MINI-CASE STUDIES

Just Right for 2021

By Cié Gee, Ed.D.

No one can dispute what an unpredictable, ambiguous, and upside-down year 2020 was. You may be reading this from your home office, your campus office, or some other hybrid situation. 2020 has forced us to change our habits and rituals and look at the world and our jobs differently. Pandemic fatigue is real, and taking time to train your team around some of the past year's challenges will help you enter the new year and next cycle prepared for whatever may come.

To find clarity in all the gray ambiguity, here are five reality-based case studies to start conversations with your team.

CASE STUDY #1
Being Okay with "I Don't Know."

Monique leads a large team at Up&Coming University. The week of March 20, 2020, her university sent everyone home to work remotely with no mention of a return to campus date. Every week she got questions from her staff:

"When are we going back?"

"How do I get my campus mail?"

"Are layoffs coming?"

"Are we having budget cuts?"

"Is my job still the same?"

"What does Fall 2020 look like?"

"Will we have in-person classes?"

"What do we tell students, parents?"

"Is my on-campus office going away?"

"Am I going to be fired?"

For some time, all Monique could say was, "I don't know." Morale declined as the weight of institutional ambiguity compounded the crippling effects of the pandemic and dire talks of low enrollment.

How can Monique keep the lines of communication open when information is limited and ever-changing?

Facilitating Learning: We are all faced with situations in which we don't know the answer, but I argue many of us have experienced a considerable increase in "I don't know" responses this year. The dark abyss of "I don't know" can be intimidating, frustrating, and create feelings of inadequacy, especially if you are the team leader. The situation becomes more ominous when people fill in the blanks themselves with wrong information. To quote C. Northcote Parkinson, *"Remember, the vacuum created by the failure to communicate is soon filled with poison, drivel, and misrepresentation."*[1]

Even when the answer is "I don't know," the conversation shouldn't just end there. There are lessons to be learned in embracing and accepting that sometimes "I don't know" results in times of rapid change, limited information, or information gaps. When that is the case, "I don't know" should be given with confidence furthering conversation, instead of guilt or fear.

By creating an environment of discovery and welcoming questions and inquiry, you build a safe place for staff to ask the questions needed to clarify unknown situations.

This case study helps your staff explore the birthplace and implications of "I don't know" from five different perspectives.

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1 Curtin, T., Hayman, D., & Husein, N. Managing a Crisis (London, UK: Palgrave Macmilla, 2005), PP. 50-63.

THE CASE FOR CASE STUDIES

Story-based case studies add realism, increase interest, and promote practical learning. They are a non-threatening way for your team to discover new concepts.

Case studies allow learners to build on past experiences and reach new conclusions. They facilitate discussion, creating a safe venue where someone can change their minds about a situation.

Best of all, the case study method does not put people in the awkward position of having to defend past decisions or practices.

We hope you find value in the case studies created by training expert, Cié Gee, Ed.D.

To download individual case studies for team training, please go to enrollmentfuel.com/octane-case-studies

Explore Stress

As stress levels increase, we lose our ability to think clearly and rationalize. Changes in staff, resources, even the location of work (home vs. office) creates stress. Add global issues such as pandemics, natural disasters, civil unrest, political turmoil, and everyday personal struggles, and you have a boiling pot of anxiety. Exploring these with staff will make stressors visible and help minimize conclusion-jumping.

Explain the allocation of limited resources

If resources are cut, do your staff members know how to shift focus and priorities? Please do not take for granted they do. Have a clear conversation about what is available right now, and how they will use what they have to move forward.
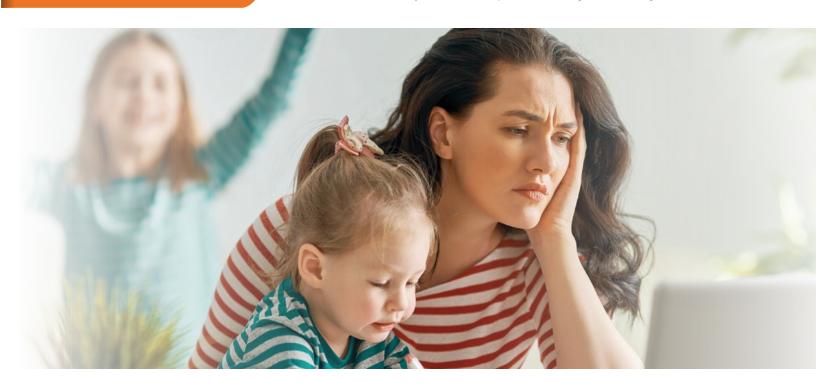
Discuss role ambiguity or role incompatibility

Even a change like working remotely from home can feel like a shift in job duties. And most likely, staff members have had at least some shift of responsibility since online adaptation had to be managed. Have open conversations, praise the work and effort that has been displayed, and make sure everyone is on the same page about their daily tasks.

Missing (wrong) information

Quash rumors as soon as they surface. Call unfounded scuttlebutt by its name. "That is a rumor that does not have evidence to prove it is a fact. Please do not spread rumors."

Manage emotions

Feelings are real, and it is alright to feel things. There is no way the emotional toll of 2020 hasn't leaked into our jobs. Create a space for sharing and listening to staff.

Now that you have identified and explored breeding grounds for "I don't know," brainstorm and explore ways to say it differently. One caveat; the suggestions below can be perceived as skirting the question that was asked, but I am suggesting that these possible answers open the door for further discussion. These suggestions are not meant to be a shut-down.

- I don't have enough information to answer your question now, but this is what I do know.

- That is a developing situation, and more research is needed before I can give an accurate answer. Let's brainstorm possible research.

- That is a very valid question and one that I'm seeking an answer for as well. Have you looked into this question?

- Let's review what we do know.

- Based on the facts that we have in front of us, we can determine the following is true.

- Looking at national trends, and what some of our benchmark institutions are doing, we can hypothesis the following.

- Based on the knowledge I have right now (or based on my current understanding), I can confirm the following.

- Let's discuss what we know and what we don't know.

Accepting that you don't know can be hard when your staff is pushing for concrete answers.

However, from my experience, the act of having a conversation creates transparency and acceptance in a developing situation.

CASE STUDY #2
Am I on Mute?

This situation comes from my personal experience (and I hope you smile at my story). Early on in the onslaught of online meetings, I entered a Zoom meeting upside down – literally! At the time, I didn't know how it happened, and I became flustered as the other meeting participants commented on my inverted appearance. Worse yet, this was one of 'those' meetings, with important people where I wanted to give an air of professionalism. After several minutes of futile attempts to right myself, I admitted defeat and turned off my camera.

Now I'm a Zoom expert and understand the mistake, but I learned a lesson from that meeting: Take time to learn the new platform in a safe space.

When we are always in meetings, when can we learn a new platform?

Facilitating Learning: You may think this is not needed now since we have all been meeting online for months. However, I still encounter presenters who do not know how to share their screen, use the chat, or even create a meeting on their own.

Set up an exploration meeting. Play around with your platform as part of the discussion. It is also a great way to highlight the expertise of members of your team. Most likely, there is one who is very skilled in Zoom or Microsoft teams. If not, this could be a project that supports socializing and fun, along with team building.

CASE STUDY #3

Recognizing Burnout

Rebecca has been a college recruiter for five years. Her work is always top-notch, and she is very reliable. Over the past few months, her work quality has declined, and she has missed some deadlines. Last week, her supervisor asked Rebecca to complete a brief territory information report for an important meeting. Rebecca has produced the same report in the past, but this time, she got micro-focused on the report's style and format and stuck in analysis paralysis. Instead of taking a day, it took Rebecca a week to complete. When Rebecca's supervisor reprimanded Rebecca for lateness, for the first time, Rebecca shared that her husband had been laid off. To help financially, Rebecca had taken an extra part-time job and was dealing with other family stressors.

How can Rebecca's supervisor improve efforts to recognize burnout?

Facilitating Learning: According to the Mayo Clinic, job burnout is a state of exhaustion, physical or emotional, that also involves a deficit in normal work accomplishments.[2] Most times, it isn't the 'job' that is burning people out, but other stressors they are carrying. The following are questions to explore with your team to identify job burnout. **Note**: For privacy reasons, these don't have to be discussed in the open, but private reflection can help people navigate.

- How has this change affected you physically or emotionally?

- What work/life balance issues are you now dealing with?

- What part of work/life balance are you enjoying? What part is causing a lot of stress?

- Are you feeling guilty about not working enough?

- Do you understand your job role?

- Do you find that you have a lack of energy when working? When does this occur? Morning, afternoon, on Mondays?

- Are you short-tempered with staff?

- Do you understand what your supervisor expects from you?

- Do you feel like you can talk to your supervisor about their expectations?

- Do you feel like you are working all the time? Or, have you established clear boundaries between work and life?

Share practical coping solutions. Discuss how staff members can open the lines of communication with their supervisors and explore compromises. Talk about setting manageable, short-term goals, so people have identifiable wins. Let people know it is okay to reach out to someone – a coworker, friends, or an employee assistance program. Share relaxation activities, articles on dealing with stress, and other resources with your team.

As a leader of the team, be diligent when watching for early signs of burnout. Reassure your team of the excellent work they are doing and reinforce accomplishments often.

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2   Retrieved from: https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642

CASE STUDY #4
When Things Get Back to Normal

Kevin has worked in the Admissions Office at Stuck-in-a-Rut University for 30 years. The recent changes have been difficult for Kevin. The closing of his campus for several months resulted in all staff working from home. It accelerated technology like web-based meeting platforms, and digital paperwork flows, and necessitated online meetings with students.

Kevin speaks about these changes as temporary, continually using the phrase "when things go back to normal." Though several of the changes have benefited the office overall, he is resistant to apply new techniques or tweak his job functions in any way that violates his 'back to normal' ideal.

How do you help Kevin understand that some changes are permanent?

Facilitating Learning: If you haven't already, STOP using the phrase 'when things go back to normal.' First, what is *normal* anyway? The dictionary defines 'normal' as "the usual, average or typical state."[3] Synonyms of the word are *predictable* and *unexceptional*. Okay, let's unpack that.

At institutions, we are all in competition to be the stand-out for whoever our student population is. Why do we want to be predictable and unexceptional? Yes, the pandemic has created major upheaval, and no, not all of it has been good. But we must take the growth mindset of looking for the positives, the gains, and saying, "I can't wait to see where these new changes will take us."

When people say, "*go back to normal,*" they long for predictable states with average outcomes where all is known and comfortable. But there is danger in this static thinking. It often fails to recognize innovation. Learning new technology, discovering new ways of interacting with students, exploring new ways to lead your team, creating more efficient routing processes, and reducing paperwork are all positive aspects of innovation in recent times. Celebrate these wins with an "innovative practices show and tell."

This discussion also provides an opportunity to explore where blind loyalty lies. What are the 'we've always done it that way' beliefs that your staff still clings to?

Here are questions for guided discussion:

- Discuss some of the hardest changes/innovative practices (for you personally) that have happened this year. What similarities did you find? What differences?

- What were the old ways of thinking, resistance issues, and changes in behavior that occurred?

- Was your specific change example handled well? Why or why not? Did this impact how you dealt with change?

- How did the people around you perceive the change?

- Thinking of something representative of a major change, what evidence do you have that it was handled effectively/ineffectively?

- What makes change hard?

- What do we know that is still predictable and creates some normalcy as we move forward?

This discussion helps your staff draw on other life experiences and recognize that while everything in the office can't return to the way it was in 2019, they will be okay.

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3   Retrieved from: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/normal

CASE STUDY #5

Leaning into the Discomfort of Discussing Privilege and Bias

Julie is an administrative assistant who has worked for the college for ten years. She is upbeat, friendly, and plays a critical support role in the office. Julie is African American, while the majority of her coworkers are White. The increase in violence against Black citizens has taken an emotional toll on Julie and her family. She has taken several days of vacation and is struggling to maintain her cheerful attitude.

Frank is a coworker of Julie's; he is White. Frank has also been shocked by the violence and felt the urge to ask Julie how she is doing or say something, but he is unsure how to approach the subject.

Having discussions with your team about racial violence, bias, and privilege is important, but these conversations often don't occur for various reasons. Most colleges and universities have a Diversity and Inclusion office that can either facilitate the discussion or direct you to resource materials.

The need to talk through difficult issues goes beyond your team, extending to the students you serve. If staff members are feeling emotional effects, students are also experiencing them. And, I would also argue that you can't address this topic with one conversation. Instead, plan for a series of exchanges exploring how your staff can be anti-racist activists and support colleagues and students of color. Talk through current practices, making sure they are advocacy-oriented and equity-minded.

Moving Forward

Plans for the 2020-2021 enrollment cycle blew up in March 2020. Teams have been separated either mentally or physically from each other. Stress and burnout are common byproducts of rapid, unexpected change. Before moving forward, it is critical to pause and reflect on challenges and accomplishments. Using a case study as a discussion vehicle allows people to discover new ideas and uncovers your team's achievements, both large and small.

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