
Returning to the workplace after lockdown – supporting teams to reconnect



With the easing of restrictions in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, many organisations have re-opened. This means a return to the work after a long period of furlough or returning to working in the on location. For employees, it may have been several months since they have worked in the same physical space as their teams. Here are some factors to consider in supporting teams to reconnect.

Have early conversations

Create opportunities for open dialogue with each individual employee and the team, both prior to, and when returning to the office. Encourage and model discussion about the potential benefits and areas of concern about re-entering the workplace.

Foster open communication

Open communication allows team leaders to be aware of problems or frustrations, collect collaborative suggestions about ideas of improvement, and receive feedback about how teams are feeling about coming back to the office. Encourage team members to communicate about how they work as a team and how they are adjusting.

Understand the implications of social distancing on team interactions in the workplace

It is likely that some employees will feel overwhelmed, hypervigilant, and anxious at the prospect of being in the same physical space as others after a prolonged period of social isolation. Easing back into the office may result in employees operating with a higher degree of alertness and increased awareness of others' behaviour. This increased anxiety may trigger scrutiny on health and hygiene practices. While this might have the benefit of encouraging good hygiene practices, for some the increased anxiety may result in conflict and tension between colleagues.

Leaders can support their employees and managers to upskill in conflict resolution and managing team dynamics. Providing opportunities for teams to come together and take stock of any issues during the adjustment phase is crucial in fostering positive reconnection of teams.

Maximise opportunities for reconnection and non-work related activities

It has likely been quite some time since teams have come together to debrief about the chaotic year that has passed. Create opportunities for informal group dialogue and team catch ups (e.g., coffee breaks, short team catch ups). Team-building activities and informal breaks have shown to boost staff morale and increase team connectedness.

Schedule time to review and take stock

Team leaders are encouraged to organise group wellbeing checks. It is likely that many individuals in each team are having shared concerns and experiences about the nature of returning to the office as a team. During a time of change, often the focus can be directed away from the self and on the immediate work tasks and demands of the team. In a group wellbeing check, all participants are equals and are expected to be open, supportive and nonjudgmental of each other. The process allows for personal reflection on the nature and context of the work and is benefited by teams reflecting on shared experiences, increasing a shared understanding and team connectedness.

It can also be beneficial to have wellbeing checks independently facilitated by a trained facilitator. They can help to create a psychologically safe space for employees, and can provide thematic, anonymous feedback to management.