Communication, coaching, and connection: The 3Cs for community cohesion during a crisis

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1  PROBLEM

The department of Diagnostic and Biomedical Sciences at the University of Texas School of Dentistry at Houston (UTSD) boasts faculty and staff with a diverse array of disciplinary expertise, academic responsibilities, and professional goals. A 2019 SWOT analysis highlighted the need to improve communication, mentoring, and engagement. Measures were underway to address departmental needs using Kotter’s 8-step model1 (Figure 1) when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted operations. The crisis forced us to be intentional and innovative in our approach to meet the varied needs of our personnel, while improving cohesiveness of the department.

2  SOLUTION

The immediate goal was to ensure members felt connected, remained successful, and returned united and ready for the
Table 1: Paired organized strategies and organic outcomes of the 3Cs

| Organized strategy | Organic outcomes |
|--------------------|------------------|
| **Communication—Security** | Email communications from Interim Chair |
| | • Many email replies of thanks and congratulations to colleagues |
| | • More nominees for open UTSD Faculty Senate positions than ever before, prompting implementation of a virtual election |
| | • Faculty staying informed and involved |
| | Targeted text messages within multiple, separate groups |
| | • Updates of latest local coronavirus news |
| | • Professional support—research needs, letters of support, advice for P&T |
| | • Photos shared of meals and desserts made |
| | • Discussions of shared in-house childcare |
| **Coaching—Success** | One-on-one coaching sessions |
| | • Faculty new to online educational tools transitioned successfully and quickly |
| | • Faculty coaches volunteered to be a safety net by attending and moderating lectures |
| **Coaching—Success** | Monthly research seminars |
| | • Increased departmental attendance |
| | • Increased attendance from other departments |
| | • Increased participation via questions |
| | • Offers and suggestions for collaborations |
| | • Identification of new research ideas |
| | Word of Encouragement emails on topics such as awareness, circles of influence, vulnerability, and positivity |
| | • Reply-all messages adding personal thoughts |
| | • Suggestions to authors for future words of encouragement |
| | • Creation of a safe space for members to acknowledge personal struggles |
| **Connection—Support** | Videoconference Going-Away Parties |
| | • Acknowledgement of the contributions of faculty members |
| | • Laughter and stories shared |
| | • “Good luck” PowerPoint slides submitted and viewed in lieu of the traditional card |
| **Connection—Support** | Biweekly Video Social Hours |
| | • Discussion of science documentary |
| | • Virtual scavenger hunt |
| | • Virtual game days |
| | • Social hours without an agenda |
| | • Virtual playdates organized between children who met during the departmental Social Hours |
| | • Birthdays celebrated |
| | • Game materials requested by attendees |
| | • Increased personal interaction between departmental members who had previous limited contact |
| | • Greater bond among departmental member families |

uncertainty that faces us. We addressed our challenge with a 2-pronged approach—organized and organic. Our organized approach provided communication, coaching, and connection, while leading to the organic outcomes of security, success, and support, respectively (Figure 2). Paired organized and organic actions are in Table 1, with examples below. Resources utilized to implement the “3Cs” included university-provided email and videoconferencing tools, personal electronic devices, and 2 hours per week of effort for the authors.

**Communication and Security:** To support and expand on the communications from the university president and the Dean of the School of Dentistry, regular check-in emails were sent that defined how evolving policies applied to departmental activities. Additionally, these emails focused on summaries of departmental status, faculty and staff achievements, and virtual events. Beyond the information included, these communications provided a sense of security that our department’s unique voice was being heard in conversations regarding the ongoing changes and future direction of the school.

**Coaching and Success:** With the transition to online teaching, faculty expressed the need for additional training in utilizing remote teaching tools. Faculty already adept with these platforms provided one-on-one coaching to novice users. These partnerships often included participat-
F I G U R E 2 A Penrose Triangle depicts the interconnectivity of the 3Cs while highlighting the unique strengths of each of the 3 organized and organic components. Each arm of the Penrose Triangle supports and relies on the other arms to provide stability and cohesion. The optical illusion reflects the difficulty in measuring the intangible, yet valuable organic outcomes of this strategy.

ing in colleagues’ online lectures and moderating Q&As between the lecturer and students. This support bolstered faculty confidence and allowed for a faster adaptation to the drastically altered teaching environment. Thus, coaching sessions blossomed into investment in faculty success and engagement between colleagues.

Connection and Support: To counter the impact of social isolation, we organized biweekly social hours and monthly research seminars, allowing virtual gatherings to serve both social and scholarly needs of the department. The authors took note of who missed these sessions and regularly connected with those individuals via emails, texts, or phone calls to convey support and provide opportunities for a department member to request help if needed.

3 | RESULTS

Solicited and unprompted departmental feedback has been encouraging and includes appreciation of regular and organized communication, commitment to departmental and institutional needs, gratitude for virtual social interactions, and stronger feelings of belonging. Despite upended work and home lives, implementation of the 3Cs has helped personnel continue to be successful, while feeling secure and supported in their contributions to the university. The 3Cs meet previously identified departmental needs. Feedback provides strong support for continued implementation and afford flexibility to adapt to evolving needs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Dr. Mary C. Farach-Carson, PhD, for her role in conducting the SWOT analysis and collating the feedback.

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How to cite this article: Joy-Thomas AR, Jeter CB, Hansen-Kiss E. Communication, coaching, and connection: The 3Cs for community cohesion during a crisis. J Dent Educ. 2021;85(Suppl. 1):1066–1068. https://doi.org/10.1002/jdd.12299