

April 29, 2020

Expert Contributor Article

By Robert Wendover



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Getting People Back to Making Decisions After Covid-19



The past two months have been chaotic, to say the least. We have been ripped from our routines, sent home, and told to stay off the streets until further notice. Millions have had their incomes disrupted and their daily concentration destroyed by the ongoing uncertainty.

And now, after weeks of this turbulence, we will be asked to return to the previous routine, albeit with some significant changes. But in addition to the disruption of normal meetings, coffee runs, and commutation, the way we make decisions has been disrupted as well. We've had to find new ways to stay connected, manage our lives and remain productive. We humans possess an innate ability to adapt when compelled to do so. But this “new normal” will take some getting used to. So, here are a few thoughts to consider as you and your team adjust:

It's okay to acknowledge the stress in yourself – Let's face it, no one is going to return to the workplace exactly like they left it. No matter what we think might happen, there are still surprises ahead. Since the brain is not a fan of surprises, each novel incident will be a potential source of discomfort. So, flexibility and acceptance of the unusual will be a part of the new normal. This will be more of a challenge for some than others. Take the time to center yourself when uncertainty invades your routine. Ask others how they are coping. There is no stigma in doing so. In fact, those you approach may appreciate that you reached out because they were hesitant to do so.

Express your own vulnerability, if you feel that will help others. There may be co-workers who appreciate your willingness to share how you feel. This is not a time to overshare, of course. But when we are willing to talk about how we might be struggling with certain decisions or changes, many times we find others who are facing similar emotions. I find that most people are capable of solving lots of problems when they have someone they trust willing to listen, not give advice, just listen.

By the way, some of this may be expressed in the form of storytelling and humor. Test the waters and find a balance. Telling everyone how your spouse and kids were driving you nuts while you were marooned at home is probably not a good idea. But commiserating with someone who shares that kind of story probably is.

Acknowledge the stress in those you supervise – Since our rhythm has been broken, it is understandable that some will return to the workplace unsure of how to get their bearings. There may be the lingering uncertainty about how to reconnect with others. You may hear questions like:

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- “I used to walk over and see Debbie. Should I now text her all the time to maintain separation, even though she’s ten feet away?”
 - “Should I use the office equipment without gloves?”
 - “Should I wipe down everything in my work-station every morning?”
 - “What about the break room? Is it safe to enter?”

The list of these questions is likely to be wide-ranging. Recognize as well, that your co-workers’ reaction to all this is will vary. Some may border on the obsessive. Others may want to interact as if nothing’s really changed. Some may want to work remotely for the foreseeable future. All of this will have an impact on the daily decisions that take place.

Offer empathy and support -- If you’re in a supervisory role, you will need to balance empathy and understanding with sufficient direction to re-start normal productivity. This can mean taking time, when you really didn’t have it, to listen, process, and offer comfort. The pace will gradually ramp back up. But if you are too anxious, some may interpret this as an insensitivity to their emotions and concerns. Simply asking, “What can I do to help?” can be an effective way to demonstrate your concern. Many will probably say something like, “I’m okay, just taking a bit of time to adapt.” If someone does have a concern, showing empathy will go a long way to helping them see that we’re all in this together.

Encourage your team and co-workers to take stock – Ask “What have you discovered about yourself and the organization during the past few weeks?” Your purpose in doing this is more to getting people thinking than to produce some list of specific changes. We don’t take enough time to reflect in normal times. But reflection can be very therapeutic. Some comments might be about new software they’ve learned or creative processes for working remotely. Others might be about the meeting you hold every week that’s not really necessary. Perhaps you’ll find a couple of helpful nuggets. Perhaps not. The main point is to get the people around you to reflect more on how decisions are made and how performance can be improved. (I wrote about in more depth this a couple of weeks ago.)

Ramp up the encouragement – I’m not sure I need to say this, but we can all use reassurance that things are going to be okay. The ongoing uncertainty of the next several months will demand more time for processing concerns about everything from physical health to job security. Open meetings with a bit of encouragement. But be careful about making it too rote or sappy however. Pay more attention to who needs the encouragement and who’s ready to get back in the groove. You might ask a couple of your seasoned people to talk a bit how they navigated September 11th and the recession of ten years ago. It may be insightful for those who have not experienced a major disruption like this to understand where the resilience comes from.

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Ramp up the humor – Along with the past month’s dire warnings and devastating statistics have come an abundance of cartoons, parodies, and memes helping us all put this situation into perspective. As the old saying goes, humor is the best medicine. While it easy to become distracted by the plethora of social commentary, jokes, and snarky comments, a little bit of this is therapeutic. Do what you can to promote a more convivial atmosphere as the workplace regains its momentum.

The experience of these past couple of months will live long into the future. The way we make daily decisions have been impacted by this on both the personal and professional level. What are you taking away from this experience about how you can make better choices?

Bob Wendover has been helping employers improve their workplace outcomes for more than 30 years. Find out more at www.commonseenterprises.net.

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