Returning to the workplace:
Minimize COVID-19 confusion with these communication tips

As companies prepare to have their employees return to the office, COVID-19 remains a pressing concern. And this concern isn't just among employers: Two-thirds of employees report being worried about their health and safety as they contemplate a return to a shared workspace, and the rate climbs even higher for members of Generation Z (75%) and people of color (78%).[1]

Because of this, it's important that employers communicate about all things COVID-19—company protocols, research updates, sanitation practices—in a way that minimizes confusion, ultimately building trust in the decision to return. Here are a few ways to do so.

6 communication tips for minimizing confusion about COVID-19

1. Aim to inform people's decisions, not cast judgment on them.

The goal of COVID-19 communication is to help people make the most informed decisions they can.[2] But judging those decisions can have the opposite effect. The more pressure people feel to contradict their convictions, the more they stick to their guns and double down (what psychologists call an "escalation of commitment").[3]

In the same fashion, fearmongering and shaming are also counterproductive. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that while fear can be motivating, it can also be debilitating, as feeling helpless can render people less able to take action to help themselves.[4] And shaming is ultimately detrimental to containment efforts because it makes people resistant to sharing information necessary for contact tracing.[2]

2. Communicate the facts, not your feelings.

To best inform your employees' decisions, you need to present them with only the facts. Even if your feelings are based on the most accurate information available, at the end of the day, feelings aren't facts. While facts are inanimate and unbiased, in communicating your feelings to your employees instead, you run the risk of presenting misinformation, misconceptions and even rumors, not to mention any biases that you have. This can all perpetuate stigmas and discrimination, which hamper pandemic response efforts.[5]

In the context of health, social stigma is the negative association between a person or group of people who share characteristics and a specific disease. In an outbreak like COVID-19, this means people may be labeled, stereotyped or discriminated against or may even experience a loss of status because of a perceived—not proven—link with the disease.[5]

While communicating the most up-to-date facts might not make for as impassioned a message as presenting your feelings would, it will give employees the accurate information they truly need.

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3. Beware of common mental states and behaviors during a crisis.

Knowing the mental states that people experience and behaviors they exhibit during a crisis like COVID-19 can help you develop communication strategies and content accordingly. This can help your employees receive and disseminate the information in a less stressful manner.

The common mental states experienced in a crisis are uncertainty, fear, hopelessness and helplessness, denial, anxiety and dread. The behavioral results can include seeking special treatment, stigmatizing others and "negative vicarious rehearsal," or acting as though the worst possible outcome were likelier than it is.[4]

Anticipating these kinds of responses can help keep your communication on point. For example, knowing that some people respond to stress by seeking special treatment can prepare you for when an employee asks for some Covid-related leeway that you've already announced you're not able to provide, such as permanent remote work for people whose jobs require their physical presence. Being ready for those requests can help you handle them appropriately.

4. Note how people process information during a crisis, and adjust your tactics accordingly.

Similar to the mental states and behaviors, there are four prominent ways that people process information during a crisis: simplify messages, hold on to current beliefs, believe the first message and look for additional information and opinions.[4]

The CDC recommends combatting this by bending your communication to these processing methods. This means using simple messages, having messages come from credible sources, releasing accurate messages as soon as possible and using consistent messages.[4] If you have a marketing expert as a part of your team, lean on him or her for ways to create effective, consistent messaging.

5. Provide opportunities for employee feedback and questions.

Even with up-to-date information and clear communication, there are bound to be ways you can improve. And your employees may very well have unique insights that can help you do so.

Establishing a system for your employees to provide their feedback and ask any questions they may have is a simple way to ensure that you are covering all relevant information and that your communication methods can evolve.

6. Turn to the CDC for communications help and up-to-date information.

The CDC is the source of the most current information on COVID-19—and it's also a source of engaging, easy-to-use communication materials that you can borrow. Browse through them and share the most relevant information with your staff; some materials come in multiple languages, including Spanish. You can also use its State-based Occupational Health Surveillance Clearinghouse to filter through your state's latest legal changes pertaining to the virus.

To discuss more about how to bring your employees back in full force, contact your Aflac benefits advisor or visit Aflac.com/business.

[1] Envoy. "Envoy survey finds employees want companies to embrace hybrid work and mandate COVID vaccines." Published 3.16.2021. Accessed 5.19.2021.
[2] Center for American Progress. "A Communications Strategy to End the COVID-19 Pandemic." Published 12.14.2020. Accessed 6.8.2021.
[3] PeopleScience. "Beware the Boardroom Double-Down." Published 6.17.2019. Accessed 6.8.2021.
[4] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "CERC: Psychology of a Crisis." Published 2019. Accessed 6.8.2021.
[5] World Health Organization. "Social Stigma associated with COVID-19." Updated 2.24.2020. Accessed 6.8.2021.

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