

Conversation: How to advocate for the flexibility you and your team need now

As the COVID-19 pandemic begins to wane in the United States, people are navigating a range of emotions and expectations — and companies are facing higher levels of attrition. What lessons can you take from the past 15 months of living and working differently to help make work better for you? FranklinCovey leadership coach Maria “Sully” Sullivan explores this moment of change — and how to advocate for the flexibility and support you and your team need.



Listen to the conversation — or read the full transcript below.

Coach Maria “Sully” Sullivan discusses what teams need from their managers and organizations in the transition to a more flexible work environment.

Audio Player

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Transcript

Heather Kathryn Ross:

Hello, I’m Heather Ross. I’m an editor at Jhana and FranklinCovey, and I’m here today with Maria Sullivan, one of our experienced leadership coaches.

Maria “Sully” Sullivan:

I’m Maria Sullivan. Please call me Sully — everybody does. I’ve been coaching and consulting since, well, last century. And I work with executives in many different industries around how to be better leaders in our current times.

Ross:

The U.S. is beginning to open up and ease restrictions a little bit more, but people are still in a period of ongoing stress, and they’re facing challenges in their personal and work lives. How have you seen this cropping up and what advice would you give people for navigating this moment?

Sullivan:

I think we're in a period of significant evolution. Korn Ferry came out with a study: One-third of the people that they surveyed said that they would not take a job that required them to be in the office every day. Seventy percent of people said they would prefer a hybrid workplace where they were in the office only a portion of the time. Twenty percent said they don't have any intention of going back to the office again at all. So, I think that we're in a place where people's perspective has changed pretty dramatically. And as humans, we crave certainty, simplicity, and clarity. And of course, those are the three things we've been missing for about 15 months here.

So, as we start to move back, I've been encouraging my clients to think really deeply, first about what are the lessons they learned during this? Everyone had to do things differently. They were forced to behave differently than they normally would. So, before you rush back to something, take the time to think about what you really learned. What habits did you develop that you would want to keep? What habits did you develop that you might want to curtail? What has become a nonnegotiable?

I'm working with a client, and he recently said, "I was thinking about this question. You've asked about what I learned. During this period, I lost all of my status with airlines and with hotels, but I gained a whole bunch of status with my kids, and that I'm not willing to give up." So, be able to articulate what you learned, what you don't want to give up as a result of that learning. Before you plunge into the conversation about what "next" looks like, learn from what's already happened.

Ross:

So, first is reflecting on what you've learned. Then what?

Sullivan:

The second step is really take some time to acknowledge how you're feeling. People are feeling a lot of different things in this moment. Some folks are anxious about the prospect of opening back up. Some are desperate to open back up and get back out there. There's this idea of languishing. Think about the construct of if mental health were a continuum, we would have depression at one end and flourishing at the other. Think about languishing as that place in the middle where you're not really motivated and you're not really thriving, but you're not depressed, specifically or clinically. You're just having a really hard time feeling purposeful.

Or are you exhausted? Some people had a very heroic response to this crisis, and they did a lot of things to keep the business alive, to keep the kids learning, to keep the family together, to keep everybody healthy and well and safe. And at this point they're just burnt out. So, notice what you're feeling. If you're like me, you may cycle through those four or five feelings every day. It's really very personal. But if you don't name it, you can't own it. You can't work to make it better. And you can't begin to really grapple with what has to happen.

Ross:

Once people have identified what they're feeling, what can they do about it?

Sullivan:

Typically, we would say baby steps — not all at once. You didn't get to feel this way overnight. You're probably not going to get to feel differently overnight either. You want to think about baby steps, and what are the small steps you can take? Sometimes we talk with folks and they've got a big pile of mail that they haven't addressed or maybe they've got some domestic challenges — there's that pile of laundry. Just decide to not tackle it all but to do five pieces; fold five items in the laundry or take five dishes out of the dishwasher or answer five emails.

Take pride in your progress. We know that as humans we're really motivated when we see progress, even when it's small. So, recognize that maybe you aren't where you want to be, but at least you're not where you were yesterday. Take pride in that progress.

And be flexible. If there's anything we've learned through this, it's that setting strong rules and having edicts about things just doesn't work. Because of the complexity and the lack of clarity around how we need to behave in response to this pandemic and our return to work, be flexible. Be flexible with yourself and be flexible with others. Agility is the thing that's really going to be needed as we come back because everybody needs something different. So, what you need may be different than what one of your colleagues needs.

Ross:

In some cases, people's organizational culture can fight against asking for more flexibility. They feel pressure from bosses or their organizations to just keep pushing through and continue to have that heroic response, as you put it. So, how can people navigate that pressure?

Sullivan:

I urge you to have the courage to ask for what you need. I had a conversation the other day with a leader. He was at the dining table, and he had two kids, one was eight and one was six, sitting there, and they were doing their homework at the same time that he was talking to me. This is just taking everything for people to get through. So, have the courage to ask for what you need. If you need more flexibility, if you need more time, if you need more space, if you need more rest, these are all things that you're going to have to create for yourself. But if you don't have the courage to ask, you can't get there from here.

Recognize that you are not alone. That everyone is dealing with the dislocation of the return, and everybody's definition of normal and what's good about it is different. So, don't expect anyone to be able to read your mind. You're going to have to ask. You're going to have to

have respectful conversations about what you need in terms of flexibility and support.

Ross:

What can leaders, and especially team-level leaders, do to help facilitate this for their teams?

Sullivan:

So, what we're finding in all of the science is that leaders who lay down the law are having tremendous attrition. People are leaving in droves. I was speaking with a client the other day — their attrition is 30 percent higher than normal right now. You can't believe that a directive is going to work for everybody. You've got to be thinking about this in a much more agile perspective. People are completely burned out with directives. So, two things that people need from their leaders right now: One — empathy, patience, caring, listening. Two — humanity.

We are not all in this alone. We are together. And if we can't see a way to get through this together, then you're going to have to get through it alone because you will lose your best people. They need your empathy and they need your humanity. They need to hear from you that you care. You have to have the personal courage to be an advocate for them to leadership because sometimes leadership doesn't hear so well without you amplifying the voices of your people.

But you have to give people space to process and be patient with their return. Remember, 70 percent of them want to stay hybrid, 20 percent of them don't want to come back to the office at all, according to this latest survey. If you look at any of the surveys from the recruiting folks, you'll see that 70 percent of people are looking to change jobs this year. I mean, it's amazing. So, you need to be really, really individual in your response to their needs.

Ross:

The last thing I wanted to ask is we've just gone through a very difficult time, and now we're potentially facing something else unique and challenging as some people return to the office or move to hybrid work. So, how can people build up a bit of a buffer for their future selves?

Sullivan:

If you're feeling burnt out, ask yourself what's really going on. Is it about the work? Is it about the way you're working? Or is it something else? So, we find that some folks are feeling really burnt but it isn't actually about the work. It's about a sense of isolation. We often will get our sense of identity and our sense of belonging from our workspace and the people we work with. And if that's true for you, then it could feel really isolating.

Conversely, if it truly is about the work and the workload ... We know from VPN records that people's average workday is three and a half hours longer in the pandemic than it was before the pandemic because you don't have to commute. We know where you are — you won't be out with your friends at the bar. So, it could be that you've just taken on too much work and you need to set some boundaries and begin to negotiate about how things are going to be done.

We found this post 9/11 — organizations that had built up a sense of urgency in response to the crisis, two years later were having terrific burnout problems because the organization had never recalibrated its expectation of people's response. You need to be in negotiation with your stakeholders and your boss about expectations if it's truly about the work.

The third piece is, this is about self-care. So, if it's not really about the work but how you're doing the work, then we've got to ask, are you maintaining your well-being? Are you getting adequate sleep? Are you taking care to nourish your body well? Are you taking care to get the proper rest? Are you resetting yourself between each meeting with just a few deep breaths with your eyes closed?

The visual exhaustion that's caused by Zoom and all of the other video interactions is real. So, even if you just take a few minutes to stand outside with your eyes closed, feel the sun on your face, and remember that you are actually a human being on the planet and not just a participant in any given video conference, it'll give you a moment to just reset. So, be a little more careful with respect to your well-being and the management of your well-being.

Ross:

Thank you so much Sully. We really appreciate you being here and sharing your insights.

Sullivan:

Certainly.

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