



A Snapshot of Leadership Amid LOCKDOWN

No US state or city has been hit harder by COVID-19 than New York—which, as of June 21st, had seen 388,000 confirmed cases and nearly 31,000 deaths. **MARIA FIGUEROA KÜPÇÜ**, who leads Brunswick's office in the city, recounts what it's been like leading from the epicenter of the pandemic.

ON MARCH 11TH, WE WERE NOTIFIED that a person in our building, who worked on a different floor, had tested positive for COVID-19. At that stage, people were already bumping elbows instead of shaking hands, some people with immunocompromised family members had made the decision to work from home, the anxiety level was rising on the floor (“the floor” being shorthand for our office) and, globally, Brunswick had been discussing COVID-19 on leadership committee calls—but that first positive case took it to a whole new level for us in the New York office.

Two days later, Friday, March 13th, was our last day in office—a day when, according to the WHO, the world passed 10,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19.

If there’s any firm that thrives on adrenaline, it’s ours. We help other companies navigate times of crisis and complexity, and I know that prepared us—as much as you can ever be prepared—for the intensity of this situation. We came into it with an innate emotional resilience. We’re used to high levels of stress and uncertainty; we’re constantly dealing with intense situations that change by the minute; our teams have to collaborate, our people have to take initiative. When we closed the office, I didn’t have anybody come and ask me, “Should I be doing this with the server? Should I be doing that with the mail?” Some of this was preparation. We’re in Midtown, near Grand Central Station, and that’s a high-threat zone; we practice scenarios. But most of this is down to a team that has great judgment and leadership individually and collectively.

I’m grateful that a lot of directing at that level didn’t need to happen, it just got done. There were big, broad decisions we had to take to ensure we could keep focused on supporting clients while everyone also scrambled to deal with family situations. We had some very late nights of coordinating, but our People, IT, and Admin teams were fantastic and ensured that we could keep up our work, which was becoming even more intense as clients were being impacted. We immediately put together a five-person New York COVID internal team. We met virtually every single day, morning and evening, sharing what we were hearing, making sure we weren’t overlooking anything. This team has now morphed into our phase-back planning team and we still meet several times a week.

The immediate need was to track people’s movements and understand health risks and exposures, while also determining what people needed in order to be able to do their jobs. The team at



WE IMMEDIATELY
PUT TOGETHER
A FIVE-PERSON
NEW YORK
COVID INTERNAL
TEAM. WE MET
VIRTUALLY EVERY
DAY, MORNING
AND EVENING,
SHARING WHAT
WE WERE
HEARING, MAKING
SURE WE WEREN'T
OVERLOOKING
ANYTHING.

MerchantCantos, our creative agency, has highly specialized video and design equipment; others just needed software installed on phones or laptops.

We have been very active in reaching out to everyone in the New York office. That’s about 170 people. It’s important to stay close and just give everyone the space they need to share or get support. As I reached out that first week, the range of responses I got was huge. Those calls and emails—which are continual for me—are windows into the countless ways this touches our people’s lives: working through the death of loved ones; concerns about childcare and living with in-laws; or those who have spouses or loved ones on the front lines as medical practitioners, firefighters. Our team is incredibly diverse, which is a source of strength, and we have to be sensitive to the many ways people are impacted.

We closed on Friday the 13th and by the middle of the following week, we learned that one of our colleagues had been diagnosed with COVID-19. Luckily, this person remembered what rooms they’d been in, who they’d met with, who might’ve been around—looking out for each other’s collective health is the new normal. We immediately alerted those people and contacted clients, who were not surprised by the news. They’d started to have cases themselves.

We’ve been so fortunate as an office. That colleague recovered. More broadly, as a company, Brunswick colleagues around the world have had COVID-19 and, thankfully, all have made similar recoveries. Since then, the New York office hasn’t had any new reported cases. But I know this is just a moment in time.

Our approach in New York is to closely follow guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the state, the city, and our building. We get real-time updates from our broker, who manages many properties in NY, and have tapped the Brunswick network to reach experts like an epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins who works for the CDC and a member of the subway’s re-opening team. Hearing the experiences of other office heads who are a few weeks ahead of us on the curve has been extremely helpful. We’re all supporting each other through the complex logistics and various questions: “Can we touch bathroom handles? Will there be coffee?”

But there remain so many unknowns around this virus and its spread—can you get it twice? What’s its effect on children? Flu season will be a huge variable. So too decisions about the city’s schools and public transportation—without those, people can’t go to work. And then variables unique to our building.

How do you navigate elevators, for instance? We occupy one floor in our building, so we're working with a certain amount of square footage, desk configurations. There's a clear mathematical calculation you can make about how many people can physically inhabit our space at any one time.

That already complicated calculus gets even more so when you factor in that people have different views about coming back: Some are eager to, others feel like they're getting more done working from home. Everyone has different considerations and thresholds about what makes them comfortable.

We're grappling with what our standard of safety will be, the point where we feel comfortable making a call to reopen the office, while remaining flexible for people who aren't ready to come back. I'm fortunate to have Regina Manza, our very experienced office manager who knows the firm and the office inside and out, and Lisa Nagorny, a former US Navy intelligence officer and management consultant who has an ability to simplify complex systems. They're part of the team that is helping think through a number of implications as we go through this: Can people do their work effectively in a remote environment? What about our policies around flexibility? How does that affect people of different jobs, or living in different locations? Is that fair?

The challenge is finding something that's based on best-practices, but also uniquely suited to the work we do and our culture—professional services is very different than a manufacturing company, and our culture depends on interaction. We haven't discussed moving Brunswick permanently to working from home. That's not something we considered because it wouldn't lead to our best work.

That said, this gives us an opportunity to explore some ways of working that, beforehand, we had a natural bias against. Though we had the capability, we never really used video calls aside from the occasional interview. We preferred face-to-face. Now we can see the benefits of being able to collaborate globally in a way that feels more personal and provides much better connection than a phone call. We've welcomed two Partners to the New York office since we've been working from home: Jane Reiss, Managing Partner of North America for Merchant Cantos, and Peter Dillon, Managing Partner Brunswick Arts. They onboarded virtually and have jumped right in. I speak with them regularly and feel like I know them even though we've never met in person.

The situation changes by the hour. Whatever happens, I don't want us to cloud our ability to make judgments based on local conditions because we feel



Brunswick New York works hard and loves to celebrate. Our Thanksgiving Pot Luck lunch, above, is one of many annual traditions. This year, will we still need to stay six feet apart in and wear masks while eating pumpkin pie?

a pressure to return. New Yorkers tend to be impatient—in a good way—and we all want to get back to routines and the collaboration we miss. And we will. As we learn more about how to live alongside this virus, we're adjusting and will make a decision. If things continue to go as they are in New York City, I'd say we'll be phasing in our pilot group this summer and starting to have more people in by fall.

One thing I know for sure is that New York and the team are an incredibly optimistic and resilient bunch. In recent weeks, our city has seen thousands take to the streets in protest, rising up in the face of injustice and brutality. We've been coming to grips with what is not a new—but a fresh—grief, anger and sense of exhaustion about how to end the systemic racism that is a part of our culture. In these moments, I stay grateful for what's in front of me: the gift of time with my two children and husband, a chance to stay connected in more profound ways, and the hope that we'll be face-to-face again soon. ♦