
Engage

Supporting your people to thrive in our “new normal”

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As New Zealanders adjust to life outside of lockdown, we’ve had a range of conversations with employers and employees around how workplaces will proceed.

For some, where we find ourselves right now is pure bliss – no more being “cooped up” at home, intentionally being able to come back into the office, putting work clothes on and switching into the work mode, while also being able to walk out of the office at 5pm and leave “work at work”.

For others, the current situation feels more like a time of grief. Lockdown gave us a probably much needed wake-up call around what is actually important to us in life and enabled us to engage in the things that really matter. Then, all of a sudden, we have work suggesting we come back to the office. For many, this might mean no more morning walk, coming home in the dark from a commute and back to our BAU hustle and bustle while navigating social distancing.

Collectively, we’ve needed to slow down for a long time. We were never going to do it on our own and, in many ways, this is one of the blessings that COVID has given us: the opportunity to embrace and create a “new normal” in our working world that aligns more closely with our values.

Last week, a participant in one of our workshops asked how best to approach their manager to discuss their fears around returning to the office, the positives they experienced while working from home and to discuss the possibility of more flexible working arrangements.

Here are some thoughts:

- We encourage managers to front foot these types of conversations and “lean into them”. We all know from talking to our friends and family that people have had such a range of experiences over the past two months and this will also apply to people at work.
- Take the time to check in with your team – both as a group and individually.
- In your individual conversations, use active listening skills to hear your people out. What is sitting top of mind for them? Do they have concerns about loved ones? Using public transport? Work-life balance?
- As your team returns to the office, allow your people to come together and to “anchor” – that is, to give space and sufficient time for conversations where people share their experiences over the past two months. What positives have come from this time? What were the challenges? Share your own experiences to demonstrate that you are human too.
- Recognise if there are any interventions you might have available, as a leader, to help support your people.
 - For example, an employee shares that they have a loved one at home that they are concerned about. Would it be helpful for them to continue to work from home in some capacity?
 - There are concerns around public transport being at reduced capacity. Would it be helpful to adjust their work hours so they are not commuting at peak times?
- Try not to be too directive but rather hear your employees out. Acknowledge how they are feeling and, if appropriate, collectively come up with some options together.

What also helps us at Umbrella, both personally and with the leaders we support, is using the psychological first aid principles of:

LEAD – LOOK – LISTEN – LINK

- **LEAD.** “Lean into leadership” by trying to model that it’s OK to seek help, to not feel OK or to ask for advice. As colleagues we “lead” others all the time, so try to model professional help-seeking behaviour, consider seeking professional or peer supervision and prioritise your psychological and physical wellbeing so you can keep doing the job you love and supporting your people.
- **LOOK.** Know yourself and your people – notice how they are when they are thriving and notice when they may be struggling. Sometimes people don’t need direct help but looking out for each other is a key part of feeling safe and valued at work and then partnering with them if they need more.
- **LISTEN.** If they do come to you, just listen actively and connect - you don’t need to fix the problem but just being there can really help. Let them guide you to what may be useful in what helps and does not help.
- **LINK.** You don’t need to be “the hero”, “the counsellor” or to “fix things” but knowing when and who to link people with is key as a leader, partnering with those who can help. Link in early or at least seek out wellness supervision with a colleague – we are here to help and it’s all confidential.



As a manager, it’s important to recognise that you can’t “fix” everything for your people. However, taking the time to initiate these types of conversations will go a long way. The benefits are likely to be seen not only in terms of staff satisfaction in the short term during this COVID era but also in more long-term retention and work-life balance.

We may not all be in the same boat after lockdown but we are all in the same sea and if we partner with our people, connect and listen then this truly helps us all navigate these new waters with a renewed hope for our shared futures at work.

(Acknowledging WHO and the Red Cross for earlier versions of the psychological first aid model).