Suggestions for Leaders to Support their Teams through the Return to In-Person Work Transition

The Covid-19 pandemic forced a sudden, jarring, and drastic change in how everyone lives and works. We all faced fears about the future. We looked forward to when we could "return to normal." COVID restrictions are now lifting and a return to in-person work for those who were remote is approaching reality. For many, this transition back to what was once "normal" is itself a source of stress and anxiety. Continued concerns about infection, vulnerability of family members, and public transportation remain for some, while for others, remote work has been a positive experience, easing personal and professional juggling acts. Leaders play a vital role in supporting their teams and ensuring safety, while also considering new options for how and where people work. Addressing emotional well-being will be an important effort in facilitating this process. Since there are many whose roles required that they remain onsite, bringing teams back together will be another component of promoting a positive work environment. To guide these efforts, CopeColumbia has compiled the following recommendations for supporting the psychological well-being of team members through this transition.

1) *Safety first:*
    - Emphasize that safety always comes first
    - Acknowledge that for some people getting vaccinated remains a source of anxiety and conflict.
    - Encourage unvaccinated employees to reach out if they have remaining questions/concerns and would like to speak with someone about them.
    - Make sure you understand the infection control procedures at your work sites (We have listed a few websites with guidance from CUIMC, NYP and the CDC below.)

2) *Create opportunities for employees to express concerns confidentially and without negative consequence:*
    - Let your team know that you understand that this transition may be stressful and challenging.
    - Listen to concerns without judgement even if you do not agree the concerns are warranted or are able to fully alleviate the concerns
    - If you are perceived as dismissive you risk missing important information that will impact this transition and may lose opportunities for employee engagement and cooperation
    - Active listening is a skill and requires time investment so all members of your team have the opportuinity to be heard.

3) *Recognize that work/life demands have changed:*
    - Many team members experienced and continue to experience high levels of stress and trauma
    - They may still have concerns about their own health or that of family members.
    - Prior commute routines or time away from home before the pandemic may no longer be as easy or desired for many people

4) *Acknowledge differences and disparities, while creating fair guidance:*
    - People's lives have been affected in many different ways
    - A "one size fits all" approach to returning onsite may not be the best or most equitable answer for your team.
    - Issues related to racial and gender disparities may re-emerge during this transition.

5) *Provide opportunities for identifying and sharing the positive aspects of returning to in-person work*:
    - Create safe spaces for your team to express their thoughts and listen to each other
    - This can spread positivity about this transition

- It can also give you helpful information about what is important and challenging to your team
- Many people have 'forgotten" about the wonderful aspects and meaning of being on site and working in-person with colleagues. Remind them of these aspects. Remind them of our values and mission.

6) *Advocate for flexibility:*
   - In many areas remote work can be just as effective and productive as in-person work.
   - Yet there are also aspects of work that can only be done or are best done in-person.
   - With guidance from the university, your leadership, and the models that will be in place, consider:
     - o Are there workplace models that accommodate individuals' differing needs but still enable the work to be done well?
     - o What works best in person?
     - o What can be done as well or better remotely?

   Importantly, if employees feel both understood as individuals and respected as professionals they are more likely to be productive, engaged and positive team members.

7) *Gradual and steady:*
   - Follow guidance from senior leadership, regarding any new expectations for onsite work, and communicate them well in advance.
   - If possible, consider a transition back to in-person work in stages. A gradual transition, if viable, can help you identify issues before they become big problems and give people more time to adjust

8) *Transparency is key:*
   - Clear, honest communication about safety,how decisions are being made, opportunities for feedback, and any changes to the plan is critical.
   - Its also important to voice site limitations in accommodating every individual's requests without invalidating their challenges and needs.

9) *The goal is not to eliminate all the anxiety from people*:
   - Your role as a manager is not to elimininate the anxiety that the transition will elicit in many people.
   - Some degree of apprehension and stress is expected and normal.
   - Some of the anxiety will only improve once people go through the transition and re-adjust to their new work routines and schedules.
   - How you handle the transition proccess can be a significant moderator of how your team's experience will be and how supported they will feel.

10) *Prioritize your well-being.*
   - Your team will need you to be at your best to lead them through this transition
   - Caring for your own mental and emotional well-being first is not selfish and it is critical both for supporting your self and modeling for your team. As examples, ask yourself:
     - i. Do you take breaks during the day?
     - ii. Are you getting up and moving?
     - iii. Do you spend time outdoors?
     - iv. Are you connecting with others?
   - By modeling this behavior, your team will follow.

RESOURCES

Below are a few brief articles about how other groups are supporting teams through this transitions that you might find helpful.

https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2021/04/05/14-ways-to-help-employees-feel-safe-returning-to-in-person-work/?sh=701eb5a51515

CopeColumbia: During weekly meetings, leaders can speak about the opportunity to seek more support via CopeColumbia. If your Department or Division would like to arrange a Wellbeing Town Hall or Peer Support Group, please email us at CopeColumbia@cumc.columbia.edu. For our 1:1 Peer Support Line, call 646-774-6311. Our website has materials to support wellbeing, including curated wellness resources for individuals, resources and support for families, and content on grief, loss, trauma and anti-racism.

Office of Work/Life: Many programs are available to engage in Columbia's own well-being community including meditation sits, nutrition seminars, wellness challenges, guided fitness and stretching videos. Other services include support for housing/relocation, child care and schooling, adult and elder care, flex work resources and more. – worklife.columbia.edu

Columbia HR/Benefits: Various benefits and resources are available including mental health coverage, well-being webinars, back to campus resourcs, and services offered through the Employee Assistance Program (confidential counseling sessions are available). - https://humanresources.columbia.edu/

The House Staff Mental Health Service (HSMHS): During Resident Meetings, PDs and Chiefs can speak about the opportunity to seek more support via the HSMHS. If your program would like to arrange a Noon Conference or Peer Support Group or if you prefer more individual support, please contact the HSMHS via Dr. Mayer at lsm16@cumc.columbia.edu or call 646-774-8067.

CUIMC guidance and Policy https://www.cuimc.columbia.edu/covid-19-resources-cuimc,
NYP guidance https://www.nyp.org/coronavirus-information,
General CDC guidance https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/office-buildings.html.