

7 Tips for Bringing Employees Back to Work

From a loss of income to the loss of a loved one, the COVID-19 pandemic is taking a serious toll on everyone, from the front line of workers to the C-level. Feeling anxious, confused, overwhelmed or powerless is reasonable. Millions of people are experiencing changes in sleep and eating patterns, difficulty concentrating and the exasperation of mental health problems.

Back in March, many of us were sent home to do our jobs remotely. We know that this pandemic will end. At some point, both employees and organizations will try to find something in their work situations that seems normal again.

But expecting the stress to just blow over after the shelter-in-place orders are lifted may place your employees and business in harm's way again. All eyes will be on employers as we transition. Leaders have the greatest opportunity to screw up their greatest opportunity.

Here are 7 actions you should take to ease the transition:

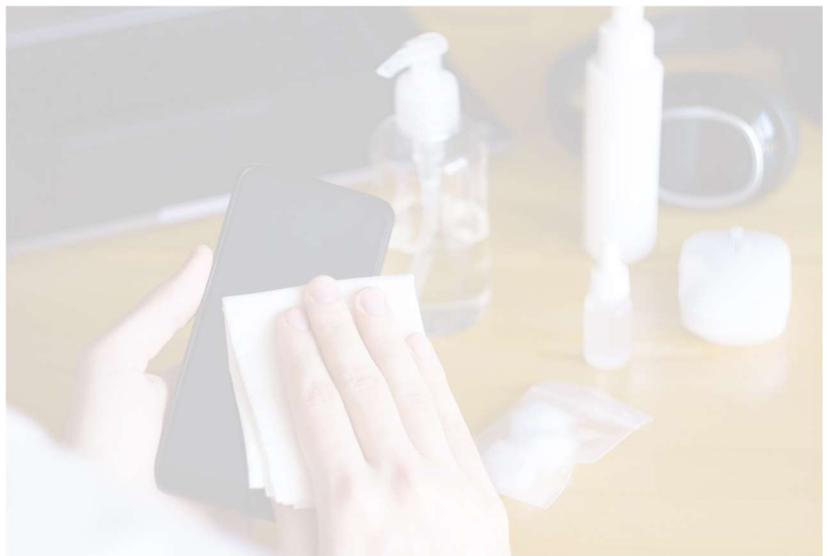
1. **Upskill Leaders.** Many leaders entered this moment unprepared and few are ready for what's next. Some managers were elevated into their roles based on their technical abilities or tenure. This isn't the time to have them make it up as they go. Further, front-line supervisors, in particular, directly manage 80% of the workforce and very possibly lack the soft skills needed to help their teams navigate the uncertain future. They need to be equipped with the proper tools.

Enroll your front-line supervisors in online learning courses on coaching, active listening, communication, leadership and stress management. Grow their emotional intelligence and team-building skills. Empathy, trust and compassionate communication are essential now.

2. **Assess Employee Needs.** As they begin to think about bringing employees back to work, organizations should emphasize listening channels such as surveys, focus groups, town halls or open calls. Having a two-way dialog between employers and employees is important to staying ahead of new concerns and how to stay healthy at work. Keep in mind how well employers respond will impact their brands for years.

3. **Ensure the Safety of the Workplace.** Now is the time to think about the cleanliness of reception areas, workstations, collaboration areas, lunchrooms, fitness facilities, housekeeping and cleaning stations. Consistent with EEOC, OSHA and CDC guidelines, employers should limit the spread of infection by adopting policies and training employees on infection prevention:

- Adopt and enforce policies recommended by OSHA and CDC, including proper handwashing and respiratory etiquette. If available, provide hand sanitizer. At a minimum, make sure all restrooms are equipped with soap, water and a means for drying hands.



- Practice regular sanitizing of the work environment. Perform more extensive cleaning and provide disinfecting wipes, if available, for employees to sanitize surfaces as needed.
- Require social distancing among workers and between workers and third parties. Consider erecting physical barriers such as clear plastic sneeze guards, reconfiguring the workspace, increasing ventilation or installing high efficiency filters.
- Create staggered schedules using work shifts or alternating days of work to minimize contact; limit or discontinue use of lunchrooms or other gathering places.
- Cancel unnecessary travel and use video conferencing.
- Prohibit sharing of equipment such as phones, radios, keyboards and desk space.
- Limit public or customer access to the worksite or restrict access to specific areas, use drive-through windows or curb-side pickup, or use virtual communication strategies.

4. **Explore Legal Considerations.** As states lift stay at home orders, employers must comply with all orders for their business locations, as well as the orders applicable to the locations in which their workers reside. In other words, workers who remain in isolation in their locality will not be able to return to work in a different locality that has re-opened.

Furthermore, the EEOC and CDC recommend that employees infected with, symptomatic or exposed to COVID-19 be excluded from the workplace. Based on these recommendations, employers can adopt policies excluding these employees from the workplace until either they no longer have symptoms for the required quarantine period, or they have satisfied the CDC's discontinue isolation criteria.

Employers should also adopt related policies that:

- Designate reporting procedures if employees become ill or experience COVID-19 symptoms.
- Require separation of workers who become symptomatic at work, compile of a list of contacts and send the worker home.
- Adopt flexible sick leave policies.

5. **Gauge the Mental Health of Employees.** Nearly 40 percent of people say their company has not even asked them how they're doing since the pandemic began. But nearly three out five of people in a study said they are comfortable with their manager proactively asking them about their mental health. In fact, more than 40 percent of people said they *want* their managers to broach the subject.

Keep in mind that these check-ins should not be delegated to HR. Research shows that the, when people were asked to rank who they were willing to talk to about mental health concerns, peers and managers were the two groups with whom people were most willing to address mental health.

Companies should also be sending a regular employee pulse survey to understand how each team, department and the entire company are doing. This is not a moment to be reactive: Employers need to get ahead of trends and understand the sentiment of the workforce to act quickly.

6. **Communicate Thoroughly and Frequently.** HR should build communication programs that are welcoming to returning employees, as well as add policies that address:

- If and how the organization will conduct temperature checks, whether it's done directly, through a third party or by self-reporting.
- Cross-training the workforce to accommodate more employee absences.
- Social distancing in the workplace.

Lastly, make sure you are very clear about the mental health resources available to everyone at your company. Almost half of workers surveyed said their company has not proactively shared the mental health resources available to them. Just knowing that resources are there goes a long way to ease

anxiety and stress. People who say their company has proactively shared how to access mental health resources are 60 percent more likely to say that their company cares about their wellbeing.

7. **Demonstrate Leadership.** Good bosses should convey that they are sensitive to the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has on employees' lives and work. Emotional support techniques include:

- Providing comfort and monitoring for signs of struggle such as distress, social withdrawal and poor performance, and knowing when to refer an employee to professionals.
- Recognizing that some employees may have families and loved ones who are requiring additional attention, so openly asking employees how they are managing both work and nonwork.
- For those without others in the house during physical distancing ordinances, offering check-ins and encouraging them to virtually connect with colleagues, friends and family.
- Reinforcing that there is an open-door policy (a virtual one) for them to talk through issues when needed.
- Knowing about the most up-to-date wellness resources available. Remind people of these resources regularly in meetings and post information about wellness resources in virtual workspaces, employee websites and other shared spaces.
- Defining your own boundaries regarding work hours, response times and disclosure around family obligations. Then, projecting consistency in adhering to these boundaries.
- Using paid time off and sick leave when needed and encouraging your team to do the same.
- Supporting employees' work-life balance and reducing excess burden with flexible deadlines, prioritizing the most important tasks, removing irrelevant ones and discouraging newly remote employees from feeling like they need to be available constantly.

When communicating with staff during this time, it is critically important to lead with empathy, strive for flexibility and model ways to prioritize health and well-being.

We are in uncharted territory. A successful re-opening requires adapting previous ways of conducting business and approaches to employment issues. Assessing risks to employees and embracing new, flexible strategies that focus on the safety and health of the workplace and employees will be crucial.

