

IS IT SAFE...?

HUMAN BEINGS ARE HARD-WIRED TO CRAVE CERTAINTY ABOUT THE FUTURE. UNCERTAINTY IS PERCEIVED AS A THREAT BY OUR MINDS AND, AS WE TRANSITION BACK INTO THE PHYSICAL WORKPLACE, THERE ARE MANY QUESTIONS TO ANSWER. GIVEN THAT THE HUMAN MIND IS CONSTANTLY WANTING TO PREDICT THE FUTURE TO FEEL SAFE.



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Involving employees in the imagination of the new ways of working will give people a sense of agency and make them feel that they have more control. We know that communication is key to addressing anxiety and so two-way communication about new ways of working, will help to reduce uncertainty ambiguity and potential distress. Line managers should communicate changes with transparency, frequency and openness and, while it may not be possible to answer all questions, keeping people as up-to-date as possible is essential. We prefer to know - even if there is no new information - rather than silence.

Realistically, it is not always possible to provide that certainty, so it is important that employers provide a psychologically safe environment, where people are supported in the face of uncertainty. We must encourage open communication about worries and wellbeing issues, by making it clear that sharing concerns is valued and that it is safe to do so. Even if employees appear to be coping, we need to find ways to ask people how they are and whether they need additional support. Look out for signs that people are just

“bearing up”, even though they say that everything is fine. It is not always easy to spot the signs that someone is experiencing distress, so promote regular conversations with employees about their health and wellbeing with their line manager. This can only be possible if people feel psychologically safe to do this, without fear of discrimination.

One of the key components to treating ourselves with self-compassion is recognising that we are not alone. Senior leaders can also model their vulnerability by sharing their own emotions and fears associated with the transition. Promoting opportunities for people to connect and share experiences - for example, coffee mornings, team meetings and pop in virtual chat rooms - can all provide opportunities for people to connect around particular challenges and concerns, as well as successes. We must also acknowledge that feelings about returning to the office will inevitably be connected to our different home situations and experiences during the pandemic. Can employers continue to be flexible about when and how work is done? This is about applying the same return to work processes, but allowing

for different outcomes - for example, some employees may work from home for longer.

It is important that we consider the impact of the loss of freedom that this may bring. Parents may have enjoyed claiming back that commute time to spend time with their children, others perhaps having more leisure time and won't want to lose this again. We also need to be mindful of how different employees in the same team may have had very different experiences of the workplace. Some remaining to 'hold the fort', whilst others may have been furloughed. As we begin the gradual transition back to the physical workplace, the importance of employers taking a proactive approach to support their employees cannot be underestimated. Taking time to consider the natural emotional response of your workforce will go a long way to minimise the impact on wellbeing and performance in both the immediate and long term.

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