

Maintain productivity by helping managers address employee fears

Many people who have kept their jobs during the coronavirus turmoil are grateful just to still be employed. But don't for a moment think health, safety, financial security and other COVID-19 concerns aren't on their minds—and affecting their performance.

“Stress, fear and anxiety are all enemies of productivity,” says Jon Hill, Chairman and CEO of The Energists, an executive search firm. “To encourage productivity, it's necessary to get at the root of what's making concentration difficult, and that means providing your workers as much stability, comfort and security as possible.”

Here are some ways managers can help employees cope:

Solicit input, truly listen

Workers forced to telecommute wonder if they are doing things right. Employees at all levels worry about the viability of the business and the reliability of their paychecks. Everyone seeks more information.

Frequent feedback and transparent communication help people feel more secure about what's going on and prevent rumors from circulating.

Soliciting input and truly listening to it can help leaders identify and address obstacles to high performance. Hearing employee concerns about workplace safety, for example, can trigger corrective action. Even small steps can have an outsized impact when the effort demonstrates that management takes employees seriously.

Provide clarity and routine

Employees' attention is scattered in many directions during this pandemic. Concern over everything from the safest way of obtaining groceries to grieving over sickness in the community takes a mental toll.

“Due to the increased stress and uncertainty, many people are operating in a fight, flight or freeze mode,” says author and time management coach Elizabeth Grace Saunders. “Their higher-level-order thinking will be more inhibited than normal.”

Calm frazzled brains by spelling out priorities. Provide clear instructions so workers know exactly what they need to do.

Create routines team members can count on. “Anything that creates a sense of ‘sameness’ is helpful and stabilizing,” Saunders says. Consider starting each day with a short staff meeting. Bosses might personally thank all employees for their contributions every night.

Be flexible and encouraging

Managers and workers may be trying their hardest to carry on business as usual, but everyone knows things are far from normal. Leaders still must hold employees accountable for getting work done, but they also may want to adjust expectations to make goals more realistic.

Think about ways to give employees more control over their work. Remote staff whose children are home from school may be more effective if they can shift their hours—perhaps delaying some tasks until the evening, after they have put the kids to bed.

“Being flexible is critical during this time,” says leadership training expert Terry Traut, CEO of Entelechy, a leadership development firm. “Do everything in your power to make it possible for people to be productive on their own terms right now.”

And while you’re at it, be extra encouraging. We all could use some kind words right now. Positive feedback builds confidence.

“Even though your employees may have been doing their jobs for many years,” Saunders says, “they’ve never had to do them in the midst of the current situation. They need extra grace when they make mistakes.”