Helping Your Team Transition Back to the Workplace

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After being at home for a long period of time, employees are starting to return to their workplaces. And after avoiding public spaces, sharing space with co-workers may feel scary. Different approaches to staying safe can add stress too. As a manager, you can help. Start by acknowledging how employees may be feeling. Then take steps to address their concerns.

Understanding Reactions to Returning to Work

For many, returning to work will bring up emotions and behaviours rooted in fear. When employees are afraid of getting sick, they have higher levels of stress and anxiety. They may even experience depression, fatigue or PTSD. At work, they may become easily irritated. This is especially true if they feel that co-workers' behaviour is risky. Moving to a new routine can make it difficult to focus, too. It may even lead to burnout.

Know that employees will have differing reactions and emotions. Some will feel eager to reconnect and get back to "normal" after being isolated for so long. Many will experience a mix of emotions. And some may be grieving a loss.

Communicating Safety Measures

The most important thing you can do is reassure your team. Talk clearly about COVID-19 safety precautions. Leadership's endorsement of these measures is critical in helping employees feel safe. Follow guidelines laid out by organisations such as the CDC, as well as and government and local regulations. Clearly communicate expectations, and be sure to lead by example.

As soon as plans to reopen your workplace are announced, ask your team for feedback. Remember that they are likely to have varying (or even conflicting) approaches to staying healthy. Some may wear face masks. Some may practise social distancing. And some might ask to stay at home for longer. Others may have no hesitations. Acknowledge your team's preferences and advocate for them. Do your best to accommodate requests. Help resolve conflicts. And create an environment where employees feel comfortable voicing their needs.

Addressing the Emotional Impact

In addition to addressing the team's safety, be sure to address the emotional impact of returning to work. Rather than an immediate return to "business as usual", think about a gradual adjustment. Invite employees to be open about their stress and grief at work. Try these tips as well:

- When addressing your full team, model behaviour. Speak calmly. Encourage empathy and collaboration.

- Keep a close eye on your team. Check in with each team member frequently, especially at the beginning.

- Listen for what's working well and what's not.

- Share emotional and mental health resources, such as the Employee Assistance Programme.

- Consider creating private spaces for those who are grieving a loss or dealing with emotional health issues.

- Encourage team members to take mindfulness breaks. It's a good way check in with their own emotions throughout the day.

In the midst of a difficult transition, you can make the experience easier for your team. Be empathetic, thoughtful and open-minded. And always listen carefully.