

Talk Your Way To A Less Stressful Return To Work



James Macpherson, the GGF's relatively newly appointed Health, Safety and Environment Manager writes his first exclusive column for The Installer on the topic of the how to make the return to work as stress free as possible.

So, we are going back to work! A lot of people will be feeling some form of anxiety about returning. Some more than others.

Anxiety will depend on each individual's current appetite for risk – and that appetite depends on the context of the situation.

What's the context?

Well, there are loads – our personal situations, our physical and mental health, our attitudes, work culture...the list goes on. But no matter what, these are stressful and anxious times. Those responsible for health and safety will have to think carefully about how

to mitigate that risk and how we mitigate the differing senses of anxiety.

Some simple tricks I have seen during this pandemic that I liked are:

- Communicating changes to the workforce before they return. Maybe a video of what the type of sites that will be encountered or how the factory looks like so it's not a surprise.
- Regular updates – I love the relaxed selfie-style videos I've seen from senior leaders.
- Have open Q&A calls with senior leaders to allow staff to ask questions.

Not easy but simple

One of the best solutions is simple, not easy but simple. It's talking – open, honest and supportive conversations. The catch here though is that it isn't a one size fits all solution. Stress and mental health, are like a dog walking through a muddy puddle. My dog is a very tall standard Poodle, he walks through a puddle and just his paws get wet. My mum's dog, a Cocker Spaniel, is not very tall and thus gets soaked. The point is that different people react and are impacted in different ways. So you and your managers need to be trying to have conversations with all your employees.

In discussions where you listen to your team's concerns, try to

Picture: Open, honest and supportive conversations will be the key to a successful return to work.

Images by StockSnap & jamesoladujoye from Pixabay

have empathy, try to understand the context and most importantly without judging are really important. Remember you are talking to collaborate and find solutions.

No one has the answer

As business leaders or managers we feel the need to always have the answer, yet right now no one has the answer – this is new to us all, so don't try to fix it yourself. Use the largest and most diverse asset in your business – your employees.

Cognitive diversity in your employees is one of the biggest untapped resources (that's for another article though). Ask your employees what they think – do they have any ideas of how to manage this risk?

Encourage and facilitate positivity

I was taught the three Ps by David McLean, an ex-Marine turned psychotherapist. Positive thoughts, Positive interaction and

Physical exercise. All of these unlock the good chemicals in the brain and when you feel good you work better, you're healthier etc. You can have lunchtime workouts or encourage walking to work but of course, you can't control people's thoughts. However, you can control the environment that they are in. That environment may be contributing to your employees' thoughts – are they positive or negative? Do your teams have positive interactions or is it all transactional? Do you ask your employee 'how are you doing?', then immediately follow up with, 'have you got that job done yet?' Because that's transactional, try to ask how people are and listen to their answer.

Being accountable

These are all powerful tips for managing mental health and stress. But it's hard to have positive interactions right now be-

cause of social distancing, it may even be hard to have positive thoughts right now. But when we are returning to work it's so important we listen to our team's concerns and hear what they are saying. If you have spent your business life looking for accountability this is how you get it. Engage and involve your teams, be interested in them, help them succeed because when they succeed you succeed and then, sit back and watch them choose to be accountable.

When it comes to managing stress and wellbeing, I don't have all the answers and I am far from a physiologist or an expert, yet I have found that we have two ears and one mouth so we should probably act accordingly. [i](#)

[The GGF will be returning to work at its London offices in a gradual organised manner under the stewardship of James Macpherson](#)

