Coronavirus (COVID-19): Anticipating and Addressing Employees' Return-to-Work Concerns Post-Pandemic

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With stay-at-home orders starting to lift and businesses preparing to begin the process of resuming regular operations, it's time for HR professionals, managers and other business leaders to start putting in place concrete plans for a return to work. At this pivotal juncture, it's important to take proactive steps to anticipate and address employee concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moving Toward an Uncertain Future

Every organization will emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic changed in multiple ways. For some organizations, finding their "new normal" may mean significant changes in day-to-day operations or even fundamental alterations to their business model. For others, the changes will be more subtle. Employees know this, and they expect management to know it as well.

Whether your organization's employees have been working remotely, reporting to a physical location, or on furlough, you can be sure that they've been very tuned in to how the organization and its leaders have responded to the pandemic every step of the way. They're continuing to watch closely to see how the organization transitions from crisis mode toward whatever its "new normal" mode of operations will be. Employees' perceptions of the organization's leadership during and after the pandemic will have a profound impact on how smoothly the return-to-work process goes and, ultimately, how successful the company will be in the post-pandemic economy.

Meeting Employees Where They Are

Leading effectively involves meeting employees where they are - in terms of their needs, priorities and motivations. As your organization starts to prepare for the post-pandemic workplace, it's important to realize that *where* your employees are today is a long way from *where* they were pre-pandemic. Just a few months ago, your employees (and you!) were working in a booming, 3 percent unemployment economy, most with no concept of how swiftly a novel virus would drastically disrupt every aspect of life. That's not where anyone is today.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Think about it in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, where basic needs related to survival must be met before individuals can attend to their social and psychological needs, which in turn must be met before addressing needs related to esteem and self-actualization.



With the onset of the pandemic, some people who were at the highest levels of Maslow's hierarchy, seeking to meet needs related to esteem or self-actualization (e.g., prestige, accomplishment, creativity) found themselves suddenly and unexpectedly at the bottom of the needs hierarchy, not certain if their basic physiological needs related to safety and survival could be met.

Social distancing provided a way for some individuals to meet basic needs during the pandemic, though it created a barrier to reaching the next level of the hierarchy, social needs. Even with certain businesses in some areas starting to reopen, that barrier remains.

When putting plans in place for transitioning toward a post-pandemic normal, it's critical to accept that your employees won't be in a place where they can prioritize esteem and self-actualization needs (such as a sense of accomplishment, recognition, achieving one's full potential), until they are comfortable that their physiological, safety and social needs are adequately being met - in that order.

What does this mean for your company during the return-to-work phase of the pandemic? The bottom line is that employees' concerns regarding safety, health and financial security must be addressed before things can return to a semblance of normalcy. Ideas about best practices for attracting and retaining top talent need to be adjusted based on where your employees are now, at this unique moment in time. This means prioritizing workplace safety and reassuring employees that the organization is taking steps to remain viable and keep its workforce employed in the unfolding economic crisis.

Employee Concerns Post-Pandemic: Three Key Areas

As the public health and economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic remains top of mind for employers and employees alike, regardless of company size or industry, organizations will be well-served by proactive planning that addresses these key areas: safety, business viability and work-life concerns.

Safety

In the age of COVID-19, employees want to know their employers are taking [steps to protect them from exposure to contagious disease and otherwise keep them safe](https://www.xperthr.com/editors-choice/coronavirus-covid-19-health-and-safety/44321/). Companies should make appropriate adjustments to business practices and clearly communicate these to employees and their families prior to return-to-work.

* **Operational adjustments.** Clearly communicate to employees any operational adjustments the company is making to improve workplace safety, such as:
	+ Screening employees or visitors for symptoms;
	+ Spacing workstations to ensure more distance; or
	+ Rotating shifts to minimize the number of people in the building at any given time.
* **Sanitization/hygiene improvements.** Inform employees about steps the organization is taking to sanitize the workspace and improve hygiene, for example:
	+ Increasing the number of stations where company-provided hand sanitizer is available;
	+ Providing masks for employees and/or customers to wear;
	+ Implementing increased sanitization procedures for workstations and common areas (such as more frequent deep cleaning);
	+ Posting cleaning schedules and procedures for accessing supplies in visible areas on site and sharing them via email and other tech-based collaboration tools that employees use regularly.
* **Update wellness initiatives.** Reconsider workplace wellness offerings with COVID-19 concerns in mind and adapt as appropriate:
	+ Offer virtual microlearning or lunch-and-learn sessions focused on topics related to COVID-19. Record the sessions so that all workers have an opportunity to attend at a time convenient to them.
	+ Consider adding a pandemic protection page to the intranet with key facts and guidance for employees.
	+ To help alleviate family members' concerns about workplace safety, produce a newsletter outlining the company's COVID-19-related safety measures and mail it to each employee's home, in addition to delivering it electronically.

Business Viability

In times of economic uncertainty, employees naturally are concerned about their ability to earn a living and to pay for housing, food and other basic needs. In light of this, company leaders should focus on:

* **Transparency.**Be transparent and truthful regarding business impact. If you mislead your employees, they'll know it and will lose trust in you and the organization. Instead, proactively share information (as appropriate) on steps the company is taking to maintain or grow market position, profitability, etc.
* **Vision.** Communicate the organization's vision and strategy to unify and align employees around it. Encourage managers to reiterate and reinforce the vision by stating it at the beginning of meetings and one-on-one conversations as a point of commonality before moving into the agenda.
* **Soliciting employee input.** Make it easy for employees to share their concerns for senior leadership to address. For example:
	+ Set up an anonymous online poll that employees can use to submit concerns, with leaders addressing submissions via town hall meetings or a Q&A stream on the intranet or internal social media channels.
	+ Establish a special email address (such as concerns@companyurl.com) that auto-forwards to everyone on the leadership team for triage and response.

Work-Life Concerns

Don't lose sight of the fact that employees are human beings with a lot of demands on their time beyond immediate workplace concerns. Even those who had mastered the art of work-life integration prior to the coronavirus crisis are now facing unexpected challenges. It's more important than ever for company leaders to empathize with employees and be flexible with regards to work-life balance concerns.

* **Empathy training for leaders.** Provide training and/or coaching to leaders on how to empathize with employees. Look for ways to incorporate accountability for empathy into the essential job functions for leadership roles.
* **Flexible work arrangements.** Consider expanding flexible scheduling or [remote options for employees](https://www.xperthr.com/editors-choice/coronavirus-covid-19-remote-work/44203/). Prioritize those who:
	+ Are at high risk or are caregivers for others who are;
	+ Have household members who are front-line healthcare workers; or
	+ Are facing difficulties due to school closings or a lack of access to childcare.
* **Mental health support.** Encourage workers to utilize the employee assistance program (EAP) for help navigating the emotional impact of the pandemic. If your firm doesn't offer an EAP, this is a good time to consider adding this service to your benefits package or otherwise covering the cost of counseling services for employees who request it.
* **Employee interest groups.** Consider implementing a special interest group for employees who are seeking to connect with others to share pandemic-related experiences. This could be as simple as setting up a channel on Slack (or whatever collaboration platform your team uses) or you could reach out to everyone to gauge interest in participating in a more formal employee interest group (EIG). Follow up to find out how those who want to participate would prefer to interact.

Survey Employees to Identify Concerns Specific to Your Workforce

Of course, your employees are likely to have other concerns beyond these universal topics. As an HR professional or organizational leader, the only way to identify your employees' unique concerns and needs is to ask.

Survey Questions

Use a brief survey to identify employee needs specific to your organization or industry. Keep the survey brief and focused solely on discovering what employees' needs are at this time. Good questions to ask include:

* How would you rate the company's response to the COVID-19 crisis so far? (Use a scale of 1 to 5 or 1 to 10)
* What are your top three workplace concerns at this time? (Open-ended question)
* How can the organization best meet your needs at this time? (Open-ended question)

Use a simple online survey tool and/or paper surveys at the worksite or post a poll on your company's intranet. The sooner you survey employees, the better. What you learn will help your organization prepare properly for what comes next.

Using the Survey Data

Once the survey has been completed, use what you learn to further define what actions need to be taken as your organization moves forward.

1. Analyze the data to discover what types of concerns are shared by the majority of employees.
2. Review the results with leadership; reach consensus and buy-in regarding what to prioritize based on the results.
3. Work collaboratively with the leadership team to formulate actionable plans, ensuring leadership alignment and commitment to decisions.
4. Present survey results and the action plan to employees.
5. Request feedback from employees.
6. Implement the plan.
7. Evaluate and adjust as needed along the way.

HR's Role

HR should work closely with the leadership team, serving as an internal consultant, to respond based on identified priorities. HR's role may include coaching, developing strategy communication plans, tracking and analyzing metrics and any other actions that can help ensure that employees' needs are met throughout the return-to-work transition and beyond.

Preparing for What Comes Next

Getting a "green light" from political leaders to reopen or expand operations doesn't mean that the workplace will suddenly go back to the way it was pre-crisis. How the organization has responded to the COVID-19 crisis to date - and how it does so moving forward - will influence employee perceptions of the organization and its leaders well into the future. Effectively anticipating and addressing employees' return-to-work concerns will significantly impact whether or not the organization comes out stronger on the other side of this crisis.