

Inman Handbook: Building teams in turbulent times

Teams have exploded in popularity in recent years. Now, agents say the pandemic-induced chaos in the economy has only made them more important

Randy Fath and Unsplash
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July 6th, 1:00 A.M.

When the [coronavirus pandemic](#) swept the U.S. in March, millions of Americans suddenly faced a profound level of isolation. Real estate professionals were no exception, and many hunkered down in their homes, communicating with clients and colleagues purely via [Zoom](#) video conferences.

Superficially at least, it may consequently seem like the era of COVID-19 is the antithesis of the modern real estate age — which has seen unprecedented levels of collaboration and, in particular, the [explosion in popularity of teams](#). But in fact, agents who spoke to Inman recently said collaboration is only getting more important. Coronavirus may have changed a lot of things, in other words, but the importance of teams is not one of them.

To get a better sense of how agents are using teams right now, and how would-be leaders might build groups that can make them even more successful, Inman recently spoke to more than half a dozen industry professionals. Here's what they had to say:

Teams in the time of coronavirus

Teams have proliferated in recent years, but the origins of their current popularity go back decades. As Inman [has previously reported](#), a pivotal moment in the rise of teams happened all the way back in the 1970s when RE/MAX began charging agents a desk fee rather than a commission split.

Later in the 1990s, RE/MAX started encouraging agents to hire assistants, effectively urging industry professionals to create their own teams. Keller Williams also helped pioneer the team concept beginning in the 1990s.

Russ Cofano

However, Russ Cofano — the former president and general counsel of eXp Realty [who recently started his own team](#) — has told Inman that the rise of online lead generation in more recent years really jump-started the modern team era.

“Many teams are fueled by online [lead gen](#), and those things really kicked things into gear in 2012, 2013 and 2014,” Cofano said late last year.

So what does this have to do with the present moment, which is dominated by the coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout?

For starters, none of the agents who spoke to Inman for this story said that the pandemic has lessened the appetite within the industry for a team experience.

For instance Renee Funk, who with her husband runs a 17-person [eXp Realty](#) team in the Orlando area, told Inman that interest in teams seems to be holding steady through the current crisis. “We have not seen any shifts as it’s related to team building culture,” she said.

And Jeremy Stein, a Sotheby’s International Realty agent who with his wife runs a six-person team in New York City, told Inman that in fact the pandemic may actually be making teams more valuable. There are a few reasons that may be the case.



Robin and Jeremy Stein run the Stein Team in New York.

For starters, Stein said even if sales have slowed down in New York during the current crisis, he has been busier than ever helping clients understand what’s happening.

And his team, he explained, has allowed him to keep up. “There’s absolutely no way we would be able to keep our heads above water if it weren’t for the fact that we have three other people helping us,” he said. “I know a lot of sort of solo flyers definitely are recognizing that the team structure in a situation like this can be really helpful.”

While each market is different, agents have in recent weeks [almost universally reported being unusually busy](#), suggesting that Stein's point about distributing workloads likely holds true across numerous markets.

Stein also said having a team right now allows agents to balance risk. Some industry members, for example, may be especially susceptible to the virus and thus uncomfortable going into strangers' homes or physically interacting with clients during the pandemic. But if those agents have multiple team members, no one person has to step into every type of situation.

"If agents don't have people on their team who are a little more comfortable with the concept of going into people's homes, they need somebody to help them out," Stein added.

Additional resources

- [How to lead your team through recovery](#)
- [What team leaders can do to promote wellness and self-care](#)
- [How can your team thrive through uncertainty? Focus on this equation](#)
- [How to lead your team through turbulent times](#)
- [How to adapt your real estate team to this new reality](#)
- [16 soft prospecting ideas for your team](#)

Recruiting the right people

Given the growing importance of collaboration, particularly at this moment of upheaval, it's no surprise that the leaders who spoke with Inman described being extremely meticulous when it comes to finding and adding people to their teams.

Michelle Pais

[Michelle Pais](#), for example, runs a team with eight agents and eight support staffers out of the brokerage she owns with her husband in New Jersey. And when asked how she recruits people for the team, she said she doesn't.

"I am not a fan of recruiting," Pais explained. "I do not recruit. I'm not out there looking for talent."

The comment may seem counterintuitive in an industry obsessed with numbers and growth, but Pais said she prefers to expand organically with people she gets to know over a longer period of time. That way, she gets to see people in action and both she and they can get a sense if the team is the right fit.

"I'm very specific on who I hire," she said. "They have to be full-time, have an incredible work ethic, be honest and ethical and be a team player. The culture has to be right."

Pais added that her strategy is paying off.

"We were just ranked by Real Trends the number one team in New Jersey," she said. "You don't have to have 50 people on your team to generate sales volume. It kind of goes to show you that more or bigger isn't necessarily better. You can have a Navy Seal team like ours."

Other agents recounted similar experiences of growing their teams slowly and looking for the right cultural fit. Among them is Dan Beer, who leads a 30-person eXp Realty team in the San Diego area and said that the most important component of finding people is first finding a team identity.

Dan Beer

“You can’t find the right people until you understand who you are,” he told Inman.

In Beer’s case, he said his team has moved away from technology and online vetting tools when it comes to recruiting. Instead — and much like Pais — he looks for people who fit the team culture.

“We’re looking for people who fit our values system and who are curious, intelligent sales people who are going to dive 100 percent head first into this,” he said. “We’re not great for part-timers. We’re not great for hobbyists.”

The point is twofold: First, according to everyone who spoke with Inman, there isn’t a simple checklist or magic tool for finding the right people. Instead, there’s some serendipity and elbow grease involved. And second, it takes time to recruit good team members — though the leaders Inman contacted said that process is ultimately worth it.

Many also advised would-be team leaders not to rush. For example, husband-and-wife duo James Hardy and Amanda Adedapo run the Dapo Group, a team with Keller Williams in Maryland. They just hired a third person to join the team and fill a support role, but they took their time vetting the person they eventually hired.

“We took our person through almost a five to six week process,” Adedapo told Inman.

Useful tools

- [IdealEstate](#) began as a Pinterest inspired app, but this spring [pivoted into recruiting](#).

Additional resources

- [9 clever ways brokers can recruit and retain teams](#)
- [10 recruiting questions team leaders should ask](#)
- [Smart recruiting vs ‘headcount’ recruiting](#)

Mentoring agents and team members

When Adedapo and Hardy began looking for someone to join their team, they were thinking about the things they wanted their eventual hire to do. In their case, that meant various administrative and support roles that would help them focus on things like their sales and clients.

Amanda Adedapo and James Hardy of the Dapo Group

But as they began searching for the right person, another objective rose to the fore: They also had to consider what their eventual employee wanted to become.

“One of the biggest things we learned from this is we’re not hiring them for the position they’re coming into,” Hardy told Inman. “We’re hiring them for the position they’ll grow into.”

Hardy’s realization highlights the importance that mentoring plays in the team building process. Though many agents start adding people

to their teams in an effort to do more business, many also told Inman that they end up wearing multiple hats as coaches and career advisors.

Pais is among those leaders who became a mentor.

“For the most part, when I hired my team I had asked everybody, ‘What are your expectations and goals?’” she said.

Pais went on to say that as a mentor she makes herself available to answer questions or help her agents 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And when agents do have specific goals regarding income or volume, for example, Pais sits down to “reverse engineer” how they can achieve them.

“Being able to call a coach directly and not have to wait is, in my opinion, amazing,” she added. “You have that support at any time of the day.”

Mentoring also involves a degree of hand-holding. Stein said that would-be team leaders should be realistic about the fact that overseeing a group will take up time. But, he added, it’s important to model for team members how to be successful.

“It can be very time consuming and you have to understand that as a team leader you can’t just throw your new agents out there and have them run wild,” he said. “You have to make sure they’re initially watching you and seeing how you do things.”

Beer agreed that the process can mark a shift in priorities for some real estate professionals.

“If you’re going to start a team get ready to make far greater investments in others than you would in yourself,” he said. “Get ready to get obsessed with leadership and organizational structure.”

Additional resources

- [How to keep your team motivated while working from home this summer](#)
- [Searching for a mentor? Look for these 11 qualities](#)
- [So you want to be a mentor? Read this first](#)
- [What team leaders can do to promote wellness and self-care](#)
- [6 ways teams can adapt to a socially distanced real estate world](#)

Building a brand and a culture

Even through the pandemic, Funk, the leader in the Orlando area, has continued meeting with her team.

“We’re really with our team a lot,” she explained. “We meet five days a week with our team. We have individual meetings as well as collective meetings. We sit down in a room remotely and say, ‘Bring any of your business contacts to the front of the room.’”

These meetings have managed to continue through the chaos of the last few months thanks to the fact that Funk can take advantage of [eXp’s](#) virtual world. But either way, the get-togethers are an important part of creating a cohesive culture within her team — which she compared to a “family.”

“Collaboration is just very high up there,” she added. “It’s one of our core values.”

Values and culture matter. When asked about recruiting, or hiring, or expanding, again and again the leaders who spoke with Inman went back to their teams' respective cultures. More than any particular piece of technology or list of best practices, they all argued, the most important part of assembling a successful team is getting everyone to function as a unit. And during the recent economic tumult, that's even more true and more difficult.

Still, though, there are plenty of ways to make it happen.

In Funk's case, in addition to meeting often and emphasizing collaboration, the team also holds community events. She said for example that her team sponsors the Orlando Magic, and at one gathering had one of the basketball players there to meet clients.

Those types of gatherings may have become more difficult to pull off more recently during the virus outbreak, but Funk responded by going online; she and her team members recently did a push to write reviews for all the companies they use, and she encourages "agents to do Facebook Live and social media" events.

These efforts have a couple of payoffs. For starters, they bring agents together in ways that go beyond sales meetings. In other words, they build the team's culture.

But equally important is the way these activities help the team convey that culture to the outside world. Put another way, it's marketing.

"We're doing events, we're coaching agents, in what it means to be the mayor of their town," Funk said.

Funk also said it's important that real estate professionals consider how their culture and brand might work over time if they decide to grow.

“You have to have a brand that will work for years to come as well as give you flexibility for your growth and scale for a long time,” she advised. “Does your brand make sense if you wish to grow outside of your current market? Can you take that brand and have it available on every platform?”

Beer similarly argued that leaders should consider the prospect of changes to their brand and culture — which can be a good thing.

“It's not wrong,” Beer added. “A lot of people think they're set in stone forever. They're not.”

Useful tools

- Video conferencing for meeting remotely with team members: [Zoom](#), [UberConference](#), [Google Hangouts/Meet](#)
- Data and media presentation: [MoxiPresent](#)

Additional resources

- [How to host a property tour on social media as a team](#)
- [3 tips for taking care of business virtually as a team](#)
- [How to build a loyal, motivated team](#)
- [Practicing real estate from a distance? 5 virtual meeting platforms you need to know](#)
- [The secret to building an effective and profitable team](#)
- [Should we adjust our ad spend? Team advertising strategies to consider now](#)
- [6 hidden Zoom features that'll boost your video skills](#)

Balancing sales and support staff

There are plenty of abstract ideas like “culture” that go into building a successful team, but one of the more concrete and practical considerations is figuring out how to balance the number of agents who focus on sales with support staffers.

How different teams strike that balance will vary, but Pais recommended would-be leaders hire support staff, not agents, first.

“Your first hire should be an admin,” she said, “and your second should be a marketing assistant.”

In her case, she now has a 50-50 split between agents and support staff, the latter of whom do things like search engine optimization, marketing, video and social media, among other things. And she added that the “back end is so important.”

Beer also has a roughly 50-50 split between agents and administrators, but he explained that he grows the team based on transactions.

“We discovered we need another support staffer for every 30 properties that are simultaneously under contract,” Beer said.

Beer went on to note that leaders will have to figure out how to balance staffers’ salaries with commission splits; as support staff members take on more of the work load, he pointed out, the splits can change to reflect the services and assistance agents are getting.

Either way though, Stein said the most important thing to keep in mind is if an agent's clients are being taken care of, and if adding more people will realistically add value to the company.

“If you're not producing more, you're not selling more real estate but you have more people on your team,” he said, “then you have to question if that's worth it.”