

REFRAMED REALITY

Dr. Eliyahu's Partial List of Things People Do to Transition the Post-Covid Workplace while Increasing Safety and Agency

CONTEXT

Part of what gives a feeling of safety from the uncontrollable vagaries of life is physical safety measures. In the case of Covid-19 measures include masks, disinfectants, sneeze guards and social distancing, to name a few. Those key steps help not only with liability and basic human respect, but with productivity. I can't work well if I don't feel safe; I can if I do.

Physical measures control the external environment. However, we just learned that the safety of our external environment will surprise us with something unexpected and unsafe. We apply that learning to how we perceive our present, the next moment, and the future. The *unknown* threatens. An employee's thoughts might be: *"I can't see those little viruses, and people can transmit when they are symptomless. How do I know if there isn't a virus floating in the air or living on a surface someplace because one of my colleagues was selfish or unaware?"* OR *"Will they make me come in to work if I want to keep working from home?"* OR *"Will I lose my job if they don't see that I am working so hard?"* Etc. An excess of nerves or anxiety means being less engaged and less productive because our focus is partially on our safety rather than on producing work outcomes. And we spread our nervousness, anxiety, and lack of full presence through the content and affect of our communications.

Hence the real need to address psychological safety. The psychological safety approach aims to strengthen a person's internal sense of self-efficacy or agency, helping them believe that they can accomplish and achieve regardless of circumstance. That agency allows us to keep our eyes outward on accomplishment. And that creates a positive feedback loop: self-efficacy – accomplishment – increased self efficacy – calm industriousness – accomplishment – increased self efficacy... etc.

METHOD

Above all during transition from the workplace as we knew it, let people know they are not alone. Let them know that you – executives, managers, and teammates – are in this together. That means increased communication. Keep them in the loop. Talk not only for the sake of getting things done, but for the sake of connection. Paradoxically, **just knowing that you are there and you care helps people produce results.** That is true after things stop changing too.

When you talk with people, follow **3 steps**, what I call **"TMT"**: Them/Me/Them.

- **Them:** ask them about them to discover their needs for safety and agency.
- **Me:** think about what you or a team can do to increase their safety and agency, not just in the immediate short term, but sustainably considering the new work arrangements.
- **Them:** find out if the solutions and arrangements you thought of will work for them. Adjust as necessary. For more on TMT, refer to my slide deck.

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Here are some things we have heard so far that organizations do to help with safety and agency, as of 6/1/2020. The list is only partial, but the two hyperlinks should bring you to more.

PHYSICAL SAFETY & AGENCY

- Plexiglass sneeze guards between cubicles that are affixed to low cubicle walls.
- Door sensors that will bring up an alert when someone walks in with an above normal temperature so that the person can be asked to leave if it is deemed that they are a safety risk to others. This measure will make some feel safe while some may feel insecure, perceiving it as "1984"-style invasive surveillance; find out which before implementing.
- Extra cleaning schedule.
- Masks.
- Eliminate kitchen utensils, coffee makers.
- Rotating schedule to reduce # of people in office.
- Limit # of people in elevators.
- Follow building-owner guidelines, or if they provide none, then consult other tenants.

MENTAL-EMOTIONAL SAFETY & AGENCY

- Extra PTO (or not)
- From [SHRM](#): help employees feel supported by role-modeling "the ability to say, 'I'm feeling some anxiety right now,' or other words that normalize talking about mental health.
- From one HR leader: Communicating about re-opening should be more about "asking when folks would like to come back" as opposed to "telling them that they need to come back".
- Increased frequency (but not length) manager-staff 1-on-1 sessions.
- Increasing the EAP with additional mental health coverage.
- Manager-staff 1-on-1 sessions that are designed primarily for managers to listen to staff. Build trust by being consistent: *do not cancel 1-on-1's just because there is urgent work to do - employee trust is urgent and important.*
- Choose a different team to present whatever they want (work or not work related) online once a month. Team can choose representative or do it together.
- Talent show
- Trivia night
- Quarantine quest that gets your kids involved
- Birthday and accomplishment celebrations
- Weekly non-mandatory social coffee breaks, with an HR-appointed convener to make sure there is someone upbeat staffing the call
- Happy hours
- Online exercise, yoga, meditation, or mindfulness classes provided by employer
- Designate revolving teams to lead brown-bag lunch hours

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- Quick stand-up meetings to check in while actually standing up
- Quick stand-up meetings where leaders give updates and take questions
- suggest to employees to eat lunch online together with friends not from work (increases feelings of connectedness and stability)
- Help leaders be empathetic in their communications and action choices.
- Bring in support for employees who take care of elderly parents; bring in psychotherapist; suicide hotlines; acknowledge that this isn't normal and make it okay to say so.
- Celebrate staff-generated work-arounds, new processes, and accomplishments. Do it in a way that encourages rather than alienates those who weren't celebrated.
- Get informed about the signs of overly high mental-emotional stress:
<https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/mental-health-resources/>
- Getting non-talkers to talk: create a small group, ask powerful open-ended questions, don't say anyone has to answer but encourage them to share. The leader/manager should start.
- From another HR leader: Streamline, get rid of stuff. Get rid of tons of "rules" and "must do" in order to get things accomplished quickly." Take the transition moment to identify the busywork that staff does that takes away from individual and organizational priorities.
- Use the moment to allow, encourage, or assist staff to reinvent their jobs within the organization's strategic objectives.
- Let go, allow some risk, don't stifle with overly strict or overly many new procedures. Mothers eventually let their kids play outside in a civil war zone: even though there is always danger, one needs a measure of freedom to maintain a measure of sanity and agency.
- To be a resilient organization, what policies do you eliminate, change, or enact?