

Helping Employees and Preventing Tension at Work During Times of Uncertainty

Uncertainty can be stressful—whether it arises close to home, such as changes in the organization; or on a larger scale, such as a presidential election, a recession, or another national event. During times of change and uncertainty, employees' stress levels can make it hard to stay focused on the job. Productivity may suffer as a result. In this article, we offer practical tips for managers on supporting employees and keeping them focused during unsettled times.

Action steps for managers

Managers play a key role in setting the emotional climate of the work group. During uncertain times, it's more important than ever to set a positive tone and to create an environment where employees feel supported and committed to their work. Here are action steps you can take to support your staff through times of transition and uncertainty.

Understand the signs of stress. According to research reported in *Psychology Today*, events that are both unpredictable and uncontrollable are the most stressful and have the greatest negative impact on employee wellbeing. As a manager, it's important to be aware of this and provide support during tumultuous times.

Remind all employees to take advantage of the stress-management resources available through your organization. An assistance program (also referred to as an employee assistance program or EAP) or work-life program offers stress-management and wellness resources. Make sure employees know how to access these resources. Remind them that using the program is confidential and that it is a free benefit through their organization.

Make it clear that inclusion and mutual respect are core values in your workplace. During times of uncertainty, such as when there are political divides, it's especially important for managers to set a tone of respect and inclusion. Send the message that the success of your workplace rests on a diversity of opinions, values, and beliefs.

Keep your finger on the emotional pulse of your team. Employees have a right to hold and, to a certain degree, express their opinions in the workplace. But they do not have a right to harass or belittle others whose opinions differ from theirs. When do political

conversations in the workplace cross the line to harassment? And what should managers do when this happens?

Here are a few simple points: If you hear conversations where voices are raised or a disrespectful tone is used or if there are people who come on too strong or in ways that could alienate others, you need to act. What is just plain conversation to one employee could be experienced as a hostile work environment to another. Begin by reminding all employees that respect for diversity includes diversity of opinions. If employees do discuss political views, these conversations should always be calm and respectful. If the problem continues, have a private conversation with the person who's coming on too strong. Remind them that their tone and language could be experienced as hostile by others and needs to be changed.

Provide perspective. If there is a large-scale event that is affecting the people you manage, acknowledge this and provide some perspective. Then listen. Allow people to voice their concerns on the issue. Are they concerned about the future of the company? About their own employment future? About how national events will impact the company? Something else? Remind employees this is not the first time the organization or the country has been through a significant change. In addition, reemphasize company values and reinforce a positive vision for the future.

Promote contributions to the common good. Remind employees that each one of them contributes to the success of the organization and that what they do matters and is valued.

Bring your team together. Team bonding is a great way to bring people together and take their minds off stressful events. Look for ways to do things together as a team, even if it's a video chat while having lunch together. A little laughter and lightness can shift the mood to positive and help boost morale. Spending time talking about common interests like pets, sports, or TV shows can go far in helping bridge gaps.

Create an issues-free zone. If the situation that's impacting morale involves a major political or news event, set aside safe zones at work. Agree, for example, that once employees enter the break room or lunchroom, all discussion of politics or news events will cease.

Encourage gratitude. Getting employees to think about the positives in their lives and the kindness of co-workers goes a long way toward creating a supportive workplace. Start a gratitude board in your workplace. Or take advantage of rewards and recognition programs your organization offers, and encourage employees to use them to recognize co-workers who are team players, have been helpful, or who go the extra mile.

Be a source of optimism. Fear and negative thinking can be contagious as well as distracting. As a manager, be truthful and realistic, but balance this with hope.

Remind employees that their organization's assistance program is available to provide support during this time. Trained professionals are available through this program to provide guidance and support to help deal with worry, stress, and anxiety. The program is available 24/7 and is a free benefit through work.

If you or your employees are experiencing stress or are distracted due to national events, recognize that it is a real concern that may impact the workplace. Carrying out business as usual may not be enough. Managers will need to reinforce company values, highlight benefits and wellness offerings, and make the extra effort to show employees that they are supported, valued, and heard.