

6 tips to help you lead your team's workplace re-entry

When COVID-19 stay-at-home restrictions ease, those who have been asked to stay home or work remotely will venture back to their workplaces — but nowhere near back to what was “normal.”

Use these tips to help guide your team through the new and evolving environment.

1. Frame re-entry as a new phase in an ongoing change rather than a return to the way things were.

Everyone has had their lives and work upended for months now. It's natural for some people to feel nostalgia for the comfort and predictability of the pre-pandemic world: *Remember when we used to hug hello and go to the store without a mask? Remember when we felt confident that our normal way of doing business would yield good results?*

For many, going back to work will feel like a welcome return to familiar surroundings — and a temptation to resume the previous behaviors that came with it. That may be fine to an extent, but as we begin to emerge from this disruption, success will depend on people adopting new behaviors to help their organizations operate safely and grow for the future.

Prepare your team for the (likely long) journey ahead by using forward-looking language that paints a real but optimistic picture. For example:

“It will be great to see everyone after our time apart. We've been through some tough times already and have done a good job adjusting. There will be more challenges ahead as we return to work, and we'll have to face them under unique conditions like wearing masks and social distancing. But I have confidence that we're up for it and will eventually come out of this with an even stronger team and relationship with our customers than we had before.”

2. Communicate and embrace the new safety policies your organization has set.

Mandated masks, hand-washing stations, staggered shifts, workspace modifications to allow social distancing, one-way corridors or other new foot-traffic flows — until there's a treatment or vaccine, organizations will set new workplace rules in order to reduce health risks and provide peace of mind to employees and customers.

Your job as manager is to make sure people understand that their safety-minded behaviors protect and reassure their colleagues and customers, in addition to themselves. And you need to ensure that everyone follows the policies, even if they think they're overblown.

“We’re all in this together” is often a workplace cliché, but these days it happens to be true. To do this:

- **Model accountability by eagerly adopting the policies yourself.** Teams take behavior cues from their leader and even more so in times of change when people are trying to navigate new situations. If you’re lax about wearing your mask, for example, some of your direct reports probably will be, too.
- **Explain and repeat the importance of safety policies in your regular communications.** You can do this in your team meetings, 1-on-1s, and regular feedback to direct reports (e.g., *“I appreciate how careful you’ve been to wipe down the counter after every customer. That kind of attention keeps everyone safe and also helps them feel safe being here.”*)
- **Address lapses quickly.** In the moment is best. If you put off giving feedback on a safety lapse, you could send your team the message that breaking the rules is no big deal.
- **If someone feels like the policies aren’t working as intended, listen and pass the feedback to your boss or HR.** Organizations will need to assess how effective their new policies are. And employee feedback is an important input to help make those determinations and adjustments.

3. Help your team handle a new wave of stress.

Re-entry brings the possibility of new uncertainty and anxiety — about their personal safety and the financial health of your organization. Managers who downplay the uncertainty (e.g., “This is no big deal — it’s just business as usual!”) or wear their stress on their sleeves can make things worse.

Instead, try to balance an attitude of calm confidence with heightened awareness of team members’ stress levels. To help, you can:

- **Use empowering language.** Blaming “management” or complaining about things “happening to us” can contribute to feelings of disempowerment that only heighten anxiety. Instead, openly acknowledge challenges while staying focused on the actions within your and your team’s control. For example, *“You’re right that this is a tough situation. What do you think we could do differently? Let’s talk through some ideas together.”* This kind of language doesn’t take away the pain, but it does help people see that they can consider actions to improve their situation.
- **Give timely, frequent updates.** People crave information during periods of uncertainty; without it, they tend to assume the worst. Overcommunicating by sharing both what you know and what’s still unknown or in flux can help your direct reports to see the whole picture and mentally prepare for (rather than worry about) the blanks still to be filled in.

- **Be an active listener and observer.** Proactively asking how people are doing and then listening with empathy sends the message that you care and want to help. And remember that silence doesn't necessarily mean everything's OK — if someone has disengaged or is exhibiting anxious body language compared to their norm, check in.

For more, see [6 ways to help your team handle stress in times of disruption](#).

4. Identify and proactively preserve the good things from your team's time away.

Plenty of teams have found a silver lining to the initial COVID-19 disruption — better ways of working despite being physically apart. They've forged cross-team collaborations to address urgent business needs. They've devised virtual ways to communicate more efficiently and to track and celebrate people's accomplishments even amid chaos. They've learned more personal details about teammates during virtual happy hours than they would have in the office.

What about your team? During a meeting, ask the group: *"What's something good that we've been doing that you think we should keep doing as we move into this next phase?"* And discuss the pros and cons of each idea and any modifications needed to make them happen when you're working together in person.

5. Get your direct reports' feedback on how re-entry is going, and make or request adjustments as needed.

Change almost never happens perfectly from day one. It's a process: You gather input to formulate the best plan you can, implement the changes, gather feedback on the changes, make further adjustments, and so on until you achieve the desired outcome. And seeking your team's input won't just yield better results — it will also build trust, promote honest communication, and help people feel like they've had a say in new directions.

Before your 1-on-1s this week, ask each of your direct reports to prepare feedback about their return to work. Good feedback takes time to formulate, so ask at least a day in advance. For example:

“Hi, Naya. In our 1-on-1 this week, I'd like to get your feedback on how it's going since we've returned to work and you've been doing your work a little differently: What's going well? And what's not working well that we need to address? Please bring your thoughts to our meeting.”

Some issues will be well within your team's power to address: For example, you could create a [how-to document](#) for an important new process people are having trouble adopting or start each day with a 15-minute [standup meeting](#) to be sure that everyone has the latest

updates. For larger issues outside your team's control, you'll need to determine whether and how to escalate them upward. For more, see [Share your direct reports' important critical feedback with your boss](#).

6. Prepare your team to anticipate — and even drive — changes on the horizon.

What's coming next? It's easy to overfocus on what's happening now, especially when it involves big adjustments. But if you can make the time — for you and your team — to look ahead, you'll be better prepared to stay buoyant in the future and be more innovative.

Ask your team to prepare their thoughts on questions like:

- What's changing for our customers, and how can we change to better meet those new needs?
- What's our biggest area of inefficiency right now — and what ideas do we have to improve?
- If we look six months ahead, what will our industry look like? What evidence do we have to support that view?
- Given that future prediction, what's an improvement we could make now that would give us a competitive advantage?
- What experiments could we set up in the next week or month to try some of these ideas?

Then meet as a group to discuss ideas, pick a few promising ones, and start trying new things. For more, see [Set a strategic learning goal with your team this week](#).

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