Navigating the new normal

We are all currently trying to predict the future. We've adapted to lockdown and moved our working lives into our homes, but as restrictions begin to ease in parts of the country, it's clear that things may never return to the 'normal' we knew before.

Facebook and Google have already confirmed that their employees will be working from home for the rest of the year, whilst Twitter recently announced that their workforce will now be permanently remote.

Initially it looked like working from home would be a stop-gap for a few weeks, so most of us have carried on working in the same way as before, simply swapping face-to-face meetings for video calls. But as a people manager, you're now facing the long-term challenge of helping your team navigate through change and uncertainty with no end date or tangible 'goal' in sight. If the current situation makes you feel daunted or overwhelmed, you're not alone – no leadership training or management course prepared us for Covid-19. But there are simple habits and behaviours that you can begin to implement now which will help you to assess the risks and re-prioritise in order to manage the change effectively and support your team.

This article will provide you with tips and guidance to support you in managing change, including:

1. **The risk of 'business as usual'**
2. **Making time**
3. **Creating a culture of feedback**
4. **Normalising conversation around mental health**
5. **Maintaining a sense of control**
6. **Managing upwards**
7. **Communicating through uncertainty**

Useful links

- **AXA PPP Webinar – 'Managing change and dealing with uncertainty'**
- **Survey tips & questions**
- **Example business case**

1. The risk of 'business as usual'

As anyone who has ever gone through an acquisition will tell you, change and uncertainty can be extremely difficult to manage, but couple this with a remote, distributed workforce and you have a complex set of challenges. Your team members are likely to react differently to working from home – some may thrive and find themselves more motivated and productive, whereas others may find it challenging, which could cause an imbalance within the team. In addition, long-term uncertainty can breed fear and resentment and remote working can increase the risk of some employees experiencing poor mental health, which means that the 'people' aspect of your role is likely to need your attention more than ever. By failing to focus on this element, you run the risk of low morale, increased sickness absence, increased attrition and reduced productivity within your team.

2. Making time

As a line manager, one of your biggest obstacles is time. You don't have enough in the day as it is, so how do you make space in your workload to concentrate more on the 'people' piece? You could consider up-skilling some of your direct reports to take over some of your other duties, for example train someone in the team to do reporting, audits, training or monitor workflow/task allocation. By delegating some of the more transactional tasks, it not only frees up time in your schedule but can also serve as a useful tool to develop high-potential team members.

3. Creating a culture of feedback

Giving and receiving feedback isn't something we're all naturally comfortable with, but by embedding it into your usual routine you can start to make it a normal occurrence. By doing this, you create a culture of trust in which your employees feel comfortable to openly share their thoughts, which can provide you with valuable insight.

You can use the tools already available to you, for example performance reviews, 1-2-1s and team meetings, or you can create other channels to distribute and receive information:

- Hold weekly meetings to discuss any Company-wide communications that have been issued that week and allow your team time to ask questions or raise concerns

- Take advantage of free survey tools, such as SoGo Survey, Google Forms or Survey Monkey to seek feedback anonymously. Not everyone feels comfortable airing their views in an open forum, so anonymity can encourage people to share things that may otherwise have been left unsaid. To assist you, we have compiled some survey questions that you might consider using, along with tips on how to position the survey and what to do with the data afterwards – **click here for details**.

- If that feels too time consuming, you could consider narrowing it down – ask one question per week or pick a topic each week and ask for ideas. Make it relevant – think about the challenges you're currently facing and seek input, eg. how do you feel about returning to the office? What one improvement can we make within our team to become more efficient? Do you prefer working at home, in the office or a mixture of both?

4. Normalising conversation around mental health

Remote working can increase isolation and make it more challenging for employees to manage their mental health. In addition to this, long-term uncertainty and a changing environment can increase feelings of stress and anxiety, which means that as a line manager, monitoring your employees' wellbeing will be critical to the change process. Employees who feel supported, heard and more in control of their work and working environment are likely to be more resilient and able to deal with change. We will deal with this topic in more detail in a future edition of the Working Well Toolkit, so keep an eye out for further resources.

Monitoring wellbeing is much trickier to handle when you can't see your team in person – usually you might notice a change in mood through body language or behaviour, but in order to spot these signs remotely, you need to actively and deliberately look out for them and open the conversation.

The easiest way to do this is to try and make mental health a normal part of your regular interactions with your team, to encourage them to open up if they're struggling. Ask questions in 1-2-1s (or team meetings if you think it's appropriate) such as how has your mental health been this week?; what's affected your mental health this week?; or what are you doing to take care of your mental health this week? This can help to remove the stigma and over time should lessen the awkwardness that is often felt when holding these conversations.

5. Maintaining a sense of control

One of the most difficult aspects of enforced change is feeling out of control or overwhelmed. There are ways in which you can try to counteract this, such as:

- Provide a clear vision for your team, where possible. If there is uncertainty in the wider business, then setting short or medium-term goals specific to your team's objectives can help to keep a sense of focus.
- Focus on the things within your control – talk through any concerns and try to come up with solutions for the things you can change (eg. work environment, deadlines, tasks etc).
- Try not to think too far-ahead. Remove uncertainty from the short-term by making a plan for the next 1-3 weeks and running through it with your team. You could hold a meeting before close of play each Friday to discuss the plan for the following week so that everyone goes into the weekend knowing what's ahead.
- Seek feedback (see point 2 above) – giving your team a platform to share their opinions and input to the process can help reduce feelings of powerlessness.

6. Managing upwards

When operating in a changing environment, you may find that you have increasing demands placed upon you and it can be difficult to say no. If you or your team are under pressure, you could:

- Discuss your concerns with your own line manager and ask for clarity on acceptable risks to help you prioritise – what deadlines can be pushed back, what work can be allowed to fall? Even if nothing can be moved, it's helpful to manage expectations by flagging your concerns.
- If you (or your team) have an idea or suggestion as to how something can be changed or improved, consider presenting this in the form of a business case. Use data to back up your suggestion (eg. results from a staff survey) and keep it concise – bear in mind that your manager is also likely to be short on time. **Click here for an example business case.**

7. Communicating through uncertainty

Communicating can be difficult when you don't have the answers that your team are seeking, but try to avoid dodging the subject altogether. If you create a void, the likelihood is that your team will try to read between the lines and fill it with negative (and often incorrect) assumptions. Be as honest as you can in your interactions and talk through their concerns – sometimes just an acknowledgement of the difficulty they're facing can be enough to lower stress levels. And if you don't have the answer, try to find out. It can be frustrating for your team if you don't make the effort to seek guidance for them.

Right now everyone is probably wondering about the return to the office. Some team members may be desperate to get back, whilst others may be worried about maintaining social distancing in an office environment. If your business hasn't yet shared a plan for returning then this is a classic example of dealing with uncertainty. If you're not sure what to say to your team, try to seek information about the key factors being considered by your senior management team – what will drive their decision-making process? Seeking your team's feedback will also be invaluable in helping you to understand the issues you may face, and by feeding this upwards you may be able to assist in the planning process.