MANAGING FEAR, STIGMA, AND INTOLERANCE IN THE WORKPLACE

Supporting Employees in the Aftermath of a Pandemic

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There is no doubt that this remarkable event has shaken every human being. Whether or not one has been directly affected by they themself or a loved one contracting the virus, all have been impacted. There is no surety to how each individual will cope with the changes to come in the future of work. This module provides pointers on how to engage with your employees after re-entry to the 'new' workplace.

CLEAR, CONCISE, CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION

Share the voice of leadership from a place of clarity and positivity. People have experienced a pandemic of fear and anxiety emphasized by media coverage. It stands to reason that the more entrenched people have been in the news, the more fearful they may be. It is important for leadership to be the voice of reason and positivity, to be role models and inspiration that resonate on a personal level for employees. Each individual will form their own opinions and perspectives based on their conditioning, prior beliefs and how they were impacted by the virus. Be cognizant of this and encourage others not to place judgment on themselves or others during this time. Rather, stress the importance of mutual respect amongst employees.

UNDERSTANDING AND VULNERABILITY

Employees want to feel seen and heard. Especially now during times of physical distancing and isolation, human beings are craving connection. Upon re-entry to our workplaces, we can support this need for human connection and also address fear of being in too close proximity to others by encouraging vulnerability.

This process must start with leadership at all levels. Employees will benefit greatly from seeing and hearing what their leaders are experiencing during this crisis. Too often it can seem as though leaders have no 'real people' problems, but that's just not true. The more that leaders make the time for a personal conversation and share their own stories in a vulnerable manner, the more employees will be open to sharing in return. Telling stories, sharing feelings, expressing our fears with one another leads to enhanced sense of belonging, unity, and strengthened trust. Ultimately relationships in the workplace are fostered. We can not underestimate the power of vulnerability, understanding and being seen.

Another important piece to this process is to discourage venting, gossip and spreading negativity. Employees should be given resources to become aware of the negative effects this can have on the human psyche. Vulnerability does not mean dumping one's negative thoughts, rather it means opening up to share what we truly feel. Employees and leaders alike can then support one another through navigating those feelings, and by being seen feel more emotional support.

SUPPORT AMID UNCERTAINTY

In our new normal at work, there will continue to be a need for rapid change. One day a plan will be carried out and the next day a new plan of action will need to be developed. Leaders must think and act quickly these days. As with any change, employees will be looking for support and active leadership for guidance. It will be critical to communicate clearly, concisely, and transparently during these times. Providing virtual resources such as links to online materials, a buddy system, and virtual gatherings will be helpful. Managers can schedule one-to-one check ins weekly with employees, where the time is used solely for personal discussion and not business related. This is a time for humanity to be placed in the forefront of the way we work. Companies that do so will find their employees feel more supported and apt to achieve their work regardless of where they are physically located.

CONNECTION AND COLLABORATION

Employers must provide their employees with the space and ways to connect and collaborate with one another. Out of crisis can come innovation and visionaries if the culture and 'environment' support this mindset. Coming up with new and exciting ways to engage employees could be a positive outlet for employees to feel they are part of something bigger. By inviting employees into material, structural change we can build a new narrative for a better future. Some ideas to carry this out include:

» Hold online forums where employees can anonymously share their ideas.

» Encourage managers to ask employees for their thoughts.

» Create a slack channel or private social media group where employees collaborate virtually

» Offer incentives for those that innovate during this time (i.e., creating a new internal process, a better way to serve customers, a new product or revenue stream, etc).

As you invite your employees back together into the 'new' workplace, remember these key pieces to help make the transition better for all:

» Provide clear, concise, and consistent communication to all.

» Be understanding and vulnerable and encourage your employees to do the same.

» Support your employees during uncertainty with guidance and active leadership.

» Provide space for your employees to be heard.

NEED MORE?

For more support, refer to these other WELCOA Resources:

» Expert Interview with Mettie Spiess: Mental Health at the Workplace
https://www.welcoa.org/resources/mental-health-workplace/

» Summit 2019 Video: The Keys to Workplace Mental Health: Voice. Value. Vigilance.
https://www.welcoa.org/resources/keys-workplace-mental-health-voice-value-vigilance/

» The WELCOA Pulse with Mettie Spiess
https://www.welcoa.org/resources/welcoa-pulse-mettie-spiess/

» Planning Template: Benchmark 6- Cultivate Supportive Health Promoting Environments, Policies and Practices
https://www.welcoa.org/resources/benchmark-6-creating-supportive-environments/