



Weighing Your HR Options During COVID

A discussion with Carol Fowler and Matt Manion
Friday, April 3, 2020

Basic principles – a church’s moral, social, and legal responsibilities

- Always employ best business practices with the filter of faith-based identity
- Remember: No one has expertise in leading through this pandemic; we’re all learning our way
- We must focus on our identity as church. There is no greater time to try to show our actions match our words. ie: Do we follow Catholic Social Teaching (CST) guidance? CST was written during a time of great crisis, as well, at the end of the 19th century, and then re-focused on by St. John Paul II 90 years later.
- Questions about our leadership:
 - Are we employing the skills we need at this time? How do we get help with this?
- What are our communication strategies?
 - Are we communicating with transparency and clarity?
 - Lack of transparency can sometimes stifle the creative options and solutions we could be solving together. Rely on the people you have. Let them be a part of possible solutions.
 - High levels of anxiety, fear, and grief exist – we need to focus on this. As faith-based people, our inability to gather to worship is more difficult than we anticipated. Are we remembering this when we communicate with each other?
 - Are leaders strengthening connections with staff/parishioners/stakeholders?
 - Communicate even if nothing has changed. Lack of communication fuels anxiety. Communicate regularly to relieve anxiety. People who don’t hear anything tend to make stuff up (MSU).

Legal Responsibilities

- Again, we are constantly learning new things!
- What impact will the CARES Act have on our parishes?
 - Remember, CARES Act is changing constantly at this time (Friday, 4/3/20), and its benefits and application protocol are still being updated.
 - Make sure you have discussions with your parish legal and diocesan legal contacts about this
 - Be sure to make plans in case this funding is not an option for your church
- What is the moral consideration of applying for the CARES Act if you have a rainy-day fund?

- Discern: should you apply for this benefit if you don't need it, considering it is needed by others? Don't hoard the "toilet paper."
- What about the employees that *are* still at work?
 - Check in with your local HR groups and councils.
 - Obligation under OSHA to protect people from harm or physical danger.
 - Make sure people who are physically present are safe, with hygiene, masks, gloves.
 - Know *exactly* what the restrictions are for those who develop symptoms at work, when to send home
 - Not obligated to protect them when working from home, but still good to communicate
- Be sure to fulfill your ongoing legal responsibilities for: paid leave, unpaid leave, wages, salary
 - Culturally, we like to "tough it out" even if it's not an appropriate decision to come to work.
 - Can you make them use their PTO?
 - If they're sick, yes.
 - However, if you're excluding them from the workplace, this could be a problem, because it's the institution making the decision. Check with your diocesan benefits administrators and attorneys to confirm what you can do.

Strategies for decision and action – what choices are available?

Everyone needs to consider appropriate and effective means of cutting expenses if revenues are down. "My biggest expense is employees, so I have to cut payroll." This should not be your knee-jerk reaction. Consider other expenses, too. And be sure parishioners understand that not giving to the collection means people might lose their jobs?

Tell your people, transparently, what the circumstances are:

- You cannot ask someone if they are thinking about retirement (age discrimination), but if you open up the discussion, someone may volunteer this information and make a decision based on what would be helpful to other people.
- Some may be transparent about what money they need to make it by. This gives you parameters.
- "We're short x dollars for the next two months. If we have the goal of not laying off any employees, how can we solve this problem?" Complete this exercise with your staff.
- **Unemployment** - most religious organizations do not participate in state-based unemployment assistance which means that direct help for our employees is not accessible.
 - Put this down as something to look at later. A safety-net for our employees is a morally responsible consideration we can incorporate into our post-COVID reality.
 - If you self-insure for unemployment, why lay people off? You're going to have to pay them anyway! Get creative about how to use their positions.

- **Benefits** - even if we ask someone to take a pay cut, are we going to keep them in our benefit plans? In terms of a faith-based identity, we should always **make every effort to provide our employees with healthcare in a health crisis!**
 - Understand what the limits are for losing benefits – these vary widely, and some insurance carriers may be flexible at this time. Most of the time the wording is, “your regularly scheduled hours are x hours a week.” If regularly scheduled to work 30 hours and your current hours are reduced to 20, you could still qualify for benefits. Check with diocesan HR and legal to confirm this for your contracts.
- **Re-purposing** staff members, ie:
 - Opportunity for staff members to call every parishioner (starting with seniors), in line with our mission and considerate of our finances:
 - In ordinary circumstances, we don’t have the resources or the time to contact all our parishioners. When was the last time you called to check in with everyone? This could be an opportunity for evangelization, community-strengthening, and care for individuals. What’s the good that can come out of this?
 - Hi, how are you, what do you need, what are your prayer requests?
 - Can we update your email, cell phone, preferred contact information in our database?
 - Follow-up call: would you consider moving to online giving right now?
 - “We understand you may have lost your job. Here’s what we’re trying to do as church for the community. Are you interested and able to partner with us?” Invite people to participate in a mission and vision that is hopeful in this time!
- **Work from Home** (WFH) - how do we help people work from home?
 - Are we making the best use of technology to serve peoples’ needs?
 - Share the pain – if we ask people to reduce hours, we do that with everybody (different decision for exempt employees).
 - Consider tiered pay-cuts so those receiving the most have higher cuts than those making less
- **Layoffs vs Furloughs**
 - Layoff in a union context: you don’t have a job right now, but as soon as things get better, you’ll be the first called to come back
 - Layoff in a non-union context: synonymous with termination
 - Furlough: Always temporary. Most of the time, people continue offering health benefits
 - If you do need to go the route of a layoff or a furlough, is there a severance package that will tide people over? Severance packages are possible when the layoff does not have to do with performance.
 - Reduced hours vs. furlough with benefits: see above for how hours may affect benefits, and check your plan and with your diocesan HR.

What happens when this crisis is over?

- This will end...sort of. But we're going to go back to a different reality. We need to ask: WHAT DO PEOPLE NEED? Our world as we know it is not as safe as it was.
 - What is the role of grief in all of this? Everyone is experiencing this. How do we deal with grief/anxiety/fear and support them?
 - Human beings are resilient. What can we do as a community to empower and encourage resilience?
 - What kind of training do we need (everything from technology to mental health)? Where do we need to invest? What policies need to change? What did we learn?
 - What has forever changed? What is going to be different in an ongoing and permanent way?
 - How do we prepare for something like this to happen again?
- Check in: how are you taking care of yourself physically, emotionally, spiritually?**

For additional information:

Read the case study of Western Presbyterian Church: <https://alban.org/archive/what-to-keep-what-to-cut-reshaping-budgets-in-times-of-adversity/>

Read Carol Fowler's new book: [Human Resources, Best Practices in Church Management](#), Paulist Press, 2019

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