

After the Pandemic: 12 Challenges for Managers

As with many workplace issues, managers and supervisors occupy a place on the front lines of each workplace. They are responsible for directing and supervising day-to-day work and may be the only ones to lay eyes on employees. Managing remotely has created many challenges and there will be new challenges when employees return to the workplace. At this point, how to address those may involve more questions than answers.



Since most of us have not experienced a pandemic, what we know about managing them comes from research into past traumatic events. Some patterns of behavior and impact are common to epidemics such as SARS, H1N1, and various flu epidemics. We also learned something about return to work issues post-9/11. History has shown that businesses need to anticipate workforce problems as people return to work. Here are 12 challenges that managers and supervisors may face in the future.

1. The returning workforce may be traumatized from the months of self-quarantine, illness, and fear of death. Some workers prioritize work differently from an existential perspective. Some have more resiliency than others.
2. It is likely that when the return to work orders are given, not all employees will be on board. Some will continue to feel anxious and unsafe at work while others may simply refuse to come in.
3. We know from history that trauma which occurs in a pandemic can activate behavioral issues or exacerbate existing mental health conditions. Managers will need to monitor their employees' emotional wellbeing and consult with HR professionals and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) about what changes they are witnessing.
4. In addition to mental health issues, some employees may return to work with significant financial concerns due to a change in family income or a period of furlough. Some will benefit from referrals to the EAP for financial consultation.
5. Employees may be worried about the financial health of the organization and start looking around at their employment options. Managers should be prepared to discuss this.
6. From a career mobility standpoint, employees may feel confined in their current role after seeing massive layoffs and furloughs.
7. Employees may be helping their children to adjust to a new way of living. Employees who were alone and suffered from isolation may be needy. Employees who lost family members will be grieving and may still be waiting for a formal service.
8. Incidents of domestic violence, child abuse and elder abuse often increase during traumatic events. Managers should be alert to these potential issues.

9. Employees who struggle with addiction issues may have relapses before during or after traumatic events. Depression, hopelessness and protracted grief responses may lead to thoughts of suicide. Managers should watch for signs and address them immediately.
10. Sometimes traumatic events lead to blaming and xenophobic reactions. Managers need to be alert to any disparagement or stigmatization that might be present in the workplace.
11. During this pandemic, many people discovered that it was difficult to live without the usual structure and routines of their work and home lives. Managers and supervisors can help put work structures back in place while also recognizing that flexibility is needed. Emotional recovery from this pandemic will vary from person to person.
12. We know that pandemics have waves of seeming recovery and managers will need to help employees weather these storms. Similar to experiencing a bad day during recovery from depression, a step back into social isolation or physical distancing may feel like a devastating turn of events.

Pandemics leave a very long psychological footprint. Although managers are key in the recovery process, managers are people too. Every manager or supervisor returning to work may also have been traumatized by the course of the pandemic or feel psychologically vulnerable. How will his or her needs be met? Will they have the resiliency to be able to offer structure and support to others?

Organizations need to consider these issues and get help for managers and supervisors. Can senior leaders and HR professionals offer discussion forums about return to work issues? Is your EAP well equipped to offer group support to managers and supervisors during the early return to work period? As we face these challenging and uncertain times, engaging the EAP for both managers and employees will be critical.

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