



Jerome Wilson, Extruder Operator, running production of Cooley's next generation water containment technology in Pawtucket, RI.

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Pandemic diary: Seeking silver linings



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As CEO and President of a midsized manufacturer sustaining operations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, I have found my "ALL EMPLOYEES" emails tend toward rallying cries of a wartime melodrama, rather than their usual anodyne financial or technical update. My tonal shift, alongside the company's myriad operational, supply chain and protocol shifts (not to mention the financial and social shifts across the globe), is jarring. But jarring shifts can affect large-scale change for the better.

Business leaders have the hard job of framing moments of crisis as opportunities, without misleading their employees, board members and community. So, how does a leader turn a crisis into an opportunity to build a stronger, more-resilient company?

To ensure the Cooley team doesn't devolve into an anxious, unproductive tailspin, I am finding it is my responsibility as CEO to reinforce what we know already works well within our culture. Relying on and amplifying good habits during times of crisis reinforces productive, collaborative behavior that strengthens our corporate culture and sets us up for success well beyond this global crisis.

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For those who are unfamiliar with Cooley Group, we are a technical textile and geomembrane manufacturer with customers on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic, including the medical, health care, food, agriculture and

U.S. defense industries. For these essential industries, we remain open throughout the coronavirus pandemic. This past week, emergency, nationwide demands for medical supplies pushed Cooley to expand beyond our existing portfolio of medical products [which already include respiratory vests, hospital bedding and safety suits] to develop medical gowns. We leveraged our collaborative culture to accelerate the development and production of these gowns, with plans to begin shipping more than 1 million square feet of material per week to support health care communities in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Florida, California and Louisiana.

In response to the odd and impersonal reality of social distancing, Cooley is opting to reinforce our digital collaboration. Moving much of our operations online exposed holes in our digital infrastructure. With so many staff working from home, we are improving our digital acumen and discovering new software, technological shortcuts and Manufacturing 4.0 advantages we had previously ignored.

Faced with near-constant anxiety in the form of stress for ourselves and our families, persistently scary news cycles, and fears for our nation's financial health, we are apt to fret inwardly rather than recognizing there is unity in our collective experience. In the face of this anxiety, rather than pulling back, Cooley is reinforcing our connection to

the local community by increasing time and money spent on social-responsibility initiatives during this crisis. Those who are socioeconomically vulnerable are hit the hardest by COVID-19; as a result, Cooley Group is raising money for Family Service of Rhode Island and other local charities.

Finally, and most importantly, Cooley is building a habit around effective communication in order to combat the confusion caused by this pandemic. Sending regular emails – with fully transparent status reports on our business, daily updates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and regular “How are you holding up?” inter-office chats – promotes a higher level of collaboration, corporate cohesion and productivity than I’ve ever seen before.

In response to anxiety, companies must provide employees with constant, consistent and transparent communication.

In these uncertain and difficult times, Cooley is determined to emerge stronger and more resilient.

Daniel Dwight is CEO and President of Pawtucket-based Cooley Group.

(Editor’s note: This is the first installment in a weekly series on how Cooley Group is managing the COVID-19 pandemic, from the perspective of its CEO.)