

# Managing Your Team After COVID-19

Being a manager during a stressful event, such as COVID-19, may be a new experience for you. Learning to adapt to changes in your work environment and workload, as well as your employees, is important. And, once the dust settles, a new normal will start to present itself. This new normalcy can create emotions you have never recognized or addressed before in your staff. When going back into the work environment, each employee will handle the transition differently.

**Address changes in behavior.** As a manager, you are responsible for your employees' ability to fully engage with their work. Returning to the workplace following COVID-19 may present employees with a unique emotional barrier—fear of being exposed to COVID-19 in the workplace. Some employees will share this fear with you upfront; others may not. So, it is important to pay attention to changes in your employees' behaviors to recognize how they may be feeling, and address that in a constructive way. Behavioral changes—such as an employee being late, missing meetings or deadlines, avoiding new tasks or responsibilities, or disrupting the team with a short temper or impatient emails—can all be indications of emotional unease or fear related to COVID-19. It's important to follow up with employees with your observations about their behavior and ask what's going on, explain how their behavior is affecting the team, and ask how you can help.

**Keep communication open.** When returning to work, remember to keep the lines of communication open to all your employees. Let them know they can come to you about anything impacting their engagement with work. Each employee may communicate differently. Some individuals are hesitant to proactively engage in communication with management. Take the time to check in with all your employees—even those who appear to be handling things well. Even if they are perfectly fine now, your openness and support now will encourage them in the future.

**Listen and share.** Allow your staff to express their feelings to you and listen. Simply by listening, you can help ease fear or other emotions they are facing. In addition, sharing your own experiences related to fear might be helpful to your employee. Knowing that a person in a leadership role is going through or has gone through similar feelings might help some staff feel better about the situation.

**Compromise and accommodate.** Your employees are your business' greatest asset. If you notice changes in an employee or they confide in you that they have reservations about returning to the office, do your best to make a supportive plan. For example, if they ask to work from home for a week longer or they request to work in a space separate from other staff to ease their fears, set some boundaries and accommodate these requests. If the reality of your business means that you simply can't make the specific accommodation your employee requests, explain that honestly and share whatever options you can.

**Create an opportunity.** This pandemic has provided a moment to stop and reevaluate company values and practices. The workplace behaviors that you likely shared during the pandemic of team solidarity, compromise, efficiency, creativity, and compassion, do not need to disappear when everyone returns to the workplace. These can elevate your workplace and your company's bottom line. A successful return-to-work plan includes figuring out how to support and integrate these behaviors into your company's culture and goals going forward.

Franco, F. & Gregg-Meeker, C. (2020, April 20). *Managing your team after COVID-19* (A. Gaddis, Ed.). Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.

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