Workplace Cultural Considerations

The transition back to the office after the COVID-19 quarantine will not be a return to business as usual. An organization's successful re-entry into the workspace is bound to take time. It will also require a thoughtful approach that addresses all the changes in our habits and behavior, as well as in company spaces and procedures. The process will be different for each organization and will have to respect its particular workplace culture, objectives and workstyle. The following is provided as a resource tool to help each organization to adapt its own protocols in a way that best suits its needs.

Every management team will have to navigate a myriad of operational issues, but empathetic leadership must be at the heart of everything we do. One of the most important things to consider is how to make the transition a positive experience for everyone concerned.

First and foremost, the talent will need a place where they feel safe, supported and valued. This will mean:

1.
Demonstrating care for people

2.
Encouraging transparency and communicating often

3.
Cultivating a culture of trust and continuous learning

Demonstrating care for people

What do you need to accomplish before people return to work on site?

1. **Centralize decision-making, coordination and communications**
   - ☐ Set up a command center with cross-functional leaders to manage crises, workforce planning, financial planning, scenario modeling, contingency planning and communications with internal and external stakeholders.

2. **Establish clear and effective protocol and policies**
   - ☐ Protocols for social distancing in the workplace, as well as for meetings and business travel.
   - ☐ Health, hygiene and daily cleaning/disinfection requirements.
   - ☐ Contingency plans for new outbreaks, including the conditions that might trigger further workplace shutdowns.

3. **Assess readiness and determine the criteria and timing for re-entry**
   - ☐ Pulse your team and establish feedback channels to sound out any potential concerns and employees' willingness to return.
   - ☐ Determine what technology and tools will be necessary to support team collaboration, testing and cleaning.
   - ☐ Make a checklist of the steps required to reopen.

4. **Create a clean, welcoming and secure environment**

5. **Prepare your team**
   - ☐ Give people the autonomy to choose whether they're ready to come back.
   - ☐ Develop guidelines to evaluate who is fully ready to physically return to the office, depending on each individual's health and quarantine history.
   - ☐ Determine how to phase in the return. Which functions and roles should be the first to come back to the office and re-enter the workspace?

6. **Review human resources procedures, policies and benefits and set up:**
   - ☐ Flexible work policy, given the new expectations.
   - ☐ Travel guidance and restrictions, PTO, or sick leave.
   - ☐ Workforce flexibility in the case of family illness (if further quarantine is called for) and for those who have child care and elder care responsibilities.
   - ☐ Additional benefits needed to address limitations that have emerged during the crisis.

Behavior change and ways to show care as your people practices evolve

1. **Provide emotional support**
   - ☐ Pulse employees regularly to understand their concerns.
   - ☐ Engage experts to provide advice and support.
   - ☐ Mobilize on-site and virtual access to resources for physical and emotional well-being; recognize and address any concerns about the return to work.
   - ☐ Manage emerging unconscious bias toward recovering or recovered individuals or workers from particularly hard-hit locations.

2. **Provide health, safety, and wellness support**
   - ☐ Determine how to set up health screenings and precautions (e.g., temperature screening, wearing masks) in a way that emphasizes safety concerns and not infringement on individual rights.
   - ☐ Develop and implement a plan to monitor workplace health and contact-tracing.
   - ☐ Educate managers and leaders on workers' concerns, the resources available and steps to take if an employee might potentially be ill.

3. **Establish new operating and social norms**
   - ☐ Plan for workplace interactions, segmenting critical employees, greetings, elevator protocols, meeting guidance and PPE recommendations.
   - ☐ Provide transparency and flexibility with updates on new policies and organization actions.

4. **Support remote work**
   - ☐ Design a virtual workplace technology ecosystem that facilitates productive remote work.
   - ☐ Implement teaming best practices to collaborate effectively.
   - ☐ Provide learning opportunities on how to effectively lead and manage remote teams, communicating effectively, collaborating with teams, etc.
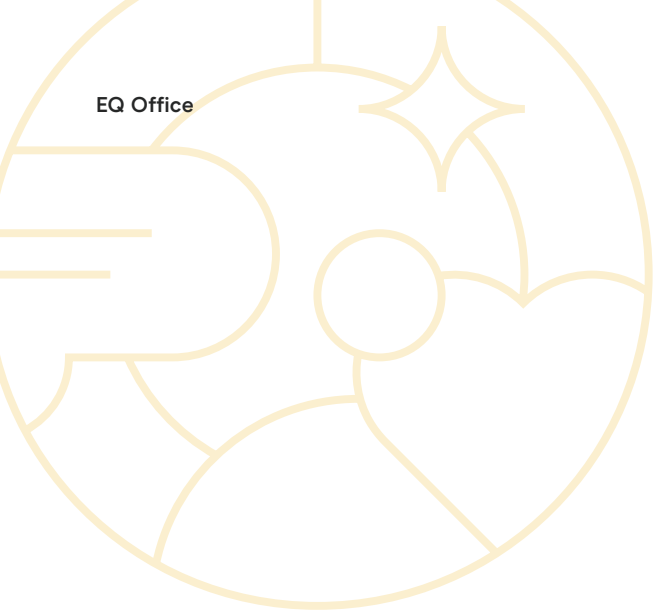
5. **Consider new ways to enhance and incentivize performance**
   - ☐ Develop and implement reward and well-being programs to identify, recognize and incentivize your talent.
   - ☐ Reset performance expectations; assess impact on compensation programs geared to retaining talent.

6. **Review workforce impact and long-term planning needs**
   - ☐ Conduct workforce planning and model multiple workforce scenarios.
   - ☐ Reevaluate real estate, facilities and/or construction investments.
   - ☐ Identify opportunities to restructure workplaces for efficiencies.

Being transparent and communicating often

1. Communicate early and often, and across the appropriate channels, expectations about re-entering the workspace.

2. Provide guidance to employees and other stakeholders on the new workplace procedures for conducting business and social interactions.

3. Specify health and safety protocols for re-entering the workplace (i.e., thermal scanning, face masks, etc.).

4. Set up the process for worker inquiries and monitor worker health.

5. Develop and launch training to facilitate effective remote teams, the use of technology platforms and how best to manage teams remotely.

6. Plan how to conduct communications in a crisis.

Communicating during a crisis

It is critical to maintain two-way communication throughout the crisis. Establish a dedicated channel/hub for workers to submit questions, feedback and concerns. Also consider deploying pulse surveys on a regular basis, to gauge the health and productivity of your workforce.

Human

The tone and messaging should be direct, honest and empathetic

- Acknowledge that, in addition to the emotional toll of this crisis, professional difficulties may arise, and workers may struggle to focus and acclimate to working on site again.
- Highlight the resources available and the efforts being made to ensure that workers remain safe and healthy, both physically and mentally.

Frequent

Don't leave your workers to fill in the blanks — communicate often

- There will continue to be uncertainty. Communicating that some issues have not been fully resolved, or that decisions have yet to be made, is better than not communicating at all.
- Avoid saturating workers with communication. Designate a channel/hub (or several) for updates. This will allow workers to tune in and out as they see fit.

Intentional

Different workers will require different means of communication

- Consider the characteristics of your worker population when determining the communication mix::
  - Physical (flyers, posters, etc.) — best suited to hourly or on-site workers.
  - Digital (email, social media, collaboration platforms) — best suited for office workers and hourly workers (where allowable).

Cultivating a culture of trust and continuous learning

How do you build a culture of trust and continuous learning?

1. Develop methods to drive and evaluate engagement and productivity in the new work environment.

2. Determine and highlight values that have emerged for the organization during this period.

3. Assess new cultural norms, ways of working and physical/virtual interactions among workers, customers, vendors and other stakeholders.

4. Demonstrate flexibility about workers' needs.
   □ Be clear on expectations of performance and delivery.
   □ Measure output and productivity rather than time.

5. Launch continuous learning programs to coach and train the workforce to be successful in the new normal.

6. Be rigorous about the routines expected of remote teams, so that they can collaborate effectively and consistently.

7. Acknowledge and reward performance regularly to improve team morale and business outcomes.

8. Communicate with the workforce frequently to establish transparency and smooth the transition to the new normal.

Ways to lead in this time

1. **Be a steady hand at the wheel**
   People are stressed, uncertain and sensitive to the emotions of their leaders. They seek calm in the storm. Set a measured, light tone. Self-regulate. Have clear priorities. Be grounded in mastery of the facts. Offer pragmatic hope.

2. **Be empathic rather than sympathetic**
   People want to know that you are aware of what they are going through. Show them you care by asking questions that reflect that you understand their situation and needs. Take their perspective into account. Check your personal baggage and ego — it's not about you, it's about them. Meet them where they are.

3. **Show up as the authentic you**
   People appreciate honest connection with those who are leading them. They want their leaders to be real. Share what you are going through. Be vulnerable and as transparent as you can. Wear your old college sweatshirt to a meeting.

4. **Lighten the burden**
   In the virtual work world, people may feel unfocused, disconnected, and less motivated to be productive. Leaders can help by modeling that it's acceptable to be less serious on occasion. Start meetings with a personal, creative touch. Bring perspective and humor. Laugh.

5. **Wear your company and personal purpose T-shirt.**
   In times of crisis, people crave meaning and inspiration more than ever. Small words and gestures can give them hope for today and for a better tomorrow. Every day, consciously model how to focus and stay true to what matters most to you and your team — personally and professionally — (a) through what you say, (b) how you make decisions and (c) how you act.