

A PATH FORWARD

# PREPARING FOR A CIVIL RETURN TO THE WORKPLACE

BY STEVEN P. DINKIN

California is itching to get back to work, back to business, back to normal. You can't keep the world's fifth-largest economy shut down for long.

Gov. Gavin Newsom scratched that itch, opening some "low-risk" businesses on Friday, including bookstores and florists — just in time for Mother's Day (smart move). Restaurants, gyms and movie theaters remain closed.

As normalcy beckons, it's fair to wonder what it will look like after nearly eight weeks of shelter-at-home isolation.

This much we know: There's an onus on all of us who run businesses to be more caring and careful, and to create workplaces that are safe, respectful and sustainable. A new "civil code" is needed — and it will prove to be just as important as the safety measures that businesses around the country are putting into place.

In Michigan, Ford Motor Company recently outlined its protocols for reopening, including intensive cleaning regimens, mandatory face masks, and redesigned workspaces, to enforce social distancing. Employees will need to clear daily health assessments and temperature checks. There also will be new rules for entering and exiting facilities — a compli-

ated process for thousands of workers on multiple shifts.

Speaking recently to The Washington Post, Ford CEO Jim Hackett said that the company has compiled a 70-page return-to-work handbook that includes "granular details" so employees feel confident in their personal safety. And he is willing to share the Ford plan with any company that's interested. That's good corporate leadership.

Yet, it's a safe bet that the Ford plan doesn't include much about how to prepare employees to be civil when they return to the workplace.

For instance, it's a fact that a face covering can help stop the spread of coronavirus. When a person refuses to wear one, there are safety implications, certainly, but it's an act of incivility, too. That person is making a statement: My freedom of choice matters more than the health and safety of others.

At the National Conflict Resolution Center, I'll be posting a set of five standards and practices that all employees — including me — will be expected to follow as we come back to work.

Call it our COVID Code of Conduct:

- Follow workplace rules — whether you're an employee or a visitor. Those rules are likely to



**Sue Conklin, owner of Books Rio V in Rio Vista, was back at work on Friday. She was forced to close March 28.**

BEN MARGOT AP

incorporate mask-wearing and distancing etiquette. To feel good about going to work every day, employees need to trust that the rules will be followed — and to speak up if they're not.

- Be empathetic and patient. Most of us will greet a return to the workplace with a mix of relief and apprehension. With a jumble of emotions, some employees may not operate at max capacity right away. If ever there was a time to cut your co-workers some slack, it's now.

- Keep health matters to yourself. Knowing a person's COVID status could lead to differential treatment. And some employees will choose to continue to work from home because of personal or household health concerns. That's OK. They are still a part of the team.

- Be flexible. The pandemic has given us a valuable opportunity to "rearrange the sock drawer." That will mean new priorities and different ways of doing business. (I, for one, hope that we rely on Zoom a

lot less.) It's an opportunity to step up and take on new challenges.

- Practice self-care. Be honest about how you feel, physically and mentally. It will differ from day to day and likely, from hour to hour. Stay home if you're unwell. Seek help if you need it. This is brand new territory for all of us. If you feel something, say something.

Just thinking through this stuff, and writing it down, makes me feel relieved. But, to be honest, I'm a little apprehensive, too. One thing about setting down rules to prevent things from going wrong is that, before you know it, you start to imagine everything that could go wrong.

Still, I am counting the minutes until I can return to the workplace. While NCRC has continued to fulfill its mission over these last eight weeks, virtually, I can't wait to welcome back our team — from an appropriate distance, of course. They may not be able to tell, but under my mask, I'll be smiling.

Dinkin is president of the National Conflict Resolution Center, a San Diego-based organization working to create innovative solutions to challenging issues, including intolerance and incivility. NCRC is nationally recognized for its conflict management and communication strategies. To learn about NCRC's programming, visit [ncronline.com](http://ncronline.com)

## UNCERTAIN Artists trying to get grants

FROM B1 and supplement her own work. She's fortunate to have landed positions within the visual arts workforce at places like Mesa College, but fears that the MCASD position could be seen as redundant if the pandemic continues into the summer or schools remain closed into the fall.

And she's not alone.

Up and down San Diego County — from Oceanside to San Ysidro — independent art spaces, nonprofits and artists themselves are bracing for an uncertain future. While some were still optimistic at first, hoping that the crisis would subside after a while, many are now doing their best to readjust to indefinite stay-at-home orders and bans on mass gatherings.

"Right now, I'm just finding ways to curate in this moment for my community," says Dinah Poellnitz, the co-founder, program director and curator at Hill Street Country Club, a nonprofit art space in Oceanside. "That is how our space is going to survive, if we continue to curate in this moment and with the well-being of the community in mind."

Poellnitz says that she and Hill Street co-founder Margaret Hernandez secured a grant from the California Arts Council just before the pandemic, but that they've had to cancel and re-evaluate the proposed project, which involved arts-based workshops throughout Oceanside.

Hill Street is nestled inside a building leased by LinkSoul, a golf apparel company. She says the company has been very supportive when it comes to the current financial crisis, and even collaborated with Hill Street on a charitable "Flatten the Curve" T-shirt. Poellnitz says they're lucky to have such support, considering they have not received much assistance



COURTESY PHOTO

**"Right now, I'm just finding ways to curate in this moment for my community," says Dinah Poellnitz, the co-founder, program director and curator at Hill Street Country Club, a nonprofit art space in Oceanside.**

from the city.

"Right now, we have city council members who are more concerned about re-opening businesses and the beach," says Poellnitz, who says she's particularly concerned about these kinds of attitudes because she suffers from asthma and lives in a multigenerational household. "As an organization, we're moving in a direction independently. When it comes to Oceanside, it's like you're on your own. Ride or die."

Francisco Morales is the Gallery Director of The Front Arte Cultura, a San Ysidro art space that hosts concerts, workshops and art shows that feature artists from both sides of the border. The most recent exhibition, "Dia de la Mujer," opened mere days before Gov. Gavin Newsom's stay-at-home directive, but not many people have been able to see it since then.

"We can keep doing it like this for a couple more months, maybe," Morales says. "We are hoping that next year, everything will be back to normal. Right now, we're just going to keep looking for money. We're continuing to do grant applications."



K.C. ALFRED U-T

**Artist Akiko Surai, in one of the masks she made, isn't sure if she'll be hired back to her museum job.**

The Front is operated by Casa Familiar, a local nonprofit that facilitates a number of community development projects. Morales says he isn't immediately concerned about the future of the space, but he does fear that he will have to reassess how the space will be used in the future.

"We can stay in this pause for a couple months more," Morales says. "After July, though, we'll need to rethink about what we need to change and adjustments that need to be made."

Since spaces like The

Front and Hill Street are nonprofits, they do not qualify for small business assistance programs such as the city of San Diego's Small Business Relief Fund (SBRF), which is allocating over \$6 million worth of grants and low-interest loans to independent businesses affected by the COVID-19 crisis. This means that many have to compete for loans and both governmental and private grants in order to retain staff or simply to pay rent.

Many of these grants, however, come with stipulations that the organization must be performing programs they deem essential to the community, a hard ask when visual art shows are ostensibly banned for the foreseeable future. Many visual arts organizations, such as Space 4 Art and ArtReach, receive annual grants from the city of San Diego via the San Diego Commission for Arts and Culture (SDCAC). But Mayor Kevin Faulconer's recently proposed city budget for fiscal year 2021 sees deep cuts to arts-based nonprofits. The grants are mostly funded by hotel room tax revenue and are delegated by the mayor-appointed SDCAC. City council members have been mostly successful in the past in securing the funding, but with hotels vacant and no clear timeline as to when tourism will pick back up, the council may have to take a more cautious approach to the city's arts funding.

Some relief may come in the form of the recently launched San Diego Arts + Culture Challenge Fund. The fund, according to its press release, is to stabilize "San Diego's vulnerable, essential nonprofit organizations and their artists in the

creative sector." The funding for the ongoing, county-wide grant program was started with \$1.25 million in seed money from the city, the San Diego Regional Arts and Culture Coalition (SDRACC) and the San Diego Foundation, the region's largest nonprofit. The "challenge" aspect is donations from the general public.

"We want it to be quick and easy to get the funds out," says Lynnette Tessitore, co-chair on the SDRACC, which will be distributing the funds to applicants who apply online.

While the timing of the fund is coincidental and wasn't tied to the mayor's proposed budget cuts, the hope is that a total of \$2 million will be raised to help arts organizations and that donations from the public will continue.

"We're really going to focus on the most vulnerable organizations, the small to midsize organizations," says Tessitore, who estimates that the grants will be awarded by the end of May. "The organizations whose budgets fall between the \$150,000 to \$1.5 million range, they're going to get priority in this first phase."

Still, that \$2 million would still be less than half of the mayor's proposed arts funding cuts and even then, visual arts organizations would still ostensibly have to compete against dance, music, film and literary organizations for the grants. And while Tessitore emphasizes that the funds should be used to "support the creative workforce" (read: retain employees), there are no concrete stipulations on how organizations can spend the money.

For working artists like Surai, the prospect of being rehired anytime soon seems like a distant projection at best.

"Depending on how long this lasts, this is going to be very difficult," says Surai, who says she's now looking into copy-editing and web design positions. "As far as anything related to public arts programming, everything is pretty much frozen."

Combs is a freelance writer.

## SHIFT Groups still offer support

FROM B1 nues by the end of June, said Marco Li Mandri, chief executive administrator.

The association canceled several events, but closing its Saturday farmers market — which until COVID-19 was grossing \$80,000 a month — had the greatest impact, he said.

The association opened its market again on April 17 but the market that used to cover six blocks shrank to two blocks with social distancing, he said, and it could only sell fruits and vegetables; not ready-to-eat food.

The Little Italy Association represents 450 businesses and the neighborhood maintenance assessment district, which charges an assessment fee to property owners.

"We just have to figure out how we can make cuts to ensure that we can keep some sort of normalcy in Little Italy," he said.

The merchant associations are still providing core services such as maintenance and support to businesses.

The Adams Avenue Business Association includes 600 businesses in Normal Heights, Kensington and University Heights.

Organizers canceled the April music festival, Adams Avenue Unplugged, and they anticipate canceling the upcoming gastronomic tour, Taste of Adams Avenue, in June.

Scott Kessler, executive director of the association, said he expects the nonprofit will have an estimated \$130,000 shortfall. He said the promotional arm of the association will suffer but that's not the priority at the moment.

Nonprofit leaders say businesses need their support now more than ever. Nonprofits are helping businesses stay informed and developing creative ways to market the districts virtually.

Angela Landsberg, executive director of North Park Main Street, said that just because organizations are



SAM HODGSON U-T

**A worker with the Downtown Partnership sweeps the empty streets in San Diego on Friday. Some firms are still helping businesses by providing maintenance.**

not hosting events it does not mean the staff is not working. Landsberg said she spends most of her days speaking with business owners, helping them navigate and apply for COVID-19 resources.

Sara Berns, executive director of Discover Pacific, which works with 1,500 businesses in Pacific Beach, said the organization is helping businesses shift gears during the pandemic.

"My first concern is who is

going to come out of this and what is that going to look like," Berns said.

With the loss of revenue from weekly farmers markets and events, it's quite possible Discover Pacific could cancel its fall events

and Christmas parade, she said.

The Hillcrest Business Association closed its farmers market in early March but has since reopened it with adjustments to the number of vendors and customers.

Instead of completely canceling its gastronomic tour, Taste of Hillcrest, which draws hundreds of people to the neighborhood, leaders are shifting the event to an at-home experience.

"There are ways we can get together while we are apart," said Benjamin Nicholls, executive director of the association.

Nicholls plans to have people purchase to-go boxes with samples from various restaurants and then watch videos of chefs speaking about their food, as they would have on an in-person tour.

The "at-home edition" tour will patronize the restaurants and keep residents engaged with the commercial district of Hillcrest, he said.

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