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Enhancing **People.** Improving Business.

The Ultimate HR Guide Workplace Transitions Post COVID-19

Transitioning from remote to office work, addressing the new conflicts in the workplace & everything in-between.

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Introduction

All workplaces are unique, and depending on the work we do, the COVID-19 pandemic affected us in various ways. Many workplaces have continued to work onsite throughout the pandemic and had to find ways to keep their operations running efficiently, while overhauling safety protocols to keep their employees healthy. Others have had to shift to remote work. This shift occurred suddenly and required businesses to adjust many policies and procedures to fit a whole different way of staying productive. Now, over a year in, cases of COVID-19 are steadily decreasing, and growing numbers of people are getting vaccinated. This has paved the way for more offices and worksites to reopen their doors.

Whether employees return to their workplaces full-time, on a hybrid schedule, or not at all depends on an array of factors, and planning for reopening during a still-unfolding pandemic is new and uncertain territory. The upheaval brought by the pandemic was due in part to the sweeping changes and adjustments that were required to do our jobs. Our efforts to figure out what returning to the workplace looks like means still more changes. These changes can be jarring for employees who have adapted and settled into a new routine over the past year, and now must do it again. There is a certain level of exhaustion that we all feel after a very tumultuous year, and these transitions, though welcomed by a few, can seem overwhelming for others.

One thing has become clear: *the mental health effects of the pandemic won't disappear quickly upon returning to the workplace. In fact, some may be exacerbated by the shifts and changes. As a result, businesses and their leaders will need to prioritize mental health, communicate effectively with their teams, and be ready to manage any arising conflict.*

Offering access to available resources, as well as communicating regularly with your team can make all the difference for workers in distress. The following guidance and insights can help leaders better respond to workers' needs during this transition and position your organization to emerge with a healthier, more resilient workforce.

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Transitioning from Remote to Office Work

When the pandemic became a clear threat to public health, many businesses had to abruptly shift to a remote work platform, so they could stay productive and viable. This shift was not without its challenges, and many workers initially struggled with this change. However, more than a year later, most employees have learned to adapt. They have also learned that there are some benefits to working from home, including eliminating the commute to the office, having the comforts of home at their fingertips, and the feeling of a more optimal work-life balance.

So how can leaders get their teams on board for the migration back to a more traditional office environment? Recent data shows that [nearly two-thirds of U.S. workers who have been working remotely during the pandemic would like to continue to do so.](#)

- **Set the right tone from the start**- Know that employees will have a wide variety of feelings associated with returning to the office. Offer empathy and gratitude. Approach return-to-work discussions with a compassionate tone to show that you understand the mix of emotions employees are likely feeling. Make yourself aware of your employees' unique circumstances and acknowledge the types of personal and professional challenges people are facing. Communicate any efforts the company is making to allow for flexibility. Let your team know how much their work is appreciated and valued.

- **Lead with empathy**- Focus on what you know about this person and the challenges they face that create concern about returning to work. Think about their circumstances and what resources they have to handle them. Consider that this person is likely trying to do their best.

  - Ask open-ended questions to show that you're curious and willing to learn more.

  - Reflect what they've shared by summarizing what you heard and asking if it's accurate. This shows that you're invested in understanding their point of view.

  - If you get frustrated with the person, consider some alternative explanations for why they're behaving in a way that bothers you. This can prevent you from taking the situation personally when it likely has more to do with factors unrelated to you.

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- **Communicate next steps and rationale-** Credible information is a powerful antidote to anxiety. Consistent communication can reduce some of the uncertainty employees may feel during this stressful time. Without concrete information, our minds naturally fill the gaps – often with imagined scenarios that exacerbate anxiety. If your company's plans are still in development, share regular updates to your team across multiple channels (emails, one-on-one or departmental meetings) to ensure that messages are highly visible and reinforced. In your communications, be sure to:

  o **Provide clear rationale for business decisions** about the return-to-work timeline, policies, and safety protocols. Employees are more likely to accept policy decisions when they understand the underlying process and considerations behind those decisions. Be sure to include any references and sources that helped inform your decisions.

  o **Offer reassurance from corporate leaders** regarding the steps the company is taking to ensure everyone's health and safety. Be empathetic and considerate in your tone. Signal that the company understands the high stakes involved and is proactively prioritizing employee health.

  o **Include specific guidelines on social distancing** in the workplace and necessary preventative measures to reduce health risks, such as mask-wearing. Concrete guidance for employees on how they can mitigate the risk of illness at work can boost their sense of control in the situation, which helps reduce worry and anxiety.

- **Highlight the Ulliance benefit in your discussions with** employees- With all the stressors your employees are experiencing right now, providing supportive benefits can make a big difference in their ability to effectively return to the workplace.

- **Contact your Ulliance Account Manager** if you'd like to consult on a difficult employee situation or learn how we can help facilitate a referral to the program.

"*Ulliance offers so many valuable EAP resources. We really value the Smart Manager Webinar Series, the Ulliance Account Managers are so knowledgeable and do such a great job hosting them. "HR Director*

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Overworked Employees: Finding Solutions for Managing Low Morale

The pandemic has led to historic disruptions and upended what work looks like for many employees. In addition, Leaders in some cases have had to redistribute both work responsibilities and workload due to layoffs and furloughs of some workers. Even as the effects of the pandemic have been lessening, many businesses are looking to hire once again – however, due to many factors, including the extended unemployment benefits, recruitment has been a challenge. As a result, existing team members are feeling more taxed than ever. Between juggling the demands of work, and those of their personal lives, it's common to see burnout, depression, and anxiety cause further disruption in productivity and other normal business operations.

As a Leader, it's important to address the many layers of stress for your team, and to assist in keeping the morale of your workforce as steady and strong as possible. An organization is more likely to endure, and even thrive, during a crisis if its leaders shift expectations and focus on supporting the well-being of employees. Leaders will not always have all the answers, but there are simple ways to show what strong leadership looks like in uncertain times.

Acknowledge the Elephant in the Room

With all the recent changes, many workers report feeling less motivated, and increasingly more frustrated. Clear and empathetic communication can go a long way to help employees manage their anxiety. Leaders will need to acknowledge the challenges people are dealing with and make space for them to talk about how they're doing. Provide employees an outlet to name their emotions. While leaders may not have all the answers, it's important to let people know what you're doing to help minimize the burden and when you may expect to see positive changes. It's okay to allow yourself the same grace you're offering your team. You can still model professionalism while being candid about how the recent changes have been challenging for you.

Communicate Consistently

Ongoing and consistent communication will help dial back anxiety and provide some much-needed predictability for your employees. Be transparent about your efforts on recruitment, for example, and provide any updates on progress. This helps your team know that the issue is important, and efforts are being made to promote progress. The future may not be predictable, but leaders can help their team anticipate what's ahead more effectively, which offers a greater sense of control.

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Overworked Employees: Finding Solutions for Managing Low Morale

Small Changes, Big Impact

As a Leader, your job is to execute company-wide goals. With more limited resources, it's tempting to push your team harder. However, an overworked team will quickly decompensate. Smart Leaders will put their workers first by thinking outside the box to help minimize the stress. Small changes can often have a big impact. For example:

Assess the frequency of standard internal meetings. Are they truly necessary, or are they simply something that has always been done? Take inventory and make some short-term changes if appropriate. Instead of a weekly meeting, for example, perhaps a monthly meeting would suffice. Freeing up time for your team to manage their responsibilities can certainly help with increasing demands on work output.

- Re-frame language- Small adjustments in our language can alter the pressure your team feels. Instead of talking about deadlines, for example, talk about goals. This slight shift in language ("goal") can lessen the perceived pressure attached to a word ("deadline").

- Empower your team to schedule time for their work, encouraging mixing in any administrative or lower stress tasks to provide a balance throughout the day.

- When possible, allow flexible schedules and/or asynchronous communication- One of the best ways organizations can support employees with added family responsibilities or stress is by giving them more control over when they work. In a world dictated by calendars and schedules, people are conditioned to operate in synchronicity (when two or more parties try to be in the same place, either physically or virtually, at the same time). Asynchronous communication, on the other hand, gives team members the ability to work together, keeping a project moving forward without the need to be available at the same time. While certain collaborative efforts work better in synchronicity, not all projects require it. Some examples of incorporating this approach include:

  - Evaluate which team meetings can happen in writing instead.
  - Empower your team to decline meetings that aren't relevant to them.
  - Let your team know it's okay to disconnect from email or chat tools like Teams or Slack.
  - Set expectations for team response times in hours, not minutes.

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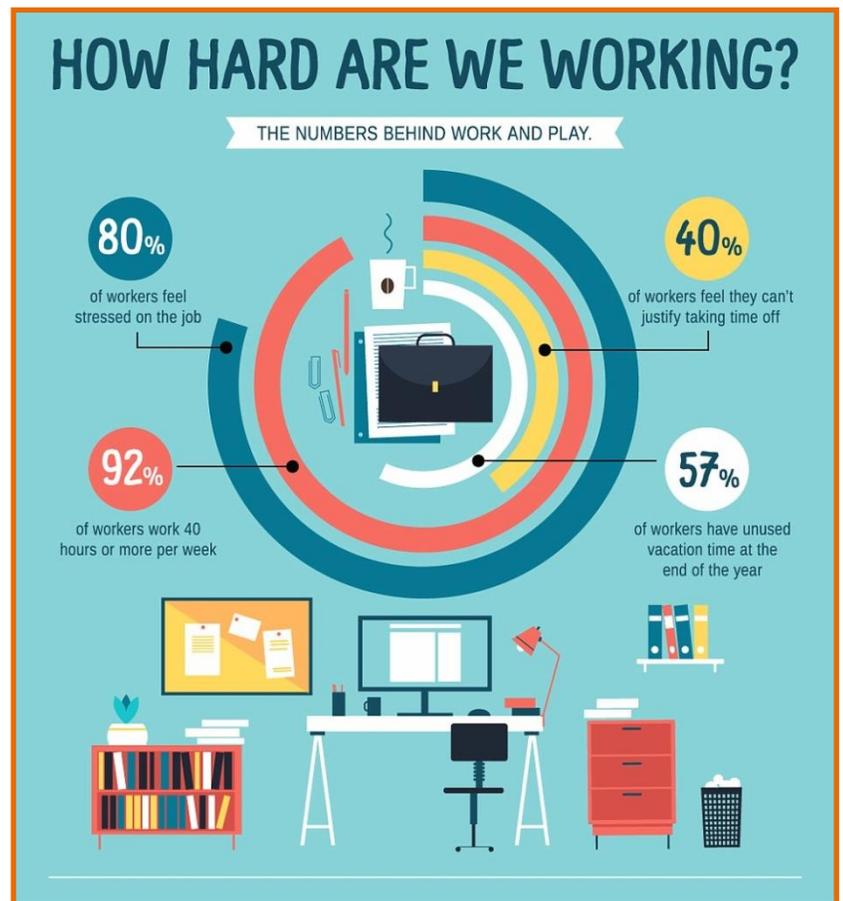
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Encourage Breaks and Time Off

A staff that is stressed may be hesitant to take a break or earned time off, for fear of falling behind. Nobody can pour from an empty cup, so encourage rest, relaxation, and time for family responsibilities when it's warranted.

Recognize Extra Efforts

Take the time to ensure your team feels valued and appreciated for their extra efforts. Recognition can come in many forms: from formal recognition programs to a simple email or handwritten note thanking them for their hard work, or a positive mention in a team meeting. Remember, your employees may not only be taking on more work, but they may also be performing tasks that are new to them, and not necessarily in their wheelhouse. Make sure you let them know you notice and appreciate the extra support.

HOW HARD ARE WE WORKING?
THE NUMBERS BEHIND WORK AND PLAY.

80% of workers feel stressed on the job

40% of workers feel they can't justify taking time off

92% of workers work 40 hours or more per week

57% of workers have unused vacation time at the end of the year

Encourage Input and Feedback

Conduct one-on-one meetings with your employees. Let your employees know that this is a safe place to voice concerns and offer productive solutions. During these meetings, encourage them to give their input and feedback. Take notes and let them know that you take them seriously. Often the best ideas come from your team.

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Supporting Your Team's
Emotional Health at Work & Beyond

Be on the lookout for signs of mental distress in your team- Data shows that the prevalence and severity of things like depression, anxiety, and substance use have surged since the spread of COVID-19 began, especially as a result of social distancing measures.

- **Keep the lines of communication open-** If your employee's typical behaviors have changed for more than a few days, this could be a sign of trouble ahead. For example, a normally outgoing personality type now seems withdrawn and quiet. If you notice changes, it's okay to talk privately and respectfully with your team member about the changes you've noticed, and ask them if they're okay, or if they need assistance. This conversation can take place both in-person and virtually.

- **Be proactive-** As leaders, it's important to make mental health a priority, not just when you suspect a problem. Talking about emotional health in a proactive way can ease the stigma that some feel when they're experiencing challenges. Make it a normal part of discussions in staff meetings and one-on-one discussions. It's critical that managers consider strategies that make employees more comfortable with speaking up if they're facing challenges. This can be accomplished in several ways:

  - o **Individually:** Check in casually with team members throughout the week about how they're doing, how they're managing their work, and what support you can offer. This demonstrates your care and concern, while providing opportunities for them to share unseen struggles.

  - o **For team meetings:** Consider designating the first 5 to 10 minutes for a "wellness check" by asking people to share how they are feeling and what they're doing to support themselves. You can start with something like, "What's something you've tried this week for self-care?"

- **Encourage employees to take time off-** After a year of cancelled vacations and, in many cases, longer hours at work, many employees need a break. Encourage employees to schedule time off and consider formulating policies in advance around how paid time off (PTO) requests can be managed to minimize disruption. For employers with a "use it or lose it" PTO policy, now is a good time to consider amending it to give workers who have accumulated lots of unused vacation days a chance to take PTO at their convenience.

- **Get additional guidance-** Your Ulliance Account Manager has a mental health background and can help you gain valuable insight about any concerns you have about an employee's emotional well-being. Your Account Manager can help you with appropriate next steps, including advice on talking with your employee, or making a referral to the Ulliance Life Advisor Employee Assistance Program.

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If You're Feeling the Strain: Leadership Burnout

Workplace transitions of any kind mean a period of readjustment for everyone. As you support your team members with this transition, chances are you're dealing with your own stress behind the scenes. Leaders are not immune to the cumulative effects of the pandemic that can erode patience and intensify emotions. An effective Leader typically focuses much of their energy on guiding others. But inspiring a team, building confidence, and creating positive change doesn't always come easy. For this reason, Leaders routinely place the needs of others before their own. When we consider that a strong constitution and an optimistic outlook are so important for successful leadership, it's not difficult to see the disconnect. The issue? You cannot give what you do not have. Pouring from an empty cup is not an option.

It's no surprise that those in Leadership roles are prone to feeling overwhelmed. Feeling stressed is a normal occurrence, but in the long-term it can foster a negative outlook, difficulty listening, over-analysis, problems with decision-making and emotional reactions. Left unchecked, these behaviors can lead you directly down the path to burnout. And when a Leader gets to the point of burnout, it not only affects their own performance, but it can easily hinder the morale and performance of team members.

Burnout has recently been recognized as an "occupational phenomenon." According to the World Health Organization (WHO), burnout is a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. **It is characterized by three dimensions:**

1. Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion

2. Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativity or cynicism related to one's job

3. Reduced professional efficacy

> *Burnout is a combination of the work we do and organizational stressors. It is different than stress in that **burnout is always linked to your job; stress is not.***

Stress and the brain: Stress is meant to be helpful – in the short-term. When we experience stress, neurotransmitters, such as epinephrine (otherwise known as adrenaline), are released in the brain. Your body also releases the hormone cortisol into your bloodstream. Often called the "stress hormone," cortisol causes an increase in your heart rate and blood pressure.

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These neurotransmitters and hormones are designed to stimulate the body, so it can respond to fear and creates that "fight, flight or freeze" response. In the short-term, this can lead to some helpful outcomes, such as an increased focus and reaction time. When the short-term stress has passed, the body ideally returns to its normal baseline state. But when stressors are chronically present, that "fight, flight or freeze" reaction stays turned on. The long-term activation of the stress-response and the overexposure to cortisol that follows can disrupt almost all the body's processes, and can lead to health concerns, such as anxiety, depression, digestive problems, headaches, heart disease, sleep disturbances, weight gain, memory and concentration impairment.

There Is a Solution: Stress will always be a part of the human experience. That doesn't mean it can't be effectively addressed and the solutions are easier than we may think.

The Power of Resiliency: Psychologists define resiliency as the process of adapting well in the face of trauma, tragedy, or everyday sources of stress, including family and relationship concerns, or workplace and financial challenges. If we can find ways to adapt and cope effectively, we lower the likelihood that stress and burnout will create more problems. Perhaps even more importantly, we will be more adequately prepared for the next challenge.

There are certain traits and habits that increase the likelihood one can maintain ongoing resiliency in the face of adversity:

1. Being optimistic in a realistic way.

2. Having a moral compass to guide your beliefs and actions.

3. A belief in something greater than oneself (not necessarily of a religious nature).

4. Emotional and cognitive flexibility. Seeing things in "gray" and avoiding rigid or absolutes in your thinking and feeling. Practicing mindfulness can help develop this flexibility.

5. Strong, healthy connections to others.

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If You're Feeling the Strain: Leadership Burnout

Building Resiliency: To do this, we need to shift our focus, at least partially to ourselves. We must learn how to anticipate and take care of our own needs, so that we can be able to help others. For some, the concept of self-care seems almost self-indulgent. And when things are hectic, it's easy to let it fall by the wayside.

1. Maintain Your Energy

o **Respect your need for sleep.** Stick with a schedule whenever possible. Whether you need eight hours or six hours to feel rested, do your best to get the right amount of sleep, so you can put yourself in a position to be your best self each day.

o **Carve out focus and/or down time.** Remember you're human, and sometimes need dedicated time to focus on certain tasks or to take a much-needed break. Close your emails when you need to. Let people know you're taking a break.

o **Rethink the caffeine.** No need to eliminate all caffeine, but if you're having difficulty focusing or having trouble falling asleep at night, it might be time to cut back. If you drink a lot of caffeine during the day, you may experience a "crash" when the effects wear off. These energy lows can lead us to seek out a quick source of energy, such as more caffeine or unhealthy foods.

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2. **Practice the Art of Self-Reflection and Mindfulness.** Learning is a life-long process. The way we operate today is a result of our experiences (and mistakes) of the past. When processing our experiences, our individual perceptions play an important part. Our unique perspectives are like stories we tell ourselves. This storytelling is very powerful, because it shapes our expectations, emotions, and our view of the world. Emotions follow cognitions, so managing our thoughts in a productive way can create helpful feelings which influence our expectations and behaviors.

- **Self-reflection** allows us to think through the situation without judgement. Remember, self-reflection isn't the same as remembering. When looking back on a situation, it usually isn't as important to ruminate over or try to remember specific details. That can actually increase our stress. Instead, think from a bird's-eye view at the bigger picture. If negative thoughts and emotions come up, try to experience them without judgement. Are we dwelling on the positive or negative aspects of today's events? How we "color" circumstances in our minds will affect our decision-making, which elevates the importance of intentional reflection. Always think about two questions: "What can we do differently next time? To do that, what do we need to learn or practice? "

3. **Burn Off the Stress.** Obviously, exercise is healthy for our bodies, which is reason enough alone to incorporate it into a daily routine. But exercise can also reboot your brain, particularly when it's overstimulated. Exercise can help to level out the chemistry of a stressed brain. Engaging in exercise before or after work can also reset the brain from its previous state, either preparing us for the day ahead, or helping us to wind down after the day is over.

- ✓ **Make it a priority.** There is always time. Even if it's five minutes. Don't let it fall to the bottom of your to-do list. The best time to exercise is when you need it the most.

- ✓ **Make it a habit.** Things become habitual when we do them consistently. If exercise isn't currently a habit, make a goal to incorporate it into your day. Start with smaller goals and build on that. The key is to build it into your daily routine, so you don't see it as something outside of the norm.

> "
> EXERCISE IS A CELEBRATION OF WHAT YOUR BODY CAN DO. NOT A PUNISHMENT FOR WHAT YOU ATE.
> "
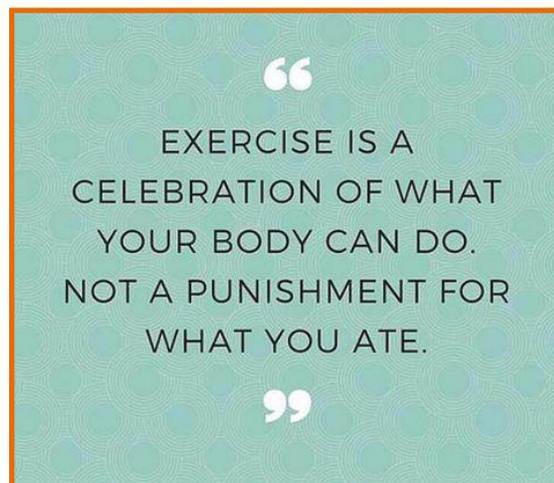
- ✓ **Enjoy it.** To make exercise a habit, it's helpful to find joy in the activity. Exercise doesn't have to mean self-punishment. Think about activities you like, such as swimming, walking, riding a bike, or dancing, and simply do more of those things. It's not going to be helpful for your wellbeing if you must drag yourself kicking and screaming, so choose something fun, or find something new to try.

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4. Set Boundaries and Adjust Expectations

- **Learn to say no.** Time is a nonrenewable resource. When you say "yes" to one thing, you are saying "no" to something else. Be strategic with what you agree to do.

- **Perfection does not exist.** If we expect ourselves to be perfect, we will always feel defeated. Adjust your expectations so they reflect a more realistic vision. Striving for excellence should be a goal. Expecting perfection should not.

- **Delegate when it makes sense.** For some Leaders, letting go of certain tasks can sometimes be challenging. Ask yourself: What can someone else do 80% as well as I can? Consider taking those items off your plate. This can also be a learning experience for employees who show initiative and are ready for something new.

5. Rekindle.
Recent events may have brought you to the general complaint of "I just don't like my job anymore." When this happens, you'll need to challenge yourself to remember why you took the job in the first place. Focus on what you were excited about and what a typical day looked like during times you were feeling more fulfilled. What things were you doing then that brought you some joy and made you feel competent? Beyond just thinking about it, find ways to bring an element of that excitement into your current day. Rekindling isn't about focusing our attention on the past but aligning our activity with our values. Am I doing what excites me? Am I living my passion? There is so much emphasis these days on "living one's truth" – we must do this in our job as well. Does it align with who I am?

6. Practice Gratitude.
Gratitude is the act of showing thanks and appreciation for the good things in our lives without ignoring the fact that we do not exist in a perfect world. Gratitude influences dopamine and serotonin levels, the neurotransmitters in our brain responsible for making us feel good. Studies show that people who are grateful experience improved mental health because they are better able to fight against depression, anxiety, and other negative emotions. Try to focus on at least one thing to be grateful for each day. Express this to your co-workers when it applies, too.

7. Celebrate!
Acknowledge Accomplishments. Most driven, successful Leaders are hardest on themselves. Taking the time to acknowledge what we did well fuels motivation and inspiration.

Practicing self-care strategies, while deceptively straightforward, can help Leaders adjust to a rapidly changing, and often hectic environment. We don't have to be perfect with self-care, but we do need to take the initiative and make time to build habits that encourage resiliency, and ultimately help us to be better at what we do.

self care

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Addressing the New Conflicts in the Workplace

COVID-19's profound impact on the workplace has been present from the start. As vaccines are made more widely available, some employers will be bringing employees back into the workspace. Some will have a hybrid program, with different employee groups continuing some remote work, with other groups returning every day. Many organizations have had some or all their employees working on-site consistently throughout the pandemic. This wide variety of scenarios can create potential for conflict amongst employee groups.

Some common conflicts include a "divide" between those workers who have been on-site for most of the public health crisis, and those who have been afforded the opportunity to effectively work from home. Additionally, there may be morale concerns for those employees who are resisting the draw to bring people back, not to mention the differing opinions on the coronavirus vaccine, mask-wearing at work, and the "politicization" of all the above. Fortunately, there are steps team leaders can take to prepare for and respond to the new variety of conflicts in the workplace.

Supervisors—Your Role in Defusing Conflict- Part of the role of a Leader is to recognize and effectively deal with conflict that may arise between employees. To start, there are some important tips to consider:

- **Setting the tone begins with you -** Refrain from engaging in judgmental conversations with employees on the topic of return to work, vaccines, and mask-wearing practices.

- **Make an extra effort to be visible -** Knowledge is power. Be present with your team, so you can observe the dynamics of the group during this sensitive time. The sooner you can become aware of any conflicts, the sooner they can be addressed. Quick intervention is important, just as with any other type of workplace conflict.

- **Educate yourself on applicable employment law compliance -** If your company is mandating or encouraging vaccinations, be aware that employees may request exemptions and/or accommodations under federal law (e.g., Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII)), as well as state and local law. For example:

   o **Disability -** Under the Americans With Disability Act (ADA), if an employee has a disability or medical condition that would contraindicate the vaccine, the employer may have to accommodate by exempting the individual from a mandatory vaccine requirement. This could apply to someone who has a history of allergic reactions to a vaccine ingredient.

   o **Sincerely Held Religious Beliefs -** Employers may also have to exempt employees who are unable to receive a COVID-19 vaccine because of sincerely held religious beliefs, observance, or practice. However, social, political, or economic philosophies, as well as mere personal preferences, are not protected as religious beliefs under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.

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Addressing the New Conflicts in the Workplace

- **Talk to your team** - If there are issues among team members, meet to emphasize the importance of staying focused on work and keeping opinions on company policies or personal healthcare decisions out of workplace discussions.

- **Be solution focused** - A few examples of problematic situations and ways to defuse them include:

  o **Redirecting problematic behaviors.** If employees are arguing about vaccines or mask-wearing, remind them that they are here for work. Ask them about a current project and how it's going.

  o **Remember company policy.** If employees engage in name-calling ("anti-vaxxer," "sheep," etc.), advise them that such communication is unprofessional and/or a violation of the code of conduct. Situations like these may also be a violation of Harassment or Anti-Discrimination Policies. Employees may be unaware that a co-worker's disability or sincerely held religious belief may prevent them from being able to get vaccinated, so these interactions should be handled with sensitivity and care. Follow disciplinary procedures and document the incident as you would any other similar violation.

  o **Counsel employees individually.** For those who disruptively promote their perceptions to others, talk to them in private. Explain that what they are doing is disruptive and that they are coming across as attempting to force their beliefs on others, which is not permissible in the workplace.

  o **Respond intentionally.** When responding to someone during challenging moments, think beyond your own feelings and think about the long-term nature of the professional relationship you have with your team member. Being right isn't everything. Whenever possible, respond to an employee in a way that promotes preserving the relationship and encouraging their best work.

  This can include reminding the employee of your shared goals, letting them know what you can do to support them towards those goals, and clarifying their role in next steps after the conversation. In especially tense situations, the best course may be pausing the conversation if it's unproductive and revisiting it at a later time.

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Addressing the New Conflicts in the Workplace

- o **Be mindful of your own emotions.** Managers are human and being human means that we also have opinions and emotional triggers. Being aware of and tempering your own emotions can help you set the tone for the group. Maintain a focus on concrete work rules and policies. Avoid giving personal advice on the decision to vaccinate or wear a mask. Instead, refer employees with questions to a reputable and neutral source of information, such as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), or your local health department.

- o **Call your Ulliance Account Manager.** Reach out for support and coaching regarding difficult-to-manage situations. Ulliance can assist you with appropriate employee referrals to the Life Advisor EAP.

Preparation Is the Key - Don't wait until a problem arises. Learn to recognize and deal with situations that are not only disruptive, but also pose significant compliance risk to the organization. Preparing now is the key to minimizing the potential for problems in the future.

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short term counseling for you & your family.

Call us- we're here to help **877.912.2733**

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