

A SHORT GUIDE FOR MANAGERS IN THE TIME OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 crisis came upon the world so suddenly that it did not leave much time for companies to prepare. However, most companies in South Africa have been able to get the most of their operations functioning virtually and ensure that the wheels of business keep turning. An important ongoing consideration for all organisations is the safety of employees and the clients with whom they interact. Despite responding to the pandemic and its demands on individuals and businesses, given that the course of events is continually changing and unfolding, different, sometimes unexpected and certainly unexplored phenomena may arise.

Our data informs us that the top presenting problems that employees experience as related to COVID-19 is stress and anxiety. This is closely followed by the struggle to balance work and personal life, especially due to many people working from home and not yet used to implementing boundaries between the two. Worries about family members follow closely behind, especially those that may have existing chronic health conditions. Conflict in relationships is next and this is understandable given all the stress, anxiety and worry, as well as being in the confines of the work from home situation.

A reaction that has remained constant amongst employees is the anxiety and fear that they express. This is usually related to their job security and their health.



Employees feel afraid that they may lose their jobs due to the impact that the virus has had on the economy. For those that support an entire family and often an extended family, the idea of losing their job understandably creates a lot of stress and worry.



Employees are afraid of contracting the virus. This fear is exacerbated when someone in the team comes into contact with a COVID-positive employee or client or a team member's family member tests positive. This kind of anxiety needs to be contained by the company as it can be disruptive, impacting negatively on productivity.



Employees are afraid of losing their loved ones to the virus. There is a high possibility that everyone will have the virus at one time or another in the near future, and it is often unclear how one's body will respond to the virus. Further, employees feel afraid of infecting their loved ones themselves.



Routine as we knew it has gone, to be replaced with routines that some employees may find uncomfortable or isolating.

It is normal for people to grieve for things lost and that includes things like routines, 'what used to be', as well as for the loss of people. Employees may be grieving for all of the things that were.

It is important for employees to feel cared for by the organisation and therefore, caring for employees' mental health is critical so that they can continue to be productive and engage in their occupation in a meaningful way.



Below are some useful and practical tips to consider:

- 01** Make sure that all health and safety protocols are observed and monitored. This includes ensuring that **physical distancing** is observed if your teams are working in the office. Also implement ongoing cleaning in the office. These things will show employees that you are concerned about their wellbeing. As far as possible though, try and let a percentage of your workforce work remotely.
- 02** **Identify your vulnerable employees** which are those with pre-existing health conditions and ensure that they work remotely, but do not forget to keep connected with them and keep them connected to the larger teams. Connections can be made through virtual weekly meetings, virtual social gatherings or virtual check-ins.
- 03** Ensure that your company has a protocol that can be implemented by any **team member that may test positive**. The protocol may include ensuring that the team member self-isolates or get hospitalised or whatever it is that they need. Make sure that you keep in contact with them. Then follow the standard procedures of decontaminating the work area and do risk assessments on the team members that may have been in contact with the positive employee. This makes employees feel that the company is serious about effectively containing any COVID-related risks and they feel that the company takes their wellbeing seriously. Understand and expect that employees may feel vulnerable at this time, but treating all employees as traumatised in this situation is disempowering and we should concentrate on building resiliency at this point. To build resilience, one should empower team members by using empowering language, letting them know that they are supported and encouraging team cohesion.
- 04** Have weekly **virtual team meetings**. This helps employees feel connected to each other as a team and contributes to team cohesion, which is an important factor for productivity. If possible, request that team members have their cameras on when participating in the meeting as human contact needs to be encouraged, even if it is just on camera.
- 05** Have **virtual support groups**. These can be informal where the employees connect with each other to share ways that they are managing their changed environment, or they can be facilitated by a manager. These support groups can take the form of virtual coffee sessions where employees share their week, their concerns, their good moments and tips on how they are coping. Try and encourage the expression of both negative and positive so as to normalise this period that we are all facing.
- 06** Creating a general **virtual culture of care** as an organisation will go a long way to supporting employees through the losses and fears of this time, and at the same time ensuring that productivity is not compromised. Culture of care can be in the form of a WhatsApp message each day wishing the team well, checking in on individuals about whom you are concerned.
- 07** **Empower your employees** by creating a space for them to talk about their concerns, empathising with the very real risks they face especially if they are required to come to the workplace every day and interact with clients. As this will be a part of our everyday lives going forward, it is important that these anxieties are contained so that they do not escalate and require intervention each and every time, however, it is equally important to ensure that employees know where to get support should they need it.
- 08** **Creating a culture of trust** and talking openly about concerns related to the pandemic is important to reduce the stigma related to the virus. Employees need to feel comfortable to share if they have been concerned about exposure, etc. which will ensure improved safety for all employees involved and allow for more proactive intervention.
- 09** **Upskill your employees**. Resilience is an important factor in being able to effectively withstand difficulties and bounce back more quickly and more effectively. ICAS is able to provide training on resilience, equipping your employees with this valuable skill that will allow them to power through the current difficulties with a lot more ease. Furthermore, this prepares the workforce for their new normal, even post the pandemic.
- 10** Give your employees **up-to-date and factual information** both about how to effectively protect themselves against COVID-19, as well as what is happening with employees in the organisation regarding COVID-19. Transparency helps vulnerable employees feel more secure in factual knowledge and also creates a culture of trust. Stop rumours in their tracks by responding to them immediately with facts.
- 11** Set up a **special page on your intranet** with factual information on COVID-19, how one can protect oneself, with links to reliable websites, such as that of the World Health Organization and include the ICAS toll-free number for easy access to immediate professional support, especially for vulnerable individuals who may require additional support.

Keep in mind that COVID-19 and the generalised anxieties it brings with it will be with us for a few years to come. We have a responsibility to not pathologise what is going to be our new normal and not to assume that all employees are feeling traumatised. Individuals will respond differently depending on their personalities and personal experiences. Employees may thus need different levels or types of support and ICAS is able to cater to those varying needs.

As a manager it is easy to forget your own self-care as you care for your teams and try to find the balance between being empathic and ensuring that the work gets done, but you also need to keep yourself resilient and strong. We suggest that you try and set up a virtual catch-up with the other managers in your organisation. You can all share your own ways of coping, what has worked and creative ways that other managers may be using to manage their teams. These connections also offer emotional support to you. Another suggestion is to ask your manager for weekly coaching sessions where you can discuss the management challenges that you have experienced that week and get some guidance from them on how better to address those specific challenges. Last but not least, don't forget to keep connected to those that you love, your friends and family members – consider having a virtual dinner or coffee together once a week. Do things that you enjoy at least once a week and always set aside some 'me-time'.

ICAS is your employee wellness partner and is here to assist you and your employees in every way possible during these uncertain times. Your toll-free line is available 24/7/365 and gives you access to immediate support from a professional, whether you want to talk about your own fears or managing your team members more effectively. ICAS also has a myriad of other services that could support you in your role as a manager. You don't need to do this alone – we are here for you. ICAS. Changing lives. Every day.

