

COP MEETING 20 MAY 2020 ONLINE WEBINAR

LEARNING BRIEF: SUPPORTING AND MOTIVATING REMOTE TEAMS

This learning brief was produced by The Learning Trust in partnership with the After School Programme Office which drives After School programming as a priority project of the Western Cape Government. The brief emerged following the second Community of Practice (CoP) meeting held in 2020, which marked the 15th CoP organised by its partners since 2016.

This May, the Community of Practice focused on supporting remote teams, particularly the well-being of staff, during COVID-19. The meeting explored the challenges that After School Programmes (ASPs) face amid the pandemic and the opportunities presented in staying connected to and supporting front-line practitioners who continue to drive the impact of the sector.

EVALUATING WHERE YOU ARE AS AN ORGANISATION

In March, the country plunged into a national lockdown in an attempt to curb the spread of the Coronavirus. Schools were closed indefinitely, threatening not only the delivery of teaching and learning, but supplementary education as well. Learning from home became the new normal as it brought about new teaching methods and created a web of connectivity between learners, teachers, parents and After School practitioners.

ASPs found themselves either going into complete shutdown mode or reinventing their programmes to offer alternatives under the new regulations. Amidst the recent plans to phase in a return to schooling, there remains much uncertainty about the future of ASPs. It is anticipated that even with schools resuming, the AfterSchool sector can anticipate a paced and adjusted return to a “new normal”.



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After School practitioners are the heartbeat of programmes, ensuring that the work continues under the current circumstances. They carry the weight of ensuring learning in a conducive environment that caters for the physical, mental and psycho-social needs of their learners. This is why emotional wellness is even more critical in ensuring continuity and consistency in programming in these uncertain times. Ensuring the well-being of front-line staff can contribute significantly towards quality ASP delivery and enabling work to continue somewhat unabated.

Key to this outcome is the role that managers and leaders of ASPs play in supporting their staff to make sense of this stressful context. By implementing systems and employing coaching methods, awareness can be raised around mindfulness and self-awareness to allow staff to feel supported. An assessment of the challenges that our programme staff face is therefore necessary in amassing a response. Below are only some.

CHALLENGES THAT AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAMMES FACE DURING LOCKDOWN

Practitioners often feel isolated and struggle to adjust to the concept of working remotely.

There is a high level of demotivation, stress and anxiety due to uncertainties.

Managers often struggle to provide emotional support to staff due to lack of insight, systems and tools.

Learners lack the necessary resources to work remotely.

Strategic relationships that are built by organisations over time are compromised during the global pandemic.

Parent involvement in programming remains a challenge for most ASPs.

The slow rate of innovation around suitable online learning content prevails.

Access to smartphones, data and network connectivity remains a challenge, especially in rural contexts.

The sudden closure of programmes during the hard lockdown caught ASPs unprepared.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROGRAMMING DURING COVID-19

While these challenges persist, the great opportunity to reinvent programmes is abound. The closure of schools isn't the only consequence of the virus. We have seen negative impact on a number of other societal issue, including access to consistent income, diminished safety for women and children, increased levels of crime and violence, among many others. Nevertheless, there are opportunities for organisations to innovate and co-create programmes that meet the growing needs of their communities and learners more specifically.

For example, various soup kitchens and other food relief efforts have been started by some ASPs in response to rising hunger, thereby creating more room for expanding our services and reach. These emerging opportunities provide platforms for staff to engage with learners in different ways and rethink the involvement of their partners and donors. Online learning has also presented a further opportunity for many ASPs, especially those that offer academic supplementation and remediation. While there is a greater need to support staff with content and learners with devices and data, the online space certainly offers a platform for connecting and learning across boundaries.

EXPLORING MEANS OF SUPPORT FOR STAFF

As COVID-19 continues to spread across the globe, the health and safety of all remains a high priority. Creating a caring culture within organisations is a key responsibility of managers and leaders if they are to secure their organisational longevity. We know that many ASPs have put measures in place to ensure that they continue paying salaries and keep staff employed, at least in the short-term. The reality, however, is that the levels of productivity for many have dropped as a result of halted programmes and working from home, with little access to technology and their usual learner groups. This necessitates increased care, patience and understanding in dealing with staff, as well as adjusting our expectations of them.

Without proper structures and systems in place, organisations are also struggling to track their work and outputs. But beyond our insistence on productivity in the traditional sense, managers would do well to place greater attention on general check-ins by increasing the frequency of touch-points with staff, extending greater support to those who are struggling, and perhaps even granting time off when necessary.





TIPS FOR SUPPORTING YOUR STAFF



IMPLEMENT A REGULAR CHECK-IN SYSTEM

While formal meetings are important, informal check-ins can be effective in injecting more energy and motivation in your staff. Explore various technologies to keep in touch with your staff. WhatsApp is a great platform for ongoing conversations that build rapport.



MAKE CHECK-INS FUN

Introduce games and activities as part of regular meetings, to make staff feel less anxious about deliverables. Offer them the space to connect in a fun environment.



CONTINUE CAPACITY BUILDING AND TEAM BUILDING SESSIONS

A key component of supporting remote teams is ensuring that they have the necessary tools and resources to continue their work and to enable them to support your learners. Do not neglect to “care for the carer” as this is key to retaining them in the long-term.



MAINTAIN CONSISTENT EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Part and parcel to our daily programming is our link to our constituents. Continue to share regular information and useful resources with them too. This not only gives credibility to our work but also has the positive spin-off of assuring staff that their work is supported.



STAY FLEXIBLE AND AGILE

Staff deal with a lot of issues on-the-ground. Ensure that even as they work remotely, they have the time and space to process and address these. Give them the flexibility around meeting programming targets under different conditions and work environments.



LEVERAGE NETWORKS AND COUNSELLORS

Offer your staff opportunities to debrief with an external party (e.g. counsellor) and make other resources available for psychological care where possible.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COACHING

Coaching is a popular capacity building tool for the development of staff and managers alike. Despite the common use of the practice, many of us are unclear of what coaching entails. With the greater effort and long hours that come with reinventing our sector in this volatile time, is also an increased need for personal development and care. These complexities call for a stronger relationship between staff and their managers to continue driving the mission of their organisations. Coaching is one such tool that organisations can use to align their goals and assist staff members to delve into personal and professional hurdles that arise. The art of coaching lies not in providing answers but guiding people through their thought processing to achieve outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The efficient functioning of ASPs largely relies on the well-being of practitioners. It is important to take stock of how your programme and its staff has been affected by the pandemic and ensure that they are supported at this time. While COVID-19 presents many challenges for the sector, with it also comes many opportunities. For these to be well-realised and leveraged, the sectors workforce must be up to the task. It is therefore critical for its leaders to rise to the occasion and take charge of stress-proofing their organisations and teams.

RESOURCES & LINKS



Three categories of resources from the ASPO,
targeted specifically at practitioners:

www.enriched.co.za



An array of resources and tools to build your physical,
psycho-social, emotional and mental well-being:

www.enriched.co.za/wellbeing



Coaching by The Trust Connection:

www.thetrustconnection.co.za