift baskets and hand-written notes delivered directly to employee homes. Proactive efforts to preserve culture don't need to be architected, complicated, or even expensive; they simply have to resonate authentically with the members of our teams.

### **4. Be mindful that some employees may need help adapting to the new realities of work.**

With many companies considering long-term remote work arrangements for the first time in their history, new territory is explored daily regarding how employers should operate for sustainable success away from the traditional office. But with so much focus accorded to preserving efficiency and productivity when working from home, it is easy to lose sight of employees navigating the uncharted waters of a newly blended workplace and home. Instead, double down on listening to your employees and understanding their concerns individually—we've used regular companywide pulse surveys and 1:1 videoconference meetings to understand what's going well and what's challenging for employees. Be flexible to the maximum extent possible in accommodating their needs and allaying their fears. Policies like flexible on-demand paid time off (PTO), alternate work hours, stipends for newly-incurred work expenses, and even celebrating "guest star" appearances of spouses, children, and pets have helped our teams feel confident in managing the massive quantity of change that all of us have encountered. We've always encouraged our employees to bring their whole selves to work, and that commitment continues even as our workplaces have shifted to the home.

Amidst all the uncertainty in the world, our employees and communities are looking to us for guidance and leadership. Few courses of action in the COVID-19 pandemic are so simple as to please everyone, or so certain as to guarantee successful outcomes given all the change that is yet to come. But with our Mission as our North Star and our Core Values as our compass, MidAmerica has remained consistently ready to deliver on our commitment to our communities and those who serve them. There will no doubt be difficult choices ahead, and consensus on the best way forward may be elusive. But decisions made in line with the Mission and Values ensure that, no matter the ups and downs, we will find the best possible solution for continued safeguarding of our employees and all those who depend on us.

1. <https://medium.com/@henryward/cartas-covid-19-layoff-cbb80e3e8a5d>  
2. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2020/05/26/coronavirus-schools-teachers-poll-ipsos-parents-fall-online/5254729002/>

