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LEADERSHIP, REMOTE WORK

# Three ways to help your staff overcome a fear of returning to the office

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Fear distracts us from our work.

Fear pulls us off our goals, and when it is very loud in our heads, it can direct our choices and push us strongly towards fight, flight or freeze behaviours.

None of these responses are useful for us at work when we are making decisions, communicating, building ideas, collaborating, or being effective in our roles.

Ultimately our ability to control fear will determine our performance individually and collectively.

As we stretch out of our local world back into our offices, there is a huge amount of fear that is related to COVID-19. This is partly because of the virus itself and partly because of the impact of having had such an isolating year.

We head back into the workplace with a mixture of excitement and trepidation.

Of course, there are continuing fears about our health and wellbeing and our loved ones. However, there are now more complicated fears that are showing themselves to really impact us at work.

We are, to some extent, now unfamiliar with our old way of working and living.

Unfamiliar with being around others, with certain spaces we haven't been in, with rules and regulations and many things will feel strange.

As we reintegrate, we are reconnecting with others and learning not only about their 2020, but also, about their opinions and attitudes towards the restrictions and recommendations.

Here are some things you can do to help your employees move beyond their fears.

## **Be patient**

Habits are relatively quick to form and so we have developed some habits that make much of our 'old' life feel uncomfortable.

We are, to some extent, out of practice. All of us.

It might not take long for things to shift, but compassion is key to enable people to travel through quickly.



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Criticism and judgement will make it harder.

## **Recognise that there are differences between our experiences**

Some will have loved isolation, others will have really found it incredibly challenging.

Some will be eager to talk and re-integrate, others will have got comfortable with retreating or having permission to run their lives from home.

We will differ over our COVID-19 fears.

Do not assume that because we have all be in the same sea, we are all in the same boat.

## **Normalise fears**

We all have fears. Fear is our front-running human emotion.

Whether we are frightened of physical danger, some have imposter syndrome, others are worried about people liking them, some people are worried about others seeing their emotions or their vulnerabilities.

The more we try to hide or squash them, the more they come out in ways that we don't want, we may snap or be irritable when it is inappropriate, or we may avoid opportunities that would actually get us closer to our goals.

Normalising our shared experience of fear (even though the cause may be different) and discussing them in a non-judgmental way will help our colleagues master their fears.

## **Try to locate the specific fear**

Help your staff safely locate what their fear is about by asking gentle open, as opposed to closed questions which lean them to yes or no answers.

For example: 'Is there something specific that would make you feel more comfortable?'

Provide a list of things which could be part of their worries. For example, sharing equipment such as the photocopiers or phones, clear COVID-19 guidelines being upheld, their commute or even their childcare.

If it is about shared equipment in the office space, then make some guidelines. If it is about the commute, provide different arrival and departure times to flex to their concerns. If there are worries about childcare, resolve them through flexibility.

We see so much more when we hear each other's perspective.

COVID-19 may leave us, but fear never will.

Fear is the main block to us reaching our potential, individually and as a group.

Understanding how to manage our fear, and reach into courage, is how we will remain flexible to all the challenges we are yet to meet.