



Managing COVID-19 return-to-work fear

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Much of what goes into being a good leader is unwritten—it's in the actions that are exhibited day in and day out, and is not simply due to a job title. The following ten suggestions are aimed specifically at managing employee fear and anxiety related to COVID-19, but the principles behind the tips will work in nearly any scenario. Good managers get the best out of their employees by supporting them well, especially during times of disruption.

1. Make a plan

You have probably already developed a physical safety plan for return to work related to COVID-19, and this plan is equally as important when it comes to managing employee fear. It should include clear and actionable steps that address safety concerns completely. Ambiguities are likely to lead to increased fear. This plan is not only about employee safety and mental sense of wellbeing, but the safety and wellbeing of their loved ones as well.

After the plan is created, have it reviewed by a few people who were not involved in its creation. They should pay particular attention to how the plan may address employee anxiety and fear as they return to the worksite. Solicit feedback and make changes as needed. A plan without some form of vetting is more likely to have holes that are going to leave your employees feeling unsupported.

2. Talk with other leaders

As a manager, none of us are experts on how to manage a pandemic situation. How could we be? The last pandemic was in 1918. However, collaboration with your colleagues is likely to generate new ideas and effective solutions for your employees. Sharing of information deepens the collective knowledge pool.

In doing so, consider consulting colleagues in differing industries or departments. Some managers have had to deal with more disruptive events in the workplace and managing employee anxiety as a result. If nothing else, consulting with peers allows for mutual support during this complex time.

It may also be beneficial to receive leadership coaching or other senior-level management guidance. While you may have significant experience managing employees, you may not have experience managing in such a unique and difficult situation. Executive coaching is built on the idea that even the best leaders need guidance. And there is no playbook to follow on how to manage during a pandemic. In the same vein, solicit feedback from others on how you are doing. This type of peer feedback can be invaluable in making adjustments to your style and making you a more effective leader. In essence, use all the resources at your disposal.

Lastly, do not hesitate to get your own behavioral health support. The current pandemic has impacted us all, managers and employees alike. Given the unique pressures you might have at this time, this could be the optimal time to get some additional support. The healthier you are as a person, the better you will be as a leader.

3. Consider individual circumstances

Take employees' individual situations into account when developing return-to-work planning. For example, if you know 25% of your workforce has young children with no daycare options, this needs to be considered. Provide creative options to help them with their family situation while transitioning back to the work site. Doing this shows that you are considerate of their individual needs.

4. Allow for individual differences regarding fear and anxiety

In response to COVID-19, there will be individual differences between your employees, and these should be accounted for in return to work planning. Employee levels of fear regarding the virus and its impacts will also not be the same. You will have some employees with low levels of anxiety and fear; many employees who have some anxiety and fear; and some employees who have significant anxiety and fear. To the extent possible, return-to-work planning should take into account individual differences. This not only shows support for employees as individuals, but will allow employees to perform more optimally (by taking away a significant source of distraction).

For example, if you have one employee who has no qualms about coming back into the office with appropriate safety equipment and distancing, there is nothing to be concerned about. However, say you have another employee who has an underlying health condition, young children, and elderly parents. This person would likely be best served continuing to work remotely, if possible, as they are more likely to be productive in a setting that does not trigger anxiety.

There will be instances where options for employees are limited (work from home, for example, may not be reasonable). In such an instance, consider asking that employee what additional steps could be put in place that would help them feel safer at work. In some cases, relatively small measures can have a significant impact on their fear.

5. Prepare to manage increased anxiety and fear as return to work begins

Every employee, just like every manager, is going to have some level of fear upon re-entering the workplace. This is to be expected and is entirely normal. Despite best efforts to ensure social distancing and the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE), the highly transmissible nature of the virus is going to leave everyone on edge, to some extent. Even if it is safe, it may not *seem* safe.

First, acknowledge this sense of uncertainty in communications. For example: *We will be returning to the office environment and this may be a somewhat uncomfortable scenario for many of us for a while...even though we have done...* Second, put things in place to help employees to manage this fear. This could be something as simple as allowing for shorter and more frequent breaks, or modifying schedules so there are fewer people in a particular area at a given time. If you are not sure what might be helpful for your employees in managing anxiety, ask.

Do not be surprised if there is a decrease in productivity initially, as people reacclimate to the much different work environment. Again, this decrease can be mitigated by proactively helping people manage their anxiety over being back in the office.

Remember, employees will eventually become more comfortable and less anxious in the work environment (assuming no significant change in the pandemic). Anxiety tends to be initially quite high but as exposure to the anxiety provoking situation continues, the distress decreases.

6. Ramp up with reasonable expectations

As employees return to the work site, it is important to remember all that has changed since they left. It is not reasonable to expect employees, mentally, to hit the ground running on day one. Expecting this will likely lead to decreased productivity and increased anxiety. Therefore, have a plan to ramp up expectations, allowing time to reacclimate to the work environment.

The ramp-up plan need not be overly complex or lengthy but should balance supporting your employees' health and getting business needs met. The greatest period of anxiety is likely to be at the outset and over time the anxiety is likely to lessen.

A simple ramp-up plan may include elements like these:

- Employees will begin by coming into the office two days per week for one week, adding one day for each of the remaining weeks, until they are in the office full time.
- Employees will work in the office half of the day and at home and half of the day. Additional guidelines might include designating employees to be in the office either in the morning or the afternoon to ensure the office is only half full at any given time.
- Tasks that involve close personal contact will be limited for the first two weeks as employees get reacclimated.

7. Communicate openly and often

Communication is the most important tool available to support employees in uncertain times. An absence of communication and information can create a sense of increased fear and uncertainty. When there's a lack of leadership communication, employees are left to fill in the blanks. There is a saying that "fear loves a vacuum." In the absence of data, the human mind will create its own reality and, most often, that reality skews to the most negative possibility. An absence of communication also tends to reflect the sense that leadership does not care or does not have a clear plan. Both of these are going to have a negative impact on employees' outlook, performance, and dedication.

Communicate often. Daily may be appropriate in some work environments. Regardless of the work environment, communicate no less than once per week. This communication should address any changes to the work environment or changes to safety protocols. It should also take time to address employees on a personal level, acknowledging that these continue to be tough times that have changed so much in our day-to-day lives. The pandemic has affected everyone personally. Recognition of this, at some level, needs to happen.

Do not communicate solely in writing. Make sure to also communicate verbally in a setting where employees can see you, and vice versa. Ideally, this should include an opportunity for attendees to provide feedback or ask questions. Employees should, at the conclusion, feel informed, valued, and that their safety is a priority. Consider sharing some personal experiences. People are more likely to trust you as a leader if they can also see you as a person.

8. Understand what additional resources may be available

A subset of your employees will need additional help as they cope with personal and workplace stressors, and the general anxiety that comes along with the present pandemic situation. Have a good understanding of what resources are available to your employees. More importantly, encourage your employees to seek additional help, with an understanding that many people are struggling at the present time. Resources such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) are in place for situations like this and should be utilized by all that could benefit.

Resources that are not typically available to your employees may be available at the present time. Know what these resources are, try and understand how they work, and encourage employees to utilize such services if they are needed.

In sharing information about resources like EAPs, keep in mind that an email or memo can easily be overlooked, so use other methods as well.

9. Show appreciation

It is important to show appreciation to your employees. Your employees, by returning to the work environment, are risking exposure to an illness that they have, thus far, isolated from. Returning to work for some comes with the fear of exposing their family to the virus. Even the smallest of tasks, like touching things and talking to people, carries a significant potential health risk. There may also have been other significant changes, such as layoffs, decreased pay, or increased workload. This is not a normal day back at work and showing that you understand and appreciate their efforts will make a difference.

Build in ways to express appreciation to employees as they return to work, and on an ongoing basis.

10. Be prepared for change

It is highly unlikely that return to work will be a smooth and linear process. Return to work will be greatly dependent upon the virus status, which we know has not been smooth and linear. Changes in the status of the pandemic will change what happens in the work environment.

It is important to communicate this clearly to your employees and for them to understand that you have a plan. For example, should a shelter-in-place order be reinstated, how that will be addressed. Or should an outbreak occur within your office, how that will be managed. These are physical and logistical issues, but have significant impacts on the emotional state of your employees.

A lack of clear planning will lead to increased employee anxiety at any stage. Communicating the plan to manage changes in the situation will help your employees to feel more supported. Uncertainty can lead to fear; so as much as you can address the uncertainty and changing circumstance, the more you are supporting your employees.

Conclusion

Nobody is going to be able to do all of the above, in every scenario. And these ten points are not going to encompass everything that needs to be done for your employees. However, managers that use these points as a guide will be better equipped to be the best managers they can be during this pandemic—and hopefully have happier and more productive employees in return.

This document is intended for general information only. It does not provide the reader with specific direction, advice, or recommendations. You may wish to contact an appropriate professional for questions concerning your particular situation.