How to Have Empathetic Conversations when Discussing Returns to the Workplace

We want to empower leaders to have thoughtful and empathetic conversations with each employee as we transition back into the workplace. Please find some tools for having these conversations about returning to work during COVID-19.

We are facing unprecedented times and there are many unknowns in our future regarding COVID-19. In order to find ways to plan returns to work, we would like to ensure each individual we supervise creates a plan that eases this transition.

Please be sure to review the CDC and Caltech guidelines. We know that having conversations about returning to work can be challenging. This can lead to a wide range of interpretations and sensitivities concerning peoples’ comfort levels with what is considered a “safe practice.” Every person will have their own threshold for the amount of risk they are comfortable taking on. Some may feel safe sharing space with 6’ distance, others are comfortable on their own front lawns without masks, others might want masks, and others may not feel safe being with others who have taken different risks than their own.

1. **Center your conversation with empathy:** Ensure your first points of discussion are about your employee’s emotional health and physical safety. Begin the conversation by asking “How have you been doing during this time?” “How are you feeling physically and emotionally?”

2. **Consider power differentials:** Managers have the upper hand and your employees depend on you for their financial and physical well-being. You will have deadlines to meet but also think about how to create work spaces that are safe while managing your team during an ongoing pandemic.

3. **Reimagine productivity standards:** Current structures and daily tasks are very different during COVID-19. How we go to grocery stores, maintain family care needs, travel to-and-from work, etc. are entirely different and may present new challenges for your employee. Your expectations on your employee’s capacity to work may need to shift. Anticipate that your team will work at less than their previous capacity during this adjustment. It will be critical to evaluate and be clear with your team about which projects and tasks are priorities so everyone can feel successful. Additionally, you may need to allocate more time for people to work on projects. For example, if in the past you expected an email response time of 24 hours, then relax that to 48 hours. It’s important that you work with your employees to find consensus towards setting up reasonable deadlines during pandemic times.

4. **Make time to check in with your employees** to learn how this pandemic has been affecting them. This will allow them to share how they are doing and feeling. Being honest and transparent will invite a similar response.

When you set up the meeting with your staff:

1. Ask questions - open ended questions preferably (see page 2 for examples)
2. Ask them to imagine potential obstacles they will face in returning to work
3. Work together to come up with ways you can navigate those obstacles together
4. Help your employee form their own plan for what would feel comfortable for a timeline to return back to work. You can share your ideal timeline but know that theirs might look different based on their experiences, responsibilities, and feelings around navigating COVID-19
5. Come to each conversation with your ideal plan for how your team will return to work. Your ideal plan will need to evolve based on the needs and input from your staff.
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Questions for managers to consider while making individualized plans with their employees:

- How will social distancing be practiced and enforced?
- What other precautions are in place for each person’s safety?
- What is the protective equipment that will be provided?
- Can your staff continue working from their “safer at home” location?

Examples of Questions that are open ended empathic

- How would you handle ...?
- What would you do if...?
- Tell me what you expect ....
- Why do you think ...

Hypothetical questions—for example: What if you volunteered to take on this task? By creating a situation that is not real, but that could happen, you plant an idea in the employee’s head and possibly push them outside their comfort zone.

Probing questions—for example: Why do you think that? As the name implies, this type of question is designed to try to uncover what is going on below the surface; what is motivating a behavior or response.

Reflective questions—for example: Can you tell me more about that? These questions are designed to get the employee to explore an idea or issue in more depth.

Verifying questions—for example: Do you understand what I mean? These questions are meant to help you determine whether the employee understands your point of view.

Sources and further information Center for Mentoring Excellence http://www.centerformentoringexcellence.com/articles

Example Responses

I don’t like the idea of being in an enclosed space for nine hours a day.

“Thank you for bringing this concern up. It’s one you share with many. I want to work with you to figure out a plan for the amount of time that would feel comfortable for you. I’ve been in touch with our building manager and learned more about how the air ducts in our building work and can share more about that... What would feel like a compromise on this front?”

Listen, empathize and work with them to think creatively about temporary or intermittent remote work arrangements and/or schedules.

I believe I’m being asked to work in unsafe conditions.

“Thank you for your concern, this is an important topic and I want to work with you and all of our staff to ensure that the conditions are safe. I’d like to make a list of your concerns so that I can reach out to Human Resources to learn about how we can best address them.”

Listen to your staff’s concerns. Document them and reach out to Human Resources or the COVID team for support. Write down what answers you’ll need to find to bring back to the next meeting.

I have to go to work but have children at home and no child care options.
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“These are not easy times to navigate, thank you for raising this concern. You are not alone in this predicament. I’d like you to continue to work remotely and would like to know if you can prepare for me what would be realistic expectations for your work given all that you are navigating through right now.”

When child care options are limited - allow your staff to continue working remotely. Negotiate new realistic expectations for this difficult time.

I live with a family member who is in a vulnerable population, and I don’t want to expose the person to the virus.

“Thank you for letting me know, I can imagine this has been a very challenging time, and it makes sense that you want to take all the possible precautions to keep your family safe. I’d like to hear what would be a reasonable working plan moving forward?”

Work with this employee to find the right set up so they can limit their exposure or not be exposed and still work towards goals.

I think I just got sick from exposure to the coronavirus at work.

I’m so sorry you are not feeling well. I want to encourage you to reach out to your health care provider. And take the time you need away from the office.

Encourage your employees to work remotely or take the appropriate time off when not feeling well and to reach out to their health care provider if they are sick.

There are resources on campus to support you in having these conversations with. Please reach out for support or to practice. All of these resources are here to support you.

- Human Resources: [http://hr.caltech.edu/contact](http://hr.caltech.edu/contact)
- Staff and Faculty Consultation Center: Supervisors and management personnel may consult with SFCC counselors for new ideas and approaches to resolving work-related issues.
  - [http://sfcc.caltech.edu/](http://sfcc.caltech.edu/) or 626-395-8360
    - SFCC @TheWell Covid 19 Resources Library
- Caltech Center for Inclusion & Diversity: diversity@caltech.edu 626-395-6207