

**Stop pushing information out.  
Start calling voices in.**

DR. FIONA JAMISON  
CEO, Spring International

# Distributed work as **our new reality**

**Dr. Fiona Jamison speaks to Dr. Julie Williamson on engaging people in our new distributed work environment, and shares the importance of showing up as an available and connected leader.**

People in all industries are challenged right now to learn new ways of working, to revisit past assumptions of what it means to be “at work”, and to balance home and work to a level most have never even imagined. In this *C-Suite Leadership Series* we talk with leaders and ask them to share their perspectives on leading in times of crisis, especially in a distributed environment.

*This transcript has been heavily edited for length and clarity while maintaining the spirit of the discussion.*

## **Flexibility, transparency, and getting on with things while managing disruption**

### **JULIE WILLIAMSON, Ph.D.**

Hello and welcome. I am Julie Williamson, the Chief Growth Enabler with Karrikins Group. As a part of our *C-Suite Leadership Series*, we're pleased today to be joined by Dr. Fiona Jamison. She's the CEO of Spring International, a women-owned research, analytics, and consulting firm based in Philadelphia.

She's a speaker and a thought leader in the area of employee engagement and people analytics and she leads a team of consultants who provide guidance to organizations across the United States and internationally on building better workplaces, enhancing the employee experience, and improving business performance.

Today she's going to share with us a perspective of being a small business owner as well as a service provider to medium and large organizations across a variety of industries.

I'd like to open, Fiona, by asking, how are you doing? What is top of mind for you right now as we push through this incredibly disruptive time, both in our economy and our lives?

### **FIONA JAMISON, Ph.D.**

**I think within my own organization what's top of mind is the health of my employees and making sure that they're all coping and managing okay with the stress levels in this new environment that they're dealing with.**

## **CEOs are the thermometer for the emotions of employees.**

That's taken front and center for so many organizations – I'm sure in your business you are seeing clients struggling with that every day since you are really focused on employee engagement. How do you as a leader try to project a sense of calm and a sense of optimism when things are so turbulent?

**Well, how we project it to our employees is that I think of myself as a CEO, as a thermometer for the emotions of the employees I lead. Whatever emotion I'm experiencing, I project that, therefore they're going to react to that emotion, and they're going to amplify it. The more calm and positive I am, the more calm and positive they will be.**

**I'm a believer in true transparency and being clear about what's happening and explaining it to my employees, and I encourage every leader just to remember that you really are the thermometer. Your employees look to you whether you want it or not as to how they should be responding to this.**

Absolutely. We really believe that leadership is infectious. It spreads. Are there any personal practices you are using right

now to remain focused and effective?

**You know, I'm a mom with two kids so I'm having to work from home. For us as a family it's really about making sure I have a schedule, that the kids are on the schedule, making sure we make time for each other. It is really easy to get lost online and sucked into things, and realize the time has gone and you haven't looked up for hours.**

**We have a rule in our house that you have to take mental breaks, get outside, take that hour for a walk. It is important for me to find that quiet space for my own thoughts just to de-stress and breathe. Making sure that I have that time but also everybody else in the household has that ability too.**

I love that because now that our lives and our work are so entwined, there's this whole rebalancing that we are seeing. I'm wondering if you are seeing ways this experience with COVID and the whole stay-at-home environment will change the way we do business more permanently?

**Absolutely. I think most organizations are going to have to change as a function of this. I think the new reality for them will be more flexible policies, having to address their HR practices and policies allowing for more flexible schedules. Especially if schools continue to be closed beyond when businesses reopen. The reality is for many parents if they don't have child care they're going to have to coordinate their time to fit work where it fits.**

It seems businesses really need to reassess some of the bigger policies like working from home. I'm sure from an employee

perspective, this has proven that people can work from home, and there's going to be some resistance to going back into the office. Do you anticipate that happening with some of your clients?

**Yes. We have a range of clients who are having different experiences with remote working, some who were very anti-remote work beforehand and are now faced with having to do it. We see them struggling with this HR and technology disruption they've never faced before. They didn't have the IT in place. When employees come back many of them will have new demands. I think they'll say, "I was just as productive at home as I was in the workplace." What's interesting to me is that a lot of companies are going to have to start thinking about how do you manage performance? How do you manage development remotely?**

**The new reality requires ongoing flexibility in policies and schedules – there is no going back.**

**We have remote workers ourselves at Spring International and one of our concerns was how to make sure they continue to feel engaged on a social level and that they have the same career and skill development opportunities that somebody in the office does. You aren't seeing them operate day to day, like when someone's in the room and being extra helpful. You aren't seeing them necessarily go the extra mile unless**

**you have a good way of monitoring and checking that performance. That was a problem before; it is going to be a problem again, even if just half the workforce comes back to the office.**

Right. I think that's such an interesting point that you miss all the little signals, all of the little notes to yourself about how people are interacting, working, and accomplishing. It leads me to a question around alignment to your strategy, because a lot of times we see that in those very subtle indicators. How do you align your team in a newly configured environment?

**Aligning employees to a strategy in this new situation is very hard. I think that for us at least we have gone to much more frequent meetings. We have an all hands every Monday where there's the company update, the employee update, and then there's "Here's where we are in our strategy. Here's what I need you to do." Even as the CEO in those meetings it is critical for me to see those faces engaged, listening, taking notes, even on camera, because then I'm able to see that my messages are getting through as a leader. There are other cues I'm having to pick up on now. Who's highly active on Teams or whatever platform you are using? Who is responding to questions? You have to seek out those more muted activities to make sure employees are really still tracking with where you are going.**

Do you see for yourself or maybe with some of your clients some really deeply embedded biases and assumptions about remote work that are starting to change?

**I see more flexibility; I see more openness to dialog. I see**

**leaders wanting to be more visible and becoming more visible. I think right now there is a huge hunger among employees to hear from top leaders – the decision makers. The focus has shifted from my *manager* to my *leader*, the person at the top. Those leaders I'm seeing very much pushing information out, a communication cascade causing almost communication overload.**

**What I see missing is them stopping and being a listening post. What are they not asking? It's very much one way right now. As people move from crisis management to survival and growth, they're going to have to stop pushing information and start calling information in. I think that will be the shift we see over time.**

It's a very noisy world right now. People are getting bombarded with messages all the time. They do need that sense of presence even more than they need yet another email. What about for you personally? Has anything changed?

**What's changed for me personally through this crisis is that I've actually become more connected to my remote employees. As a function of this I'm seeing them every week and checking in with them. I think that's actually made the relationship stronger with employees who were already remote – they've said, "Yeah, welcome to my world." I think it's recognition that they've been dealing with this all along and it's about time everyone else caught up.**

**For me personally, I've had to get used to being on camera and a much more visible leader because my employees and clients can't just stop in my office. So I have to make sure I'm available**

for Zoom or however they want to reach me, and making sure I'm checking in too. Even if it's, "Wow, what a crazy time. How are you doing?" Not asking anything of them, just making sure they know I'm there to listen, to be a partner with them in this.

Any tips or suggestions for leaders who are really trying to level up how they are engaging in this new virtual environment?

Yeah. You know, I have a couple of tips for leaders who are dealing with this.

1. **Remember you are that temperature gauge. Whatever you are projecting your employees are going to amplify, so if you come across as anxious or high stress they are going to feed off that energy. Even if you have to scream in a pillow before you get on camera, have that calm moment for yourself because they need to hear you as calm and collected.**
2. **Set up some listening posts, and make sure you are providing two way communication opportunities. If you have an internal blog, make sure employees can comment on it. Create an inbox where employees can post questions. Do a poll survey. You might not want to do a full employee engagement survey right now, but that doesn't mean you should stop talking to them. Send them three questions – How are you coping? Do you have the resources you need? What suggestions do you have?**
3. **Revisit your scenario planning. We are thinking about the best case / worst case scenarios – we want to plan now from a financial perspective as well as from human capital**

and services / products perspectives for our clients. What should we be doing differently tomorrow that we're not doing today? We are looking 3, 6, 9 months out so we have a strategy in place irrespective of what happens that's out of our control. We know what we can control. The more we think about that now, the faster we can pivot as an organization going forward.

**Level up your engagement in this new virtual environment.**

I'm also relying on both my internal team and some external advisors – other CEOs, experts, CPAs, people who are trusted peers who can help with that. I think now is the time to ask for that help, that support, and to think through what could happen so the organization is prepared for whatever comes.

Fiona, thank you so much for taking the time to do this. You've given us some really great insights. I love the idea of being a listening post, and I think there's such appreciation for what you said about the intersection of home and work. We're all trying to figure out how to manage new intersections in our lives and our work. These are all coming together in interesting ways – people are still going to want to have that kind of flexibility, and some organizations are a little further behind. You've given us some great insights around how leaders can step up and into this new reality.



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**JULIE WILLIAMSON, Ph.D.**

Partner and Chief Growth Enabler  
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Julie is a growth-minded leader who believes executives set the standard for others through the example they provide. She is a strategist, technologist, and a social scientist who puts her energy toward working with leaders around the world as they tackle some of the biggest challenges in their industries and organizations. In today's increasingly complex and interconnected world, Julie knows the power of aligned leaders to deliver on strategy and create value. That's why she focuses her time and energy on helping senior leaders come together to deliver the work that matters most.

**We are Karrikins.** We're strategists, world-class facilitators, consultants, coaches, cultural changemakers, behavioral scientists, and experience creators, but above all, we're people looking to make a lasting and positive impact. We help organizations outperform the limitations of strategy, structure, capital allocation, and market conditions.

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