July 15, 2020

Reduce anxiety: Inform employees how you'll keep them safe at work

Communicate the plan and keep getting feedback

It's time to get back to work. Actually, time to get back to *the workplace*.

How you communicate what you're doing to keep employees safe is nearly as important as what you do to keep them safe.

"Social distancing might impact an organization's culture ... productivity and engagement," says Gamika Takkar, principal in Gartner's Customer Service & Support. "Developing an effective employee communication plan, and enabling managers to handle employee needs and responses, will help minimize the impact."

That's important because 65% of employees are anxious about returning to work, according to an Articulate Global survey.

Four keys:

- Make your practices, policies and expectations for safety clear before employees step back onsite.
- Post reminders throughout the facility.
- Send daily email with tips or updates.
- Talk about safety measures when you meet.

From there, follow these strategies to keep employees physically and mentally safe:

Keep the space safe

To protect employees' health:

Make space. Post reminders about the 6-feet rule and any other CDC guidelines that affect

*Please see **Safe at work …** on Page 2.*

Sharpen Your Judgment
Disgruntled worker stopped doing his job

"Tony, I called you in here to see if everything's OK," said Kelsy, his manager.

"I'm fine," said Tony, offering no explanation.

"Are you sure?" asked Kelsy. "Because for half the year you were one of my top performers and now you're missing deadlines."

Tony shrugged. "Like I said, I'm fine."

"I know you were upset by some of the recent changes, but that doesn't mean you can slack off," said Kelsy.

"I know that," said Tony. "Can I go back to work?"

"Sure," said Kelsy. "But I have to put this in your file since you missed a few deadlines, and you're already on a performance improvement plan."

A few weeks later, Tony missed another deadline, and Kelsy decided she had to let him go.

Shirked responsibilities

"How'd he take it?" HR Director Karl Dill asked.

"Fine," said Kelsy. "He didn't seem to care at all. Just asked if he could collect unemployment."

"Nope. Don't think he can," said Karl.

"What? I told him he could," said Kelsy. "It's not like he stole anything or started a fight."

"I realize that. But he intentionally stopped doing his job," said Karl. "That's willful misconduct."

The company contested Tony's right to unemployment benefits. Did it win?

This regular feature sharpens your thinking and helps keep both you and your firm out of trouble. It describes a real legal conflict and lets you judge the outcome.

Make your decision, then please turn to Page 4 for the court's ruling.

Safe at work …
(continued from Page 1)

your industry in areas where they work and congregate. Supply them with safety gear your state or municipality requires.

Say no to visitors. Only let employees who *must be* at work in the office. Employees who don't need to be at work shouldn't drop in. Restrict deliveries – from essential supplies to lunch drop-offs – to a single entrance that can be sanitized.

Be cordial and protected. Ignoring each other can lead to feelings of isolation. Remind employees they can greet each other six feet apart with a wave, thumbs-up or peace sign.

Meet remotely, even onsite. When your team needs to meet, have them use the same tools and technology remote employees use – Zoom, Google Hangouts, GoToMeeting and Skype. They can meet from their workstations on their computers or personal devices.

Set new schedules. Try flexible work hours and staggered or rotational shifts, so fewer people are on site at one time. Use the time between shifts to sanitize workstations and communal areas.

Redesign the workspace. If possible, create partitions between employees. Raise cubicle walls or have employees only work in cubicles that are distanced from each other. Add Plexiglas dividers in common areas, such as the break room, so people can sit together and interact safely.

Nurture their spirit

Mental health in our new working environment is vital.

To help employees cope with the changes and stress:

Build a virtual water cooler. Let employees set up group virtual meetings just for social purposes – during break or lunch times when they'd normally be chatting around the water cooler – to share stories, commiserate and pass along best practices.

Help them exercise their minds and bodies. Encourage employees to walk during breaks or lunch (if they aren't meeting virtually) alone or in pairs at a safe distance from each other. Set up a room with a screen and access to free virtual Yoga classes. Give them access to online professional and personal development classes.

Recognize their efforts regularly and tailor rewards. Applaud them for their efforts during challenging circumstances. Publicly – through social media and even advertising – thank them. Make sure rewards fit the times.

Sources: Gartner, tinyurl.com/Gartner481; articulate.com

Tech Corner

Beware of those bearing helpful messages; They lie

Despite all the warnings IT gives you about email scams, they're easy to forget when you're writing a report, ordering supplies, opening emails … and then you realize you just clicked on a possibly malicious threat.

Why are they so easy to fall for?

Tricky subject lines

Criminals think outside the box. They don't always use the classic approaches, and opt for clever email subject lines, found a new report from the security experts at Proofpoint.

Check out these subject lines used in successful email phishing attacks:

- lost ring (or lost watch)
- SharePoint document
- scanned from a Xerox Multifunction Printer
- dealer proposal
- updated building evacuation plan
- confidential document, and
- [first name], please add me to you LinkedIn network.

Remember, criminals try to get your guard down with a seemingly harmless email you wouldn't think twice about opening.

Source: tinyurl.com/phishing480

Real Problems, Real Solutions

Our subscribers come from a broad range of organizations, large and small. In this regular networking feature, three of them share their successes in improving workplace communication.

1 Detailed communication essential during upgrade

Getting a new software package upgrade installed and running was a challenge, but we needed to do it when a dangerous storm was coming.

We knew it was critical to complete the transition – and still leave enough time to get everyone home safely.

Coordination among departments

To make sure everything was done correctly and efficiently, our software upgrade required coordination among several departments.

We laid out business process reviews and defined everyone's job duties.

We also hashed out details such as who needed to run different types of reports, who needed what kind of system access and what supplies we needed.

For safety's sake, we designated who could stay home the week of the storm and who was essential personnel.

Thanks to a lot of detailed communication, preparation and teamwork, everyone got home safely – and the new software system was implemented successfully.

(Laurie Hagberg, Finance Assistant Director, Charleston County Government, North Charleston, SC)

2 Lead, empower, then get out of the way!

As a new leader, I wanted to get perspective from every level within our organization. I figured I'd be more equipped to manage operations and people if I understood how they worked.

So I pulled together an Operations Council with representatives from all levels and every department.

The meetings were awkward. Employees were reserved. Managers didn't react much either.

Took myself out of the picture

I didn't get much insight, so I left the meetings, hoping they'd open up without the boss there.

I told them to talk about issues, share information and let me know how it goes. They uncovered disconnects we needed to fix and resources we needed to share.

They created a "hub" with a knowledge base, video library and user community to fill gaps and better operate – all without me interfering!

(John Murdock, CEO, Centage, Natick, MA, shared his success on ChiefExecutive.net)

3 Strategy for smooth return-to-work process

For months, we've been strategizing for the eventual return to work. While our goals have remained the same, the process to achieve them has changed.

We're considering temperature checks, masks, gloves and returning in phases. Also, we may offer hoteling, a process by which employees reserve office space on specific days.

In addition, employees are answering weekly questionnaires about their potential exposure to the virus.

Sanitizing stations

Meanwhile, hand-sanitizing stations have been placed throughout the office, which has been disinfected. We're also asking employees what they expect and what they're concerned about.

We're keeping it human by engaging returning staff in conversations to help alleviate their anxieties. Regardless of how states allow people to return, we won't budge until employees feel ready.

It's a process. There are going to be changes. Be frank with people. Show empathy and have some fun.

(Kirt Walker, Vice President of HR, Yoh, Philadelphia)

YOUR LEGAL COACH

■ Older worker's performance slips: Fire or retire?

Question: We have an older employee who can't perform his job anymore. Should we fire him and give him severance or ask him to retire and give him a retirement package?

Answer: Stick with the termination. In fact, don't use the word retirement, says William Wortel, an employment law attorney at Bryan Cave LLP.

Don't say or write it

If you say or write "retirement" in a termination decision, it can be used as the basis for an age discrimination claim.

Focus on the only reason for letting the employee go: poor performance.

In conversations and documents, cite specific examples of digressions and the results, plus attempts to improve the performance, Wortel says.

Source: HRMorning.com and bclplaw.com

LIGHTER SIDE

■ Good reasons to leave good jobs?

Most employees leave jobs for reasonable reasons – forward personal or professional movement.

And then some told Office Team researchers they left good jobs for not-so-good reasons:

- "I'm making too much money and don't feel I'm worth it."
- "I don't want to work hard."
- "This work was getting in the way of having fun."
- "I just can't get up in the morning every day."
- "The colors of the walls bugged me."
- "I prefer to live off my trust fund, not work to live."
- "I like to switch jobs every six months or so."

COMMUNICATION NEWS

Surveys do more than measure engagement

Surveys not only gauge employees' feelings on change, they help leaders create engagement.

And research shows employee engagement translates directly to organizational success.

Whether you've just announced good news or bad news, asking workers how they feel shows you value their opinion.

Know what you're measuring

Here are two critical survey suggestions to help you translate employees' responses into action and keep engagement high.

Ask yourself this question. Before you even start designing a survey, ask yourself: What do we mean by engagement?

You need a deep understanding of how an engaged employee's behavior benefits your company. If your definition of engagement is simple and easy to understand, you'll know what to measure and improve.

Be clear. Clarity is a must for surveys. That means both clear questions and transparency about what your goals are.

If employees don't understand why you're asking, they'll be guarded about their answers. Then your data will be flawed.

Share what you want to accomplish and why – and employees will be forthcoming.

Help employees see meaning in their work

More than half of employees don't understand how their efforts affect the business, customers and colleagues.

If they don't understand the meaning in their work, they won't care.

"There's no such thing as a job that doesn't count," says Quint Studer, author of *The Busy Leader's Handbook*. "Leaders aren't taking the time to emphasize to each worker 'the why' of their jobs and the contribution it makes."

To help employees see and understand the meaning of their work, Studer recommends:

- **Reach out to customers** and ask if there are employees or departments they'd like to recognize and why. Share the feedback.
- **Dig deeper.** Customers will mention front-line employees. Ask the complimented employees, "Who supports you?" Then recognize those people.
- **Share meaningful stories companywide.** Use the compliments you gather, plus those customer service employees hear in regular kudos-type email blasts or internal posts.

Source: thebusyleadershandbook.com

Sharpen Your Judgment – The Decision

(continued from Page 1)

Yes, the company won. The Unemployment Compensation Board said Tony wasn't allowed to collect unemployment benefits.

Kelsy's company argued Tony was fired for "cause" – poor performance.

Previous performance reviews were presented as evidence, as was documentation that showed Tony did his job well up until the last few months when he deliberately started missing deadlines. That was enough to convince the court it was a case of willful misconduct.

Analysis: Keep detailed documentation

It doesn't happen all that often, but poor performance can rise to the level of willful misconduct. Problem is, it can be hard to prove in court.

That's why it's vital for managers to document staffers performance – clearly, thoroughly and frequently – with regular reviews. The more documentation you have, the easier it is to prove your case in court.

Doing this provides a timeline and creates a narrative of how employees progress and change, which could help your company if willful misconduct ever becomes an issue.

(Based on *Scott v. Unemployment Compensation Board.* Dramatized for effect.)