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ACCELERATED RESTART PLAN

YOUR TWO-WEEK GUIDE TO GETTING YOUR TEAM
PRODUCTIVE AFTER THE FURLOUGH

PRESENTED BY:



ACCELERATED RESTART PLAN

In this two-week restart guide, you'll find practical tips to re-engage and refocus your program-level teams and quickly get productive after the shutdown. Specific examples are included to help you copy and tailor the approach and messaging to match your specific program and leadership style.



WHY GETTING BACK TO WORK CAN'T BE BUSINESS AS USUAL

Most federal employees run on the fuel of mission, appreciation, and stability. They took their job over other private sector options because they believe that creating and maintaining good government is the core work of their agencies. They think of themselves as public servants first, and as lawyers, systems administrators, or public affairs specialists second. Coming back to work after time away for any reason is always difficult and being furloughed can especially be a motivation killer. The shutdown was a political tool for policy negotiation, and not a reflection of the importance of the agency or each employee's role.

Federal manager must take the opportunity to bring staff together and increase engagement—or risk lost productivity for months to come.

How?

1. **Acknowledge employees' feelings.** Resist the urge to jump back into the work on day one. Offer employees an in-person or virtual opportunity to share their feelings, tell their shutdown stories, and generally reconnect.
2. **Let them vent and share in a supportive environment** to help them deal with feelings of uncertainty, lack of appreciation, and anger. Federal agencies with a mix of essential and furloughed staff face a tough challenge that will continue to bubble up for months—if not years—to come.
3. **Update your FY19 work plan** to adjust for downtime. This restart is an opportunity to identify priorities and what can realistically be accomplished with the new timeframe.

4. **Review the team assignments** against this year's priorities. Is everyone in the best role? If not, take time now to make adjustments that align people with work that matches their skills, abilities, and—to the extent possible—interests.
5. **Assign meaningful work.** Meaningful work means activities with a direct impact on the program's goals. Managers should take a little time outlining the importance and mission connection of each task as they assign it. This will help employees get engaged with the work again.
6. **Check in regularly.** This is not a plug for micromanagement. Instead, remember what people are doing and find an opportunity to stop by or ask in a meeting, "hey, how's that project going? Do you need anything from me? How can I help?" on at least a weekly basis.
7. **Create an open forum for talking about engagement longer-term.** What's driving people, and what could be fixed? Addressing these questions might mean reserving 10 minutes during the weekly staff meeting or project check-in, or it could be a quarterly session designated to talk about the dynamics in the office.

Some federal employees will come back from the shutdown eager to dig in and make up for lost time, but many will be more disillusioned with their work than before. Managers need to help reconnect employees to the importance of their role and to foster re-engagement with the agency's mission.

WELCOME BACK MESSAGES

Below are three "Welcome Back" email message templates that can be used to kickstart team focus and objectives. These messages can be modified and tailored to fit the specific agencies, programs, and teams you're addressing. They can be a great first step in promoting a path for open communication and positive thinking, and they will set the tone for the restart period.

RESTART MESSAGE FROM EXECUTIVE LEADER TO ALL STAFF

All,

Welcome back! Before we address all that must be done after such a long and unexpected pause, let me first say thank you. Thank you to our colleagues working throughout the shutdown to ensure continuity on some of our more critical, everyday functions and systems. And to those of us awaiting news at home, thank you for your patience during the shutdown. Lastly, thank you in advance for all the hard work it will take to get us back in gear.

By the end of this week, your managers will have reached out to reconnect with you and schedule a team meeting. We want to make sure that you have the opportunity to communicate and connect with your team as soon as possible. Our goal for this first week back is to make sure that everyone has what they need to resume work and, more importantly, that everyone knows to take a moment to reacclimate. Next, we'll review and update our FY19 work plan to adjust for the downtime.

With everything that just happened and so much to do, one thing we don't need is added stress. I am committed to creating a work environment where we can calmly reacclimate and strategically address our workloads.

As we prepare for what may prove to be a year unlike any other, I am grateful to work alongside such wonderful and resilient colleagues!

RESTART MESSAGE FROM LEADER TO MANAGERS

Managers,

Welcome back! Before we address all that needs to be done after such a long and unexpected pause, let me first say thank you. For those that came in to support our most critical, everyday functions, thank you. For those coming back in today, thank you for your patience and for being ready to hit the ground running now that we are back.

As managers, it is our responsibility to provide our teams with support and guidance as they return to work. These first few days back are crucial, as they will set the tone for the next few months. The attached “Restart Checklist” was created as a resource for you to help your teams readjust to this busy season. Please use these steps to ensure that each team member feels welcome, not overwhelmed, during their first week back.

Please know that I appreciate each of you and your work. I’m thankful our people have you to steer them through this season!

RESTART MESSAGE FROM MANAGERS TO STAFF

Team,

Welcome back! I want to ensure that each of you feels welcome, not overwhelmed, during this first week back. Join me in thanking our colleagues who came into the office and worked throughout the shutdown. We appreciate their efforts to keep our most essential, everyday functions running. With such a long pause in our work, it will take us some time to get back into full gear.

Either today or tomorrow you’ll hear from me by phone or in person for a brief check-in. Then, we’ll have a team meeting later this week to discuss our top projects and how we’ll prioritize our new workload.

If everyone’s inbox is as full as mine, it will take us a moment to dig out and get our bearings. Rest assured that we are all in the same boat.

Thank you for your diligence and patience!

TEAM-BUILDING MEETING: APPROACH AND AGENDA

APPROACH

Why host a team-building meeting for a group that’s already a team? Because people and relationships get rusty after an extended time apart. The purpose of this team-building meeting is to establish common ground, focus everyone on the big-picture mission and goals of the program, and create a forum for leaders and employees to share any concerns and challenges. Team-building meetings—even if you don’t call them that—help motivate the group to work together, identify ways to contribute, and address issues. As a result, your team will feel more encouraged to collaborate instead of compelled to compete for time and resources.

AGENDA

1. Welcome and ice breaker

Example: Have team members share something they're looking forward to accomplishing now that everyone is back at work

2. Regroup:
 - a. Leader shares highlights of what they've heard from higher up in the organization. Recognize the work done by essential staff. People want to feel appreciated by both their leadership and their colleagues, so take the lead by thanking them publicly.
 - b. More important than the thank you, though, is a recognition that work has gone on. Ask staff to catch others up on what happened during the shutdown. What was accomplished and what went undone? Have priorities shifted? What did the time away do to the project schedules and roadmaps?
 - c. Encourage staff to share lessons or tips on how to best navigate the situation should it happen again.
3. Re-engage: Team check-in, discuss concerns and expectations moving forward
4. Wrap-up: Summarize action items and address any final questions. Schedule the next meeting

REVIEW AND ADJUST FY19 WORK PLAN: APPROACH AND AGENDA

APPROACH

With change comes opportunity—time away from the project can provide an opportunity for team members to regroup, re-engage, and refocus. This post shutdown restart is an opportunity to keep moving forward with what was working well and change what was not. The purpose of the work plan adjustment is to clearly define and outline a path for success for team members and the department or project. This approach promotes open communication and collaboration between team members and provides the project team with a redefined structure to restart the project and ensure positive outcomes!

AGENDA

1. Welcome and review objective: Today we'll start to answer the questions, "How will the shutdown impact our work plan? What must change to successfully meet our goals in FY19?"
2. Review baseline: After time away, everyone will benefit from a review of the program's goals, requirements, and project deliverables. Review project milestones—what has been accomplished so far—and identify all tasks and deliverables that have not yet been met.
3. Consider available resources and identify strategies for future and corrective actions.
4. Identify possible project constraints (or, identify current project strengths and weaknesses): Based on the identified risks, shift resources to focus on problem areas.

5. Shift and change the current project schedule: Get input from project leaders and set realistic expectations for maximizing the new project timeline.
 - a. Give each team member the opportunity to share their priorities and to-do list from before the shutdown and brainstorm restart activities.
 - b. Confirm what's still relevant and what's become irrelevant.
 - c. Visualize the full workload on the wall with sticky notes and ask the team to sort the work into columns—Urgent, Important, and No Longer Needed.
6. Communicate with team members to address any concerns, role changes, and newly assigned tasks. An open-door policy will have team members feeling valued and understood.

ONE-ON-ONE MEETING AGENDA AND APPROACH

APPROACH

Preparing for the one-on-one helps ensure the time is used effectively and reduces any uncertainty and anxiety for both the staff and the manager. Set an agenda. Holding an effective one-on-one is a two-way street. Reach out to each employee a day in advance to ask what they would like to discuss and to identify what challenges they're facing.

AGENDA

1. Check in personally and professionally. How are you both feeling? Be real and build trust by opening up first if the employee seems hesitant.
2. Ask for an update on the employee's objectives. Discuss any challenges and offer to connect them with additional resources or your personal assistance.
3. Acknowledge successes. People want to feel appreciated and are generally motivated by an acknowledgement from their manager. Allow them to vent if needed, then redirect them to look to the future.
4. Refresh priorities and action items. Based on the organization or project plan, what new activities should the employee take on? Create a list with clear expectations on the desired outcome and due date.
5. Take notes. Managers should keep running notes of the key points and outcomes from one-on-one conversations. This should include any items for future coaching or personal notes.
6. Follow up. Review the notes before the next one-on-one and be prepared to follow up on any change in how employees feel about their work or new hurdles they've encountered.

MAINTAIN HIGH EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Low productivity resulting from poor employee engagement is expensive and wasteful. We know that engagement is important to turn average organizations into high-performing ones. However, engagement is critical for other reasons as well. According to research done by Corporate Executive Board (CEB) and reported in the [Harvard Business Review](#), organizations with high employee engagement get through tough times faster and with **less distractions**. Complaints go down and turnover is reduced.

“Organizations with high employee engagement go through tough times faster and with less distractions.”

-Harvard Business Review

Once employees are re-engaged after the shutdown, managers can sustain that momentum and continue to increase connection and productivity by:

1. Conducting and reviewing engagement surveys and other data (such as exit interviews) to identify risk areas and opportunities
2. Working directly with employees to develop actionable, practical steps for increasing engagement tied to specific business outcomes
3. Making funding available to support at least one of the recommendations. Be transparent about spending. Share why some initiatives were selected and the expected benefit
4. Planning for regular check-ins with employees to get a first-hand sense of how well new initiatives are working

When employees distance themselves from their work, productivity is lost, which causes the organization’s mission and customers to suffer. A continued, deliberate effort—initiated by leadership and sustained by the employees themselves—ultimately pays for itself in reduced turnover, fewer risks and distractions, and greater output.

TIPS FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Some employees may come back from the shutdown with significant frustration and possibly anger. Those negative feelings may be directed at program leadership or executives higher up in the organization. A negative attitude can spread and damage morale across the team, so it needs to be addressed quickly and effectively.

Here are a couple of tips to plan for and conduct difficult conversations to address someone’s anger or negative attitude:

- Know your purpose and desired outcomes. Before any difficult conversation, you need to ask yourself a couple important questions: “Why are we having this conversation? What do I want to come from it?” Before going any further, make sure you can proceed with a positive, supportive mindset.
- Know your assumptions. Ask yourself what you're assuming about the other person's intentions. (Most of the time we're wrong about other people's intentions. We assume someone set out to hurt or offend us when, in fact, they weren't thinking of the impact on us at all.)

This upfront reflection will help prepare managers to listen with an open mind and share their concerns.

1. To start the process, schedule the conversation when any initial anger and frustration has subsided and you're feeling calm.

2. Begin with a question and a sincere interest in learning about the issue from the other person's perspective. Approaching the conversation as if you don't know anything helps you be open to receiving new information. Avoid interrupting or getting defensive as they talk.
3. Acknowledge that you heard them. Repeating back key statements can help ensure you clearly understand what they've said and gives them a chance to correct anything they misstated.
4. Share your perspective. Only after you've thoroughly heard their "side," be prepared to share your view of what happened and how it impacted you.
5. Solve the problem together. Once you feel that each of you has a clear understanding of the past, you're ready to shift gears and focus on the future. Brainstorm what might work to resolve the problem. Try to avoid completely rejecting any of their positive suggestions and instead build on them to create a solution you think will work.

POST SHUTDOWN DO'S AND DON'TS

Follow these simple steps to ease your team's re-entry to work.

DO...

- Have an open-door policy
- Put yourself in the other person's shoes. Your employees have been through a stressful and uncertain time. They may be angry or distracted and may need time to refocus on work.
- Show compassion. Listen to all needs and concerns with empathy
- Take time to reflect on what's going well and what's not

DON'T...

- Get defensive. You may risk appearing dismissive of your team member's needs or concerns
- Dance around difficult topics. Being straightforward about the desired outcome sets the tone.
- Rush. Be deliberate and thoughtful in your approach. Allow time for in-depth responses

RESTART CHECKLIST

DAY 1:

- Send a group “welcome back” email to your reports.** Customize a draft in the Welcome Back Messages (hyperlinked) section.
- Conduct a quick check-in with each of your reports in person or by phone. Use the One-on-One Meeting Guide (hyperlinked).** This step confirms that everyone has successfully reported back to work and can still access their systems. (See the Self-Help Instructions (hyperlinked) for those with technical issues.)
 - Welcome back! How are you? *Acknowledge any feelings of frustration.*
 - Are all of your systems up and running?
 - Do you have what you need to begin work again?
 - Do you have any questions?
- Host a casual catch-up meeting over coffee.** Schedule an open-house-style meeting in the conference room for returning employees to pop in, catch up with coworkers, and grab a cup of coffee and a donut to casually reconnect.

WEEK 1:

- Schedule a team-building meeting. Use the Team-Building Meeting Guide. (hyperlinked)** Address the shutdown. Provide any immediate guidance on high priority items and workflow. Connect in person if possible.
 - Welcome back! How is everyone adjusting?
 - *Let folks vent. Be supportive.*
 - *Encourage them to share any lessons or tips on how to best navigate the situation should it ever happen again.*
 - What we’re hearing from leadership:
 - What are you hearing in the halls?
 - Thank you for your hard work this week! We are glad to have you back.

WEEK 2:

- Update FY19 work plans.** Engage project teams in refining FY19 goals, priorities, and activities to account for downtime. Identify and plan for any new tasks or risks created.
- Schedule one-on-ones with direct reports.** Have more individual, personal conversations about how the employee is feeling and surface any concerns or challenges they’re facing. Review and adjust their current tasks and workload. Offer support.

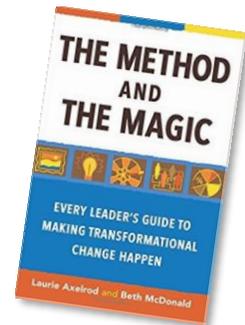
ONGOING ENGAGEMENT:

- Maintain employee engagement activities.** Continue to host team-building and listening sessions. Follow up on any problems, issues, or trouble areas. Even if you don’t yet have an answer, check back with anyone dealing with an issue.

ABOUT WHEELHOUSE GROUP

Since its founding in 2003, Wheelhouse Group has helped government clients, global Fortune 100 companies, and non-profit organizations utilize a variety of organization effectiveness, change management and communications disciplines to address their critical business challenges. We partner with our clients to successfully navigate constant change; improve how individuals and teams function; and continuously improve organizational performance and program management. Our team consists of senior consultants who offer extensive experience and bright ideas—and then dig in and get things done – in the areas of communications, change management, and program governance.

Beth McDonald and Laurie Axelrod, captured years of experience supporting the “people side” of transformational change in their book, *The Method and the Magic: Every Leader’s Guide to Making Transformational Change Happen*. The approach and real-life lessons in this book help leaders confidently and competently deliver lasting, meaningful change. Honed over years of helping organizations large and small, public and private, their methodology is based on common sense principles, informed by the best thinking in the change management field, and guided by an understanding of human behavior.



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