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by chiara lawry & giselle diego

Returning to the office:
Resetting your team

Right thinking

As many of us, particularly in Melbourne, turn our minds and bodies to a return to the office, reconnecting with your teams purposefully has never been more important. Thinking about how to best support your team and getting the most out of your in-person interactions is now a priority. In this article we share with you some practical and simple ideas on how to support a smooth transition back into a 'COVID normal' work environment.

This summer feels particularly sweet, especially for Melbournians as we come out of lockdown and plan for the kind of holiday season we thought we wouldn't get to have.

Lockdown has taken a toll on us. The impacts of COVID-19 have been felt acutely by everyone but in distinct ways. For those of us who were able to work from home this year, we had to face new challenges with work and home life blending in ways they never had before. Some were managing children and home schooling and some were living alone managing deep social isolation. One thing we know is that this year has affected a lot of people's mental health; in early April, a global survey of workers by Mind Share Partners found that the mental health of almost 42% of respondents had declined since the pandemic began (Greenwood & Krol, 2020).

COVID-19 has increased the need for us to talk about and act on supporting wellbeing in the workplace. Business leaders and academics are emphasising the need for managers to be authentic, vulnerable and kind, and to model healthy behaviours (Greenwood & Krol, 2020; Groysberg & Seligson, 2020). EY Global Health Sciences and Wellness Leader, Pamela Spence, says, 'In times of crisis, humans want to know they matter and they are being cared for' (Fealy, Storey, & Koss, 2020).

So what does this mean for our return to the office? While many teams outside of Melbourne have been juggling office and work from home arrangements for some time, those of us in Melbourne have only just returned to the office and indeed many will wait until the new year to do so.

As we begin the new year, managers will need to prioritise team connection and re-build the culture. Culture is not fixed so we can't necessarily expect it to be the same as it was. This is an opportunity to re-invest in team building and treat the team as if it were new in some respects. In our experience, culture change work is about getting the balance right between relationship building and meaningful content. We've identified some practical, simple ideas for how to reconnect with your teams purposefully.

Make the first interaction count

Once it is possible to bring your whole team together in person make the interaction meaningful and bring everyone together. Business psychologist Dr Merete Wedell-Wedellsborg (2020) notes that 'it's like the "emotional operating system" of many teams has been reset. Such a reset is psychologically intense: it exposes both strong ties and weak links in the team, and all this requires recalibration of both your own self-image and team dynamics when things return to normal'. As a manager this is your opportunity to set the tone for the year and acknowledge that there is some hard work ahead in re-norming to working together in person. There is no formula here as every team has its own dynamics but spend some time reflecting on the year your team has had and check in with everyone individually ahead of the team session so that you have a read on how the team is feeling going into that face to face session.

Develop or update your team compact

Bring your team together and re-affirm you team's purpose. If you don't have one this is a great time to align your team on what it is that you do to support the organisation to achieve its strategic objectives. Use this session as an opportunity to identify what elements of this year we want to keep and what we want to leave behind. Your team compact can also include principles you all agree to around ways of working together. This will be particularly helpful for new hires who have never worked with the team in person.

In their book *No Hard Feelings: The Secret Power of Embracing Emotions at Work* authors Liz Fosslien and Mollie West Duffy (2019) suggest that teams create an 'It's okay to…' list where you articulate all the behaviours as a team you want to affirm. This list of behaviours the team identifies as 'okay' could include different norms around asynchronous working if that's something your team will maintain when you return to the office.

Get visual

Remember when we were kids and our parents told us not to watch too much television or our eyes would turn square? It feels like after spending the better part of this year on all our devices, day and night, our eyes have, in fact, turned square. Fight screen fatigue and the low energy we feel after a day of video calls by privileging face to face meetings. Perhaps you decide that your regular team catch up is one that will always be face to face.
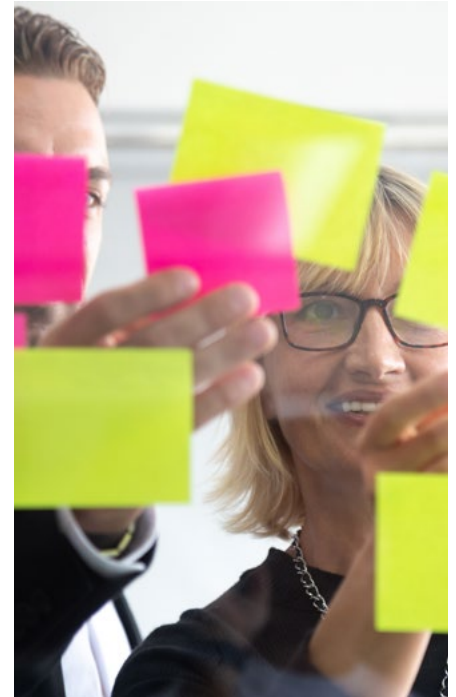
Managing your workflow visually using Kanban boards to show what everyone in the team is working on or a visual metrics display board to track your team's progress towards your team indicators is a great way to engage the team off screen. At the start or end of the week conduct a standing meeting around the boards as a way of checking in with the team. Another way to get visual is to run working sessions with a whiteboard as a way of mapping out your ideas on a particular problem you are working on. This is something that was fairly common before we started working from home and does not translate as well virtually.

Lean into the social

In her popular TED Talk business leader Margaret Heffernan identified that social cohesion is what leads to great results in a team. This cohesion is built in the incidentals that we've been missing out on for the better part of 2020: when you go get a coffee with your colleague, have a chat after a meeting, or pull someone into a conversation when you need their perspective. Find ways to foster these behaviours because it's likely your team will be a little rusty. The easiest way to do this is to role model these behaviours yourself; for example, allow for some time for social discussion before or after a meeting, go for a walk around the block with one of your team members, engage in small talk while you are in the kitchen.

It's worth investing time in re-establishing social relationships. If you've had new people join your team while we were working from home have a welcome event for them to combat the lack of belonging that joining a team virtually can engender.

Returning to the office is a process not an event. It's important that managers remain focused on building and maintaining culture. We have all shown that we are highly adaptive and will adjust to being back in the office but why not take the opportunity to make it a smoother transition and support your team by reconnecting with purpose.

Manage your workflow visually using Kanban boards to show what team members are working on and to help track your team's progress.

References

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If you would like to discuss this article in more detail, please contact **Chiara Lawry:** chiara.lawry@rightlane.com.au

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