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Managing During a Pandemic

Adapting to a New Normal

In 2020 our society and industry faced unprecedented events in our lifetime. The COVID-19 pandemic forced us to quickly pivot and adapt to keep our clients, staff, and families safe.

At our management firm, we were lucky, and we saw the writing on the wall relatively early. As such, we were able to secure appropriate PPE in time for staff, including masks, gloves, sanitizer and even face shields. Our pandemic policy was in place the same week of the first Ontario shut down in March.

Safety Measures

We advised all boards to shut down all amenities and increase cleaning in our buildings. Our company immediately

moved to online meetings and instituted a company policy that all trades must wear a mask on-site, months before the local laws required. Except for accounting, all staff were sent home to work, and condominium managers were pulled from sites to work remotely instead. Our offices shut down to the public, and we had a strict protocol for board members to sign cheques outside of our doors. All incoming mail was put in quarantine for one week before being opened. With less staff, and wanting to limit entry into our offices, we also reduced cleaning to once a week as the cleaners were also going into other offices. We chose Fridays, as the virus's viability is effectively neutralized after about 48 hours at average

inside temperatures. We transitioned to Zoom for our weekly team meetings and instituted a daily check-in via Microsoft Teams, monitoring our staff's workloads, morale, and mental health. Large office supply orders were made quarterly instead of every few weeks. We looked at every point of contact and attempted to either lesson it or mitigate it.

To date, we've had only one case of COVID-19 in our portfolio that we are aware of.

For the most part, our clients and boards supported these actions. We've had a handful of boards request in-person meetings, to which we've politely but firmly refused. Similarly, some boards wanted in-person AGMs,



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to which we advised that neither ourselves nor the auditor would attend in person should they do so. Our biggest challenge was renters in the condominiums who were angry about closed amenities, mainly the gyms in our larger buildings. This was despite regular updates to all owners and tenants about COVID-19 and applicable laws. Our other challenge was people not understanding that 14-day isolation after travel meant not leaving their unit at all, including taking their waste to the garbage chute.

Productivity & Morale

Our staff's productivity started to decline as did morale after a prolonged period of working from home. With the count of infected declining, we opted to return to the office on July 6, 2020. Staff were separated into different rooms (even our file room!) for social distancing. We adopted a strict protocol, which included wearing masks whenever outside their office and whenever anyone came to their office to speak with them. Staff were encouraged not to use the kitchen, but if necessary, they were to take cutlery and dishes back to their office for their use and cleaning, so there would be no chance of cross-contamination. Our popular Pizza Fridays were put on hold.

In Waterloo Region, a mandatory mask bylaw came into effect in September. This included multi-residential buildings and their common

areas. Compliance with that bylaw has been a challenge, and we've had to escalate to our local public health agency a number of times.

Earlier this year, there was a survey done about Canadians and mental health. Approximately 70% said another shutdown would impact their mental health in a negative way, with about half saying it would do so significantly. Here we are in January 2021, when people already have post-holiday season blues, amidst another shutdown. We've discussed this as a team, reminding staff to be mindful of this both for themselves but also for our clients. We're expecting and have already experienced more intense reactions than normal from a number of clients. We're doing our best to communicate on all matters and are even more patient than normal when it comes to complaints and angry reactions. We're making more phone calls to people as opposed to emails for that personal connection. We're also doing weekly check-ins with all staff above and beyond our weekly team meetings.

Expectations for the New Year

We don't anticipate a return to in-person meetings for 2021. We are preparing accordingly, including taking the opportunity to get bylaws passed so that online communication in the future is possible for all our clients, without needing emergency orders to allow it. We do anticipate

hybrid meetings for owners in the future where there is both in-person and computer attendance. We also expect some pushback once initial vaccinations are done, and some people will want to dive right back to in-person meetings. We're trying to set the expectation now that we need to have herd immunity with the vaccinations before in-person meetings are a possibility. For our company, we will remain closed to the public until the local population is vaccinated. We've purchased enough PPE to last well into the late summer or early fall of this year.

The new emergency order in January didn't change much of what we already do. We've sent our managers home again and pulled site staff. The one gym we had open was shut down again on December 26, 2020, in compliance with Ontario law. Cosmetic maintenance is on hold. With the experience we gained in 2020, we could pivot quickly, and the transition to remote work was seamless. ■

Sean Wilde UE, RCM, OLCM, CEO of Lee Management Solutions, OLCMP and CEO of Peak Property Management, has been in the condominium property management business since 2002. His companies manage condominium properties in Waterloo and surrounding Regions. Sean sits on the ACMO board of directors as Secretary. leemanagementsolutions.ca



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