

# *Reboarding: Learning from the Past to Prepare for the Future*

*“If we ever had to be reminded we are one  
interdependent society, one interdependent planet...this  
virus helps us to see just how connected we really are.”  
– Andrew Miller*



Andrew



Brandon



Linda



Assem



Greg



Jessica

*"It's like seeing a storm coming... in that moment, your adrenaline is running and it is easy to feel like we are doomed, in the most primal of ways. But then we move out of that primal feeling and when we step out of that immediate situation, it's much easier to see that the storm is temporary. There is light at the end of the tunnel. The sun is shining." — Andrew Miller*

**B**ecause of the COVID-19 outbreak, much of our day-to-day is upended, and we are feeling overwhelmed and scared by the loss and uncertainty. There are moments when our thoughts are overtaken by fears. And other moments when we are full of questions—but no answers. When and how will this all end? What will change (and how will I change) as a result of the crisis? How can I be resilient? With these questions in mind, we connected with six extraordinary individuals who, having faced adversity or tragedy in the past, are now well positioned to see a difficult situation with hope. Meet Jessica Kochin, Andrew Miller, Linda Post, Assem Nasr, Brandon Edwin Chrostowski and Greg Stecklow.

- Jessica Kochin re-entered the working world as a Corporate Executive after having two children.
- Andrew Miller experienced being quarantined during the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong in 2003.
- Linda Post, M.D., transitioned as the Medical Director of UnitedHealthcare to retirement.
- Assem Nasr shared stories of his childhood in Lebanon during their civil war from 1975-1990.
- Brandon Edwin Chrostowski works to support re-entry for people who have been incarcerated.
- Greg Stecklow was deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq, and numerous natural disaster relief efforts.

You can read more about these exceptional individuals at the end of this article.



Patty

*“Over the past few months we have experienced a great pause, pandemonium, and uncertainty. Each day brings new challenges, but we know that there are life events and times in history where the human spirit has overcome tough situations. We have been called upon to be flexible, forgiving, and discerning. Know that there is light at the end of this tunnel. We should harness these experiences to lay the foundation for new opportunities moving forward.”*

— *Patty Starr, President & CEO of Health Action Council*

Read more on Patty Starr’s blog [“What ‘Next’ Looks Like.”](#)

We reached out to these resilient individuals to learn about their varied experiences of change, transition, or adversity. As a result of their life experiences, they appear to be more readily able to accept and manage through the current global crisis without losing hope for the future. It

is a testament to their resiliency; they know we will get through this, it’s just a matter of

when. While learning about their stories, we listened for strategies to navigate transitions and overcome difficult times. We hope that some of these strategies will help you thoughtfully plan how best to support employees as they reboard the workplace following the COVID-19 situation.

Learning from what people focus on across various disciplines and life experiences, can:

- give hope by helping envision a brighter future;
- inform actions to take now; and,
- provide useful insights on reboarding people, businesses, and communities.

## Why Reboarding?

The term ‘reboarding’ describes the process of re-entering a ship, train, airplane, or bus following an initial exit. In today’s context, it also is the

process of returning an employee to work following an extended absence.

Whether we are talking about a new

parent coming back after maternity / paternity leave, or an employee coming back after a longer period of illness, best-in-class organizations will prepare a return-to-work plan or reboarding process.<sup>1</sup>

As a business leader responding to the pandemic and resulting stay-at-home orders, you likely have had to implement business continuity plans, modify internal processes and procedures, and transition to telework. In the coming months, as social distancing restrictions are loosened, you will be planning for a return to the office or workplace. This article will help you develop a reboarding process as you and your organization prepare for managing the new normal.

## Strategies for Reboarding

As we gathered insights in the interviews, we took particular interest in these individuals' reboarding strategies. We asked each person, "What happened after the crisis or the transition period?" From that, we learned that while their life circumstances were unique, there were some clear strategies for transitioning out of the challenging time.

The five core tactics that emerged from their reflections are:

- Get Back to Basics
- Mind your Mind
- Communicate, Connect, and Co-create
- Celebrate
- Get Ahead of the Game

### Get Back to Basics

When your employees first return to work, they will be relying on the organization for support. At first, employees may be most concerned about their basic needs such as ability to continue to work from home, redefining their roles and responsibilities, addressing medical benefits concerns, and time policies.

Dr. Linda Post, a family physician who recently retired as a Medical Director in the insurance industry talked about focusing first on your basic needs. "Once I took care of the 'tactical' issues like food, family, shelter, clothing, medical/care needs, I had the time and energy to free up my mind."

Assem Nasr, who grew up in Beirut during the 15-year Lebanese Civil war shared, "Everything was focused on our basic needs of food and water."

'Basic needs' also include the need for social support. In fact, research suggests that "our brains are designed to be social – and the need for human contact is greater than the need for safety."<sup>2</sup> Brandon Edwin Chrostowski, CEO and Founder of EDWINS Leadership & Restaurant Institute, who has dedicated his life's work to helping incarcerated individuals transition to everyday life, explained that "staying socially connected in the first week of re-entry was critical for us." Assem who was a child during the Civil War in Lebanon reminisced about bonding with neighbors during the war when there was heavy fighting. "Our apartment was safer from the bombing because it was on the lower level. The neighbors came down to our place when the fighting was going on. We would play cards and talk. It's funny how I remember that as a fond memory."

Although we know that every employee will have a different set of needs, what is constant is encouraging your leaders and managers to carve out the time to listen to each employee, identify their needs, and provide resources and support whenever possible. Equally important is providing the opportunity for them to share their experiences in groups to continue laying infrastructure for social connectedness. The act of simply carving out time to listen to individuals' needs will send the message to employees that you care and you're there to support them.



### Ideas To Consider

Here are some ways your organization can support your employees' basic needs:

- Talk with your employees regularly. Conversations should not just take place on the return day. Instead it should be an ongoing correspondence while showing continuous support and understanding.<sup>3</sup>
- Build capacity. Equip your leaders with resources and conversation tips for addressing employees' needs.
- Update policies and procedures. Re-visit, evaluate and revise employee onboarding steps, policies and procedures.
- Collaborate with others. Collaborate with leads of various Affinity Groups to identify resources and brainstorm ways to support staff.

*“Once your mind has expanded, you can’t unknow something. There will be a new level of consciousness that does not go away.”*  
– Andrew Miller

## Mind Your Mind

While you’re addressing your employees’ basic needs, it is just as critical to focus on their mental health. Some employees may expect to get back to things as usual only to be frustrated when the outcomes are not their norm. This can take a toll on one’s mental well-being. Jessica who returned to work after maternity leave recalled feeling unsettled after her transition. Reflecting on that experience, she shared, “I remember when I came back feeling like I had fallen behind. There was lots of activity, and I knew there would be many changes, but it had all transformed by the time I came back.” Brandon from EDWIN’s, shared a similar perspective that “anyone who is out of the routine can feel lost and concerned with the lack of certainty.” He then added that, “human beings are pretty resilient. I mean we survived on berries and lived in caves....I think we can get through this.”

Many shared reflections on the concept of “letting go.” Assem said, “When I think back to how my mom handled us kids, she had to let go... she had to just let us play in the building garage which was our outdoor playground, and she let us have our adventures. She had to let us go and be. I know now, if I can let my own kids go and be, I feel more at ease, too.” Greg Stecklow, spoke about his time deployed to Afghanistan, Iraq, and numerous natural disaster relief efforts, “I learned to stop

trying to control what you cannot control. You can’t control the way other people drive so why yell at them? I used to be a huge control freak. Now I recognize and realize that I cannot control everything.” Jessica, who was transitioning back to work after having her second child, recalled having to step back from managing the team. She also recognized the importance of shifting her focus on others to focusing on taking care of herself and added, “I can’t be strong for them [my team], if I’m not taking care of myself.”

Many of the people we interviewed shared a sense of being able to fully accept the current status while holding on to hope for the future. This demonstrates a sense of resiliency and a sense of hope for today’s COVID-19 situation. Just as these individuals demonstrated resilience, organizations who demonstrate resilience will successfully reboard their employees and create a new normal.



### Ideas To Consider

Here are some ways your organization can support employees who may be struggling with the transition, loss, or uncertainty, and the mental toll associated with this transition:

- Be open to change. Support changes in the way your employees learn, work, and connect.
- Build trust and confidence. Trust that your employees can handle difficult news by being transparent and hopeful.
- Be curious. No one has all the answers. Give your leaders the permission and support to “not know” the answer.
- Set a clear direction. Gain clarity on what the organization is able to “let go of” and what you need to stand firm on.



## Communicate, Connect, & Co-Create

Although communication is a two-way street, the leaders in organizations have a responsibility to create systems and provide forums to encourage and facilitate open dialogue. During times of transition it is important to open up the lines of communication by cascading information down and encouraging staff to share their needs, stories, ideas, and observations back up the chain.

Urge your leaders to engage in team and one-on-one interactions. It is as simple as setting up a meeting and listening. By carving out this time on their calendars, leaders will send the message that they are prioritizing their employees' needs. As Greg reflected on years spent in military service during war time and in disaster relief, "Personal conversations and interactions are so important and all that really mattered. I wanted to prioritize people like they prioritized me."

In addition, Jessica talked about the importance of making her needs known and following up with making clear requests after her maternity leave. She said, "People are very focused on what they need to do every day... unless you're open to others, they may not think about your needs. It's not because they don't care, it's because they're just focused on their own needs." The lesson for organizations is to help leaders engage with their employees about their true needs so the leader and employee can co-create solutions that will benefit both the individual and the organization.



### Ideas To Consider

Here are ways to communicate, connect and co-create strategies with your staff:

- Welcome people back. Prepare all managers to reach out to each employee personally and welcome them back. Suggest setting up an in-person check-in during the first week of their return.<sup>5</sup>
- Rebuild. Encourage managers to set up team building sessions to reset group norms and expectations as well as rebuild relationships.<sup>6</sup>
- Make one-on-ones a priority. Check in with managers to ensure they are consistently carving out time for their one-on-one meetings. Provide discussion guides and questions to assist them in these conversations.
- Communicate expectations. This restart is an opportunity for managers to re-evaluate priorities and discuss expectations with staff as well as solicit their staff's concerns and needs.

## Celebrate

A somewhat surprising theme that emerged was around joy and celebration. Our interviewees discussed the desire and importance of celebrating what you have just overcome. As Andrew recalled the aftermath of the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong he said, "There's a lot of healing that can take place when celebrating a victorious win. There were so many celebrations and firework shows...the Hong Kong government event invited groups like the Rolling Stones to come and be part of a three-day concert. There were all kinds of activities that celebrated the winning of the battle and getting back to normal. We wanted to show our resilience, show that we won! We beat it!" Assem reflected on Beirut today, more than 30 years following the end of the war, "They spend so much money on clothing and parties...After so many years of war, they believe you need to live your life as if every day is your last day."

Humans are naturally social beings and celebrating change can improve your psychology. Judy Glaser, author of *Conversational Intelligence*, explains that our brains are wired in such a way that "the need for human contact is greater than the need for safety."<sup>7</sup> Celebrating doesn't have to be a large event, "even a brief pause to feel excited about an accomplishment can greatly improve a company and individual's success."<sup>8</sup>

Neuroscience research has revealed that celebrations elevate the "feel good" chemicals in our brain like oxytocin and serotonin. "Their release into our system gives us a sense of well-being, creating a safety space that enables us to experiment, take risks, learn and handle the challenges of growing the business."<sup>9</sup> Regardless of the motive (e.g. to boost the economy, to bring people together, or to aid in the healing process), celebration and appreciation for your staff will provide them a renewed sense of energy and optimism.



### Ideas To Consider

Here are some ways to celebrate and show appreciation for your employees:

- Host events. Hold a party during the lunch hour or happy hour to celebrate everyone coming back to the office.
- Create a culture of gratitude. Give gratitude often and make sure that your celebrations are not a once and done action but regularly prioritized.
- Get personal. Don't hesitate to spotlight individual employees or exceptional teams, who's unique actions supported your mission and values in critical moments.
- Give something tangible. Money might not be the strong motivator you think it is, but tangible gifts in the workplace are less about the "thing" and more about the thought behind it. Those rewards could be a donation made to their favorite charity, something to support their hobbies or interests, spa certificate, movie-dinner reward cards.<sup>10</sup>
- Acknowledge positive impact. Recognize ways individuals or teams were resilient and creative under challenging times and how that had a positive impact on your business.

No matter how you go about celebrating, what's most important is that the organization acknowledges the difficulties you've been through and now celebrates overcoming this pandemic together.

## Get Ahead of the Game

After you clean up the confetti from your celebrations, it's important you don't miss this opportunity to get ahead of the next crisis. Even if you had a good continuity plan that worked, it's important to seize this time to improve it based on lessons learned.

Aisha Ahmad wrote, "Calamity is a great teacher."<sup>11</sup> Seize this opportunity to create a new culture in how your organization deals with change. Encourage leaders to engage in conversations that help individuals move forward.

Dr. Post recommended, "Use this opportunity to see and explore. Seize this time to identify the 'busy' work that we may have been doing and didn't even realize that maybe we shouldn't be, so you can focus on what's really important." Encourage employees to do work differently. Analyze existing systems and processes and determine what's no longer relevant and where to focus your efforts.

Don't miss the time to engage everyone in establishing a business continuity plan. A business continuity plan is a proactive plan to avoid and mitigate risks when operations are disrupted. This type of plan details action steps to take before, during and after an event to maintain the financial viability of an organization. This differs from a disaster recovery plan which is primarily reactive and designed to address how to respond after an event occurred. Write a business continuity plan to have limited recovery after the next disaster or crisis.



### Ideas To Consider

Here are some areas to consider in creating a plan to move forward:

- Assess your risk. Review your organization's risk management approach and make adjustments as needed.<sup>12</sup>
- Know your human assets. Gather and keep an updated inventory of employee data and information, including expertise in case you need to leverage it.
- Establish a communications plan. Ensure you have established processes and procedures for both internal and external communications.<sup>13</sup>
- Gather and assess informal and formal policies. Create a list of the formal and informal policies and procedures in the workplace. Discuss what needs to be revised and seize the opportunity to capture new best practices or policies.
- Build organizational capacity. Identify and create new employee training and resources where appropriate (e.g., crisis management, handling PHI, working remotely policies, Employee Assistance Program, emergency medical, financial planning, communicating and working with teams remotely).

### Are you ready for what's next?

There may not be a clear timeline for the months ahead, but organizations that start planning now will be ahead of the game. After going through any traumatic experience, one's mindset changes; it's important to acknowledge that life and work have been transformed. Assem captured this sentiment succinctly when he said, "Once the war was over, it never really ended." Forward-looking leaders will not treat the reboarding as an event, but rather a transition that will require on-going attention and adjustment—as you take steps to strengthen your organization and your leaders.



## Appreciation

The Health Action Council and Mendelow Consulting Group want to thank the following individuals who generously shared their personal stories and reflections.



Andrew Miller was one of America's first undergraduate exchange students in China in the early 1980s. He subsequently spent more than 30 years living and working in Asia, in professional and financial services. While in Asia, he faced SARS, Bird Flu, Swine Flu, and other regional challenges. He now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with his family and continues his work in business services and consulting. At the time we connected for this article, he said he is striving to "maintain his cool" during this tragic global pandemic.



Linda Post is the former Chief Medical Officer for UnitedHealthcare Community of Ohio. She previously worked at Aetna, Cigna, Blue Cross and Blue Shield and a private Independent Provider Association. A Board-certified family physician, she trained and worked at MetroHealth Medical Center in Cleveland both as a community health center physician and as the director of the Family Practice training program. She has an MS from Case Western Reserve University and her MD from Medical College of Ohio--University of Toledo.



Assem Nasr is an Associate Professor at the Department of Communication Purdue University Fort Wayne where he teaches media studies and international communication. Nasr completed a Master of Fine Arts degree in film and electronic media at American University in Washington, DC and received his doctorate degree in international communication from The University of Texas at Austin. His research focuses on media, gender representations, and cultural identities in the Arab world. Nasr's work has been published in scholarly journals such as *Arab & Society*, and *Communication, Culture, & Critique*, and *Global Media Journal*, and presented in international academic conferences.



Brandon Edwin Chrostowski is the founder of EDWINS Leadership & Restaurant Institute. His belief that "every human being regardless of their past has the right to a fair and equal future" is what has driven the creation of EDWINS. The idea for EDWINS was born from a "break" that Chrostowski received early in life and has grown into a six-month culinary and life skills training program conducted at EDWINS Restaurant, Butcher Shop and Bakery, as well as its Second Chance Life Skills Center in Cleveland and prisons across Ohio. Chrostowski's approach is simple: arm those re-entering society with a skill set and a smile. Individuals are not only equipped with basic culinary skills, but also are assisted with finding employment, have the opportunity to access free housing, basic medical care, clothing, job coaching, and literacy programs. For more information, visit <https://edwinsrestaurant.org/about-us/>.



Greg Stecklow, Retired Sgt. First Class, Rank E-7, spent 17 years as an Ohio National Guardsman. Greg had 18-month deployment in Iraq, 13-month deployment to Afghanistan, and served during Hurricane Sandy, Hurricane Gustav, and on Northeastern US Power Outage. He currently lives in Tampa, Florida, with his wife Shelly, son Ben, and three cats.



Jessica Kochin is the Director of U.S. Medical Benefits for Eaton and brings over 15 years of health care experience in the employer benefits, consulting, and payer industries. In her role, Jessica is responsible for the medical, prescription drug, dental and vision plans for Eaton's U.S. employees and retirees. Prior to joining Eaton, Jessica served in various benefit management leadership roles at Ford Motor Company and spent time in consulting and applied analytics at Thomson Reuters. In addition to her career achievements, Jessica currently lives in Solon, Ohio, with her husband Steve, daughter Magdalena, son Thomas, two dogs, and two cats. She enjoys live music, art, and a good card game.

# About Health Action Council

## Background and Overview

Health Action Council is an independent employer-led, membership-based not-for-profit coalition.

Health Action Council is comprised of large and mid-sized employers, both public and private, who've united to leverage their collective purchasing power in order to drive health care improvements and innovation. With a focus on quality, value, transparency, cost and consumer / patient experience, the organization shares best practices in benefits administration and strategy for the betterment of the entire coalition.

Health Action Council was incorporated in 1983 by a small group of employers focused on hospital quality. It has grown to become a national member-driven organization with a voice for employers on various healthcare issues. Health Action Council continues to believe that a strong, unified voice is essential in driving change in healthcare.

Health Action Council is distinguished by several unique characteristics:

- Board of Directors is completely comprised of leaders from member employers acting in the best interest of member organizations.
- Organizational direction and strategic decisions are made in the best interest of the members.
- The voice of members and industry experts is convened and consolidated through 1:1 meetings, committee forums, primary and secondary research, and ideation sessions like our national conference series.
- Strong relationships with industry leaders are developed to create favorable results for member employers.

## Value Proposition

Membership benefits include access to group purchasing programs, education, quality and health improvement initiatives, resource sharing, support tools, peer-to-peer dialog, and networking.

- Creates and curates unbiased education on relevant subject matter and emerging industry trends.
- Provides a forum that encourages peer-to-peer dialog and incentivizes sharing of best practices.
- Offers reputable, simple, open-sourced solutions in group purchasing that lower cost, optimize and enhance savings, improve service level standards and meet the needs of unique employee populations.
- Connects employers and community needs to improve employee and communal health outcomes.
- Leverages coalition strength to develop, test and implement new programs with industry partners.
- Organizes positive experiences that drive enhanced collaboration and measurably improved outcomes.

For more information visit [HealthActionCouncil.org](http://HealthActionCouncil.org).

## About the Authors



**Laura Mendelow**, MAOD, PCC, owner of MCG, has been a Leadership Consultant, Coach, and Trainer since 1994. Laura has her Master's degree in Organization Development and is a Professional Certified Leadership Coach. From working with a broad spectrum of leaders in Fortune 500 companies, nonprofit and government agencies, she has come to the conclusion, "when you 'get' people, you get results." Leveraging her signature Dynamic Engagement Model™, and other assessment tools, she works with leaders and teams to uncover key success factors beneath the surface to develop strategies with lasting results.



**Amy N. Swanson**, MPA, is an accomplished healthcare executive with 20+ years of demonstrated results leading business development, marketing, and outreach efforts in the public, political, medical and healthcare sectors. As a Vice President with UnitedHealthcare, she was responsible for managing growth, business development, employee engagement and launching innovative products and programs. Prior to this role, Amy served as CEO of Voices for Ohio's Children and Vice President and Regional Manager of Burges & Burges Strategists. She has a deep understanding of the complex healthcare and insurance ecosystem, combined with a passion for leading teams, improving patient outcomes and providing high-quality services to customers.



**Patty Starr** is president and CEO of Health Action Council and is responsible for the strategic direction of the organization and implementation of the mission--build stronger, healthier communities where business can thrive. Since joining the Health Action Council team in 2013, she has transformed the organization yielding broad national expansion and seven consecutive years of growth. Patty is a member of the Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine Advisory Board, the Board of Directors for Health Policy Institute of Ohio (HPIO) and a co-chair for the Ohio Patient-Centered Primary Care Collaborative Coordinating Council. In 2018, she was named among Notable Women in Healthcare by Crain's Cleveland Business.

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Health Action Council is a not-for-profit 501(c)(6) organization representing mid and large-size employers that works to improve human and economic health through thought leadership, innovative services, and collaboration. It provides value to its members by facilitating projects that improve the quality and moderate the cost of healthcare purchased by its members for their employees, dependents, and retirees.

Health Action Council also collaborates with key stakeholders health plans, physicians, hospitals and the pharmaceutical industry to improve the quality and efficiency of healthcare in the community.

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