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## **ARTICLE** **CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

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*by Sarah Clayton and Anthea Hoyle*

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# Help Your Employees Manage Their Reentry Anxiety

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As many states are giving the green light to reopen, employers are developing plans to bring employees back to work safely, giving careful thought to schedules, seating configurations, visitor policies, elevator usage, food delivery, and much more.

While workforce reentry certainly includes logistical and operational planning, it is not just physical well-being that employers must take into account. Equally important is how organizations will

respond to employees' emotional and psychological health —a topic that, regrettably, is discussed far less frequently.

[Anxiety](#) is near-universal right now — a natural reaction to unnatural circumstances and an uncertain future. Nearly half of employees are concerned that their employers will bring them back to work before it's safe, according to [a national survey](#) by Weber Shandwick and KRC Research. More than half worry about the future of the company they work for — and their job specifically.

If employers don't address these sources of anxiety and assist employees in managing their mental health, bringing people back to work will do little to help companies return to pre-Covid productivity and engagement levels.

Many companies will need to enhance current practices, supplementing external or third-party mental health programs with a greater capacity to deal with stress, anxiety, and uncertainty “in house.” This does not mean attempting to take the place of trained mental health practitioners but rather building greater internal awareness of, sensitivity toward, and ability to address employee concerns.

Drawing on our many years of experience as people, culture, and change consultants, we've identified five things employers must do to help reduce employee reentry anxiety. The five indicators can serve both as a framework to help employers build their reentry plans and as measures by which to assess progress.

### **1. Make employees' well-being your top priority.**

Employees want reassurance that their companies will put their people first whenever possible, especially in difficult times. [Costco's](#) decision to institute hazard pay for frontline workers, [Apple's](#) move to offer paid sick days, and [Delta CEO Ed Bastian's choice](#) to forgo his salary for six months are early examples of corporate values in action that helped relieve employee concerns.

Most employers receive good marks from their people for the way they've responded to the pandemic thus far. Large majorities in our survey said that their employer is putting safety above profits (72%) and taking care of employees as best they can (74%) and that their employers' response is “exactly what it should be” (72%).

Companies must continue demonstrating commitment to their values during the reentry phase. They would do well to take a cue from Jane Fraser, president of Citi & CEO of Global Consumer Banking, who made Citi's reentry priority abundantly clear when she [wrote on LinkedIn](#):

“As #Citi plans for the future — re-opening our offices and determining what our new workplace needs will be — one thing is very clear to us. We will continue to prioritize the safety of our employees, customers and communities. That may mean being more cautious than the guidance of a city, state or country. We have a senior and seasoned team working on our return to the office to

ensure that when we do so, it is done intelligently and with the health and well-being of our people at the center of our decision making.”

## **2. Share accurate, timely, and transparent information.**

A consistent cadence of communications from your CEO or other trusted leaders is key to managing employee anxiety. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo has become [one of the most trusted sources in the country for Covid-19 guidance](#) because of his transparent and regular briefings.

Not surprisingly, our research shows that employees who regularly receive updates from their companies are more likely to have positive views of their employers. They are more likely to be proud to work for their companies (by 55%) and to look forward to going back to work (by 43%).

A pattern of open two-way communication is especially critical as employers take actions to deal with the pandemic’s economic impact. Organizations that have kept employees abreast of business performance and engaged in ongoing dialogue with their people will be better prepared for difficult conversations.

## **3. Take swift action to implement recommended public health measures.**

Our research found that employees trust top public health experts, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Dr. Anthony Fauci, on reentry timelines. Fewer than one in 10 would feel safe returning to the office when only their employer says it’s safe.

Employees’ top five safety requests closely match CDC and others’ recommendations. Employees want their employers to:

- Extensively clean and sanitize work areas (55%)
- Encourage sick employees to stay home and institute flexible sick leave policies (52%)
- Promote ongoing personal hygiene (40%)
- Provide personal protective equipment (33%)
- Screen all employees before they return to the workplace (31%)

Employees need to know how these measures are being implemented, what the timeline is, and how the measures will be monitored and enforced. They also need assurance that steps are being taken to update protocols and processes as the situation evolves.

## **4. Train leaders, managers, and colleagues on how to support employees.**

Leaders and managers will shoulder much of the responsibility for ensuring a smooth return to the workplace. Some of our clients are considering holding mandatory virtual “reentry boot camps” for them, focused on topics such as dealing with ambiguity, building personal resilience, developing emotional intelligence, and leading hybrid teams. Armed with insights into these areas, managers can model needed behaviors and share them with their teams to support new ways of working.

People managers will need to take greater responsibility for employees' well-being. This includes familiarizing themselves with the warning signs of emotional distress, factoring more time into their days for checking in with staff, helping team members understand what is and isn't within their control, and learning how to triage real-time issues while other resources are called upon to help.

Anxiety will be further reduced as employees reengage with their colleagues through informal and formal support networks. Quarantining and social distancing have meant that people have lost the very support systems and coping mechanisms that would otherwise have helped them weather the storm. All employees can initiate forums for reconnecting with one another (virtually or physically, from six feet away) with empathy and compassion as they adapt to their new normal.

### **5. Offer flexibility.**

Our large-scale work-from-home experiment has shown that at least for some industries, it is possible to get work done not only remotely but on a variety of schedules that best accommodate people's preferred working hours and personal commitments. As workplaces reopen, employers can expect pressure to maintain this flexibility, particularly from team members caring for children or sick loved ones. Many may wonder, "If I can't return to a pre-Covid work situation, will I be viewed as not fully committed or, worse, lose my job?"

Employers who wish to reduce anxiety can discuss and align on how to handle these issues now. They should consider the following questions:

- Do we follow the example of Twitter, Facebook, Nationwide, and others and move to a largely remote model?
- If not, to what extent will we allow different employee groups to choose when to come back to the office?
- Is a wholesale reevaluation of our work-from-home policy in order?
- What accommodations do we need to make to enable a truly hybrid (including work-from-home and remote employees) workforce?
- How can we ensure a continuing priority on diversity, equity, and inclusion while managing a remote or hybrid workforce —and that there won't be unintended consequences for those who remain offsite?
- How will we protect older workers, employees with medical conditions, parents, and populations disproportionately impacted by the virus from being discriminated against?

In all the planning to keep employees physically safe, let's not forget the impact of Covid-19 on their psychological health. The anxiety generated by these circumstances can produce fatigue, concentration problems, increased use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs, and worsening of existing health conditions, all of which have the potential to negatively impact work performance. Taking these five actions is the right thing to do, but that's not the only reason to get behind them. Employers' attention or inattention to all aspects of their employees' well-being during this chapter will have reputational consequences for many years to come.

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