REOPENING

The World's Workplaces

The Leader's Role in Fostering New Social Norms as Workplaces Reopen

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By now, almost all organizations around the world are somewhere on their re-opening journey, whether starting to plan, bringing employees back to the workplace, or assessing "what's next" for the future of their work environments.

Companies and organizations are appropriately focused on a range of activities such as resetting the physical work environment to achieve social distancing, installing signage, adjusting building systems, securing sustainable quantities of supplies, and adapting service levels in areas such as cleaning and food service.

But few leaders can confidently predict the reaction of their workforce upon entering these adapted environments. One corporate real estate executive summed up a concern that many peers share when he said, "we've worked through how to safely re-open our workplaces…until the people show up!"

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recently clarified that COVID-19 primarily spreads through person-to-person contact.1 This means that if governmental orders, public health organizations, and/or corporate policies dictate practices such as social distancing and mask usage, preparing the workplace—and perhaps more importantly, the workforce—for this new normal should be a top priority.

As companies and organizations begin to bring their employees back into the workplace, leaders have a critical role to play in not only communicating to their teams that "things are different," but also helping their teams prepare for the experience of coming back to a dramatically transformed work environment, and feel well oriented about expected health and wellness practices as they do so.

Returning employees will experience a range of emotions. Some will quickly adapt to the different circumstances, while others may be confused or scared, or even unwilling to follow newly established guidelines. It's critical for leaders to acknowledge and prepare for this spectrum of reactions in order to rebuild a high-performance workplace culture.

Before COVID-19, many organizations used the well-established practice of "safety moments"—short talks on safety-related topics at the beginning of meetings, shift changes, and other events. Safety moments were designed to raise situational and behavioral awareness in order to mitigate risk and avoid injuries in the workplace. In the COVID-19 era, leaders in organizations of all kinds will play a critical role in helping their organizations and their workforce adopt practices like safety moments, as well as other purposeful actions, to promote a safety culture for the organization, including its employees, customers, contractors and visitors.

Beyond safety moments, there are many things leaders can do to support an effective and safe transition back into the COVID-19-adjusted work environment[2]:

1. **Clearly define and communicate desired behaviors for employee health and safety.** Make these expectations simple, visible and easy to understand. Whenever possible, include employees in setting the new health and safety norms. Provide orientations, training and reminders of the criticality of adjusting their behaviors for the health and safety of the workforce and community. For critical or essential work environments that have been open or partially open, ensure guidance is current and take steps to ensure complacency is not setting in and that behaviors aren't slipping back to the "old social norms." When feasible, make it easy for returning employees to get the supplies they need to follow safety practices.

2. **Model the right behaviors to reinforce new social norms.** Employees will take notice of whether leaders are following corporate policies and practicing the behaviors being asked of the broader organization—in particular, mask usage, social distancing, not touching one's face, hand washing, and personal work area disinfection. Now more than ever, it's critical for leaders to "walk the talk." According to a recent article in Scientific American, "Norms include both the perception of how a group behaves and a sense of social approval or censure for violating that conduct."[3] This means that leaders will also need to determine what the consequences are for those who fail to practice established protocols—particularly when they put others at risk.

3. **Foster a culture of self-accountability that reinforces the greater good.** COVID-19 transmission primarily occurs from person to person, which creates the need to build a culture of self-care and caring for others in the work environment. The concept of protecting others as well as oneself resonates in a powerful way around the world.[3] As one simple idea, consider posting "Codes of Caring" in lieu of "Codes of Conduct," to make the "why" behind the required new behaviors evident.

4. **Design communications and guidance to highlight potential risks.** Use clear, credible, actionable advice. Simply highlighting risks and creating fear without offering practical, fact-based guidance can cause people to dismiss the risk and disengage. Linking the advice to the greater-good message (as discussed above) can be especially impactful. For example, a recent study designed to determine what message would encourage doctors to improve their handwashing habits found that signs near hospital sinks reminding them to protect patients by washing their hands were more effective than signs reminding them to protect themselves.[3]

5. **Tailor guidance to employees' personal situations and circumstances.** When possible, develop communications and training for employees that cover circumstances both inside and outside of the work environment. Examples include alternatives to coming into the work environment, preparing to come into work, commuting to work, encountering people in a non-work setting, and even traveling by air (if allowed or required). Guidance may also address the practical realities of returning to work, such as child and elder care, or safe commute practices. By providing employees with information about how to manage situations such as these with practical, credible advice, leaders can signal their focus on helping employees safely navigate the work environment and beyond.[2]

6. **Be flexible and creative.** Offer employees new, creative ideas for collaborating and working to ensure success in a more fluid approach to work. Examples include encouraging walking meetings (e.g., in a campus setting or while on audio calls) rather than sitting in confined conference rooms, getting off the bus or train a few stops early and walking the remainder of the commute, or riding a bicycle to work to limit public transit interactions, taking the stairs rather than using elevators when practicing social distancing may be difficult, packing picnic lunches in lieu of visiting the cafeteria, and continually sharing innovative practices that support a safe and healthy work environment and culture. Where possible, leaders should provide the necessary supplies (e.g., bicycle racks) and guidance about how to do implement these activities the safest way possible to reinforce a culture of safety, learning and caring.[4]

7. **Solicit feedback and provide positive reinforcement.** Establish two-way communication channels that create an opportunity for employees to provide feedback about what's working, where they need additional guidance, what's not working—as well as share suggestions and ideas. Equally importantly, find ways to provide positive reinforcement. Just as many work environments reinforce safety success through practices such as promoting number of days without an injury, leaders can look for new ways to adapt this practice by sharing fun facts about the number of outdoor meetings held, steps taken, bicycle rack utilization, and other metrics that reinforce positive adoption.[4]

8. **Communicate with compassion.** Realize that employees have a myriad of experiences they bring to the workplace. Some will have had a direct experience with COVID-19, and others will know friends and family members who have been affected. COVID-19 has also disproportionately affected African Americans and other minority members of our community. During this time, it is even more important to show compassion when interacting and communicating with others.[2]

As we continue the journey of reopening workplaces worldwide, the importance of reconfiguring the workplace to support social distancing, enhanced cleaning practices, and improved ventilation cannot be overstated. But much is also riding on individual behaviors inside the workplace and beyond. Business leaders have a critical role to play in facilitating a transition back to work that builds a culture that is safe, health-conscious, caring, collaborative, and productive.

REFERENCES

[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, FAQ: How Does COVID-19 Spread, June 2, 2020 https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#How-COVID-19-Spreads

[2] Based on a conversation with Rajiv Rimal Chair of Department of Health, Behavior and Society at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (June, 2020)

[3] Scientific American, What a Difference a Plague Makes, May 14, 2020 https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/masks-reveal-new-social-norms-what-a-difference-a-plague-makes/

[4] Based on conversations with Shannon Magari, ScD, MS, MPH, Principal and VP, Colden Corporation and Visiting Scientist, Harvard School of Public Health (June, 2020)

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