



Timely Information for Personal Success

Empathy is Crucial in Return to Work

As employees return to the workplace, mental health and well-being rank high on their lists of concerns. Some workers will be fearful to return because they have no idea what will meet them at the door. Will their job or job responsibilities be the same? What new policies and procedures will they have to observe? What if some employees don't wear a mask? Will social distancing change their relationship with co-workers or customers?

This new normal is stressful, but experts say that difficult situations can be managed with appropriate HR support, empathy, flexibility, and sufficient time to adjust.

The good news is that employers now know which jobs can be successfully performed remotely. Their fear of lost productivity among remote workers or that collaboration or teamwork would be compromised has not materialized in many cases.

Flexibility is Key...

For employers that can't offer remote options but have workers who are exhibiting mental health issues, they need to demonstrate flexibility.

Change employees' job or job responsibilities. Relocate them to a more isolated workspace. Alter their work schedule. Recommend they stay unplugged during breaks. Create separate office spaces for prayer or meditation. Enable them to work from both home and the office, although

office settings provide more human contact and opportunities for empathy, states Kris Meade, partner and chair of the labor and employment practice at Crowell & Moring.

Some employees may become emotionally distraught and act out by being disruptive around co-workers. *HR can step in and suggest mental health counseling from the EAP.*

Employees also need to feel empowered and safe addressing their emotional well-being with their boss or co-workers, according to Chai Feldblum, partner with the Morgan Lewis law firm. They may be experiencing anxiety, for instance, or feel uncomfortable working with others who don't observe social distancing.

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CLIP-N-SAVE! *Theda Care: Your Lifestyle Guide to a Healthy Heart*
Healthy Recipe: Simple Tomatoes and Beans

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
- 4 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- 2 (15-ounce) cans, no salt added, white beans
- 1-1/2 cups cherry tomatoes, halved and seeded
- 1 cup low-sodium vegetable broth
- Black pepper to taste

NUTRITIONAL VALUE:

- Saturated fat: 13 g.
- Cholesterol: 300 mg.
- Sodium: 1,500-2,400 mg.
- Carbohydrates: 310 g.
- Fiber: 25-35 g.

DIRECTIONS:

- ➊ Heat oil in skillet over medium heat. Cook garlic in the hot oil until golden, about 5 minutes. (Be careful not to burn!)
- ➋ Stir beans into oil. Cook and stir beans until hot, about 5 minutes. Stir tomatoes into the beans; cook and stir until tomatoes soften; about 5 minutes more.
- ➌ Pour broth over beans mixture; stir. Cook mixture at a simmer until liquid is reduced in volume by about half; about 15 minutes. Season with pepper.

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...And so is Training

“This isn’t something that [employees] necessarily know how to do,” she says, adding that separate training webinars are needed for managers and frontline workers. “Training can give workers the script and skills and an easy way for them to talk to someone if they feel the person isn’t complying. This is not about changing beliefs, but about changing behaviors.”

Again, this is where the EAP can step in and be a tremendous resource for all involved.

It’s also important to convey that there’s no shame in requesting accommodations like time off work, with or without pay, which many employers overlook. Feldblum explains that employees with mental impairments are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act and can’t be legally laid off or terminated as long as they perform their essential job functions.

She says HR needs to provide managers with as much direction and skills as possible, back them up, and encourage them to brainstorm accommodations with employees to avoid legal and performance issues later on.

Promote Learning

Meanwhile, HR needs to move employees from being in a fearful zone to one of learning, according to Chuck Gillespie, CEO at the National Wellness Institute.

“Help people understand what they can and can’t do,” he says, adding that growth is also vital, in which people learn how to apply empathy and other skills. “Operating managers, department heads or leaders must constantly communicate more than ever [with employees]: ‘Are you afraid, learning or growing?’”

Likewise, if the organization supports a wellness committee, Gillespie says its members can help managers assess situations, engage with managers in staff conversations and identify triggers that cause emotional behaviors: *Is this individual truly fearful of COVID-19 or simply abusing company policies or benefits?*

Working from home also poses its own set of challenges. Remote employees may feel stressed or depressed because they’re isolated or overwhelmed with family responsibilities. Some may have exhausted their savings or returned to former bad habits like smoking as a way of coping with the pandemic.

“You can have the safest, cleanest environment but some [employees] will be struggling,” Gillespie states. “Give people the help they need. Whether or not the virus goes way, the issues with health, lifestyle choices, financial wellness, and safety concerns are going to be ongoing for years to come.” ■

Additional source: Carol Patton, contributing editor to “Human Resource Executive”.