7

steps to supporting employee mental health post-lockdown

What you need to know

Sanctus.

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#1 Is there a mental health crisis looming?

It goes without saying that this year hasn't quite turned out how many of us were expecting it to.

Within weeks those carefully planned and articulated 2020 business strategies were in the shredder, and employees found themselves adjusting to the challenges of working around pets, housemates and pesky parents.

For many of us our mental health has also had a huge toll to pay over the last few months, whether we realise it yet or not.

We're craving a return to normality and a return to safety. So it's hardly surprising that we're hearing phrases like "when this all blows over" or "the new normal".

And yet, "new normal" is a phrase we've concocted to convince ourselves that a sense of normality is returning, but the truth is, things aren't normal and won't be for a long time.

The stark reality is that this is not going anyway anytime soon - and it's crucial that you are ready for this when thinking about how best to support your employees.

While we may see more people out and about and we may be heading back into the office, our mental health has taken a battering over the last few months.
Everyday people have been worried about their health, the health of their loved ones, their careers, their finances, and more.
And while this has played out in people talking about "zoom fatigue" or "feeling flat", something that hasn't been as widely discussed is that we've all been collectively going through the grief cycle.

While this is typically only associated with the loss of human life, the truth is that we've all been mourning the loss of a life that we've been accustomed to for so long.

Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance...
the five stages which we've all been experiencing in our own ways.

While many of us are entering the acceptance phase, there is still an overwhelming level of anxiety prevalent among the working population.

Particularly around anticipatory anxiety in regards to someone's health; in the absence of certainty, people can begin to catastrophise and expect bad things to happen.

The Mental Health Foundation found that in the UK in June, 49% of the population felt anxious or worried due to the pandemic. Perhaps more alarmingly, they also found that 1 in 10 people had experienced suicidal thoughts in the two weeks previous to the study being conducted.

On top of that, recent news articles have highlighted that doctors across the UK are seeing a rise in people reporting severe mental health issues.

This section isn't meant to alarm or worry you, simply to state the reality of the landscape for the foreseeable future. We must understand this first so that we can empathise and support second.

Being aware of this, and aware of what your employees may be going through, can help you to better plan for it.

We'll have a look at some of the ways you can do that below.

Summary

● Understand that while physically we may be returning to some normality, our mental health may take longer to readjust and to recover

● It's important to realise this and to be prioritising employee mental health for the foreseeable future

#2 How to approach supporting employees right now

Now that you've got a bit more of an understanding of where the landscape is right now and more generally how your employees may be feeling, it's worth looking at where the heads of your specific employees might be at.

Looking at people's different working situations over the last few months, you can start to build out a picture of how each one may not only have had different experiences of the pandemic, but will have different needs moving forward.

Furloughed workers

Those that were furloughed may have experienced a huge range of emotions. They may have felt feelings of rejection and worthlessness and an extreme worry that they will be the first ones to get made redundant.

Some may have been jealous of those who continued to work, or perhaps a little bored. Others still may have even loved having so much free time to themselves.

Remote workers

As with above, remote workers could have gone several ways. Some may have been grateful that they had kept their jobs, while others may have been resentful of those who were furloughed as they felt they had to pick up all the slack.

Some may have enjoyed the flexibility of remote working and worked doubly hard, while others will be completely burnt out by this and the lack of taking holiday or breaks.

Office workers

Those that stayed in the office, like key workers for example, could very well feel undervalued and under-protected.

New joiners

New joiners get a special mention, as they've had a real rough ride of it over the last few months. Starting a new job is always nervy, but to have to do that over a laptop, in the height of a pandemic, having never met the team in person or seen the office, will have been difficult.

Not only that, but they've been robbed of those special first few weeks and months when the pressure of work hasn't yet settled in.

So, how do you approach this?

As we'll mention several times throughout this - don't put all of the pressure on yourself to assume what's right and what's wrong. Ask!

Ask your employees how they're feeling and how they've been coping.

Run personal 1:1s, small team discussions or anonymous surveys (Typeform is a great tool for this). Find out how people are doing in their own words, and plan accordingly.

However, there are a few things that you can do right off the bat. Firstly, it can help to treat all workers almost as new joiners. A new way of working, new tools to use, likely a new business strategy... there's been enough change for everyone to feel a sense of newness in some way.

Secondly, setting up a buddy system for the next few months can be a great way to make sure people have someone to chat to and to help them feel supported. Try pairing up workers from the different categories above i.e a furloughed worker with someone who has continued to work, so they can offer different perspectives.

Finally, don't minimise or avoid what has happened over the last few months and the decisions that the company has made.

Acknowledge what's happened and ask people what they need to talk about. It can be good for teams to chat through what hangovers they're carrying and if anything has been left unsaid.

Airing this could be crucial in ensuring that employees can enter this new phase together harmoniously.

Summary

- Expect your employees to be in different headspaces

- Don't put too much pressure on yourself trying to assume what people are feeling - ask them

- Treat everyone like new joiners and set up a buddy system

- Don't avoid or minimise what has happened over the last few months - try not to leave any elephants in the room

#3 What's your responsibility in all of this?

One of the big questions businesses have is what's their responsibility when it comes to managing people's mental health?

Anyone responsible for people functions in a business tend to pile an incredible amount of pressure on themselves to get it right, to fix people's problems, and to ultimately ensure employees remain "happy".

But it's crucial that you draw a line between what lies on your shoulders and what lies on the shoulders of the individual.

While this line may look slightly different for each business, it's important to say that the responsibility of an individual's mental health is their own.

Whether they choose to take action or not is largely down to them, and, extreme and immediate cases of risk aside (which are rare), is not the responsibility of the business.

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink, so to speak.

However, it is the responsibility of the business to create a workplace and a culture where employees feel supported and able to ask for help should they want to.

It's also the responsibility of the business to not ignore this; mental health is there whether they want it to be or not.

So how can you create a culture that is supportive, particularly during the pandemic?

● Understand that, generally speaking, employees will be feeling unsafe

● Understand that employees can't separate their personal experiences from what they bring to work. This has always been the case, but COVID has truly illuminated this

● Lead by example and role model the kind of actions you'd like to see in others. Found lockdown tough? Say that. It'll give people permission to say how they feel if they see senior leaders doing it

● Invite employees to share some of their experiences and feelings with others, if they feel comfortable doing so
  ○ One way of doing this is by starting all meetings with a check-in - carving out a bit of time for everyone to share how they're doing and if there's anything they want their colleagues to know

● Familiarise yourself with the signs of mounting stress. Having a look at the NHS or mental health charities (particularly Mind) is a good place to start

● Remember, if you identify someone that may be struggling, it's not up to you to fix it. But you can be well placed to invite them to share how they're doing, and refer them to internal or external services as the next line of support
  ○ If you believe someone may be struggling, don't assume or give them labels. Frame the conversation as "here's what I've noticed in you", and let them speak for themselves
  ○ To refer someone over to another service, again rather than forcing anyone, let them make that decision on their own. Ask the question "would now be a good time to talk to someone?"

As we said, every workplace will have a different line, and you'll need to figure out what works best for your business. But the steps above are applicable to any business.

Summary

- Don't allow the pressure of people's wellbeing to weigh on you; this is a topic that needs to be shared across the business

- It is, however, your responsibility to at least create a culture where people feel supported. What they choose to do with that is up to them

- Invite people to share how they're feeling or their experiences of lockdown. Role model this to bring it out of employees

#4 How to communicate effectively during a pandemic

We've said it a couple of times but it bears repeating; employees are desperate for some certainty and normality, whether they realise/admit it or not.

In the absence of certainty, many often make up their own stories about what may or may not be happening. And, more often than not, these stories can be dramatic and highly negative.

Our brains are hardwired to focus on the negative, and in a time of such stress, our fight or flight response is constantly on the lookout for any danger.

Work is uniquely positioned to provide people with some stability and predictability; it can be a bit of a bedrock that offers some routine and some normality.

But, to ensure this is the case, you must remove as much uncertainty out of work as possible.

The best way to do this is to regularly communicate with your employees. Keep them in the loop with the plans for the business over the next few months, and keep them in the loop with any day-to-day plans, changes and strategy sessions.

Tell them how often you'll be communicating and then stick to that schedule, even if one update is "nothing new to report this week".

Have empathy in your communication and get employees bought into it; invite them to share any responses they may have, or perhaps run forums where people can offer opinions or air concerns.

Have someone dedicated to this project. Don't let COVID planning and communication be something that sits on several people's to-do lists; make sure it's something that feels clearly anchored with a part or person in the business.

Communication doesn't only need to happen top-down and bottom-up. Peer-to-peer communication can also be a great way for employees to share with colleagues how they're getting on, the things they're struggling with, and to ask for help.

You'll often find that challenges melt away once transparency is seen.

So, where to start?

- It has to come from the top with the executive team leading by example
  ○ This is really, really important and we can't stress this enough. Employees will be scared, worried and disengaged if they don't feel that their leaders are in the trenches with them. Do whatever you need to do to get them on board with this

- Leaders need to be honest about the fact that things have been unstable and there may be more to come

- Don't hide away from the choices the business has made over the last few months, however tough. This isn't about airing dirty laundry, it's about kicking the elephants out of the room so that your employees can trust you

- Provide predictability and stability, i.e "the CEO will send a company-wide update every Thursday, even if there is nothing new to share" - the more rhythms and routines you can establish, the better

● Hold more regular meetings and 1:1s so employees have a space to share. Try not to move these around so that you can keep the rhythm and routine going

● How much is too much? As a general rule of thumb, over-communicating is better. Communicate until employees tell you to stop

Summary

● Communicate with honesty and transparency - this is important in both building and maintaining trust

● Communicate regularly and to a schedule - this is important for giving employees some certainty and a routine

● Ensure communication is coming from leaders

● Over-communicate until employees tell you to stop

#5 Managing employee anxiety over the commute and office return

Ah, the commute. While everyone has their own personal love or hate for it, we can all agree that busy trains, tubes and buses don't exactly instill a feeling of cleanliness, comfort or safety.

After months of being told that being close to others could be dangerous, the thought of getting back onto public transport or back into an office can be incredibly overwhelming.

And yet for others, it could be soothing to be back in the vicinity of human beings that are different to the same five faces they've been seeing for months on end.

The key issue here is people's feeling of safety; that is, the ability to feel safe and to feel calm.

Neurobilogically it doesn't actually matter if there is a danger there or not, it's about whether we perceive there to be a danger. These levels of perception will be different for everyone.

Our tube may be perfectly safe, but we may perceive it to not be so. And, as we can't prove it isn't unsafe, the absence of certainty gives rise to anxiety. Specifically health anxiety.

This is something that many experienced long before COVID, whether in small or large doses, but with the very real, very daily virus news, our anxiety now has something to latch onto.

And so, in many cases, this isn't even a health worry at all. It's a worry worry. But that doesn't make it any less real and any less of an important consideration for businesses.

How can you manage this for your employees?

● Safety must be negotiated; it's a contract between two people. The leadership team can't simply tell people how to feel. You must allow for a two-way conversation where you can hear how people feel and ask what they need to feel supported

● This conversation must be ongoing; this is going to be going on for a while

● Allow for flexible working, particularly giving employees the opportunity to travel outside of rush hour or to work from home more regularly
○ If people feel genuinely scared and worried about returning to work, it's crucial that they aren't forced to do so

● Know that employees might be scared to admit this. Which is why having forums where people can share with honesty is even more important. Or consider alternatives like anonymous feedback surveys such as Typeform

● Stagger the return if possible, perhaps by having different teams in on different days and not going from lockdown to everyday back in the office straight away

● If you're not sure where to start - ask yourself what you need to help you feel calm and safe. This can be a good guide for thinking about empathising with what others need

Summary

● Many employees are going to be scared and anxious about the commute and being around a lot of people again, regardless of how "safe" others deem it to be

● Don't force anyone to do anything they're not ready for; you could risk overwhelming them

● Ensure this remains a two-way conversation and avoid telling people how they should feel. Having regular forums for discussion can be incredibly useful

#6 Practical things to consider

Here's a list of practical processes and rules you can implement into your business immediately at no cost.

Meetings

● Meet with lots of different teams regularly to understand different needs and concerns. It can't be one-size-fits-all, so get feedback on this

● Hold regular forums and briefings with small pockets in the business. The smaller these are, the more likely employees are to engage and share

Communicating with your employees

● Speak to employees! Hearing their thoughts and feelings will be half of the work already done for you

Assess how you're getting on

● Don't be hard on yourself, you've never done this before

● Because of that, ask for regular feedback. Ask people what they need more of or less of

● Those that do return to work or have already, ask them how it was for them. How was it on the tube, being in the office etc. Use this to inform future planning for those not quite ready

Ensure empathy is top of the agenda

● Have the obvious rules in place and clear for all to see, i.e washing hands. But also have other less-thought-of rules in place, like "be kind". No one knows what others are feeling or going through right now

Mental health and safety

● Talk about mental health a lot. Make it a business priority

● Share your risk assessment with the business

● Any other resources that you have in place, ensure these are easily accessible by employees

Planning

● If possible, ensure all planning sits with a dedicated person

● Plan backwards team-by-team and day-by-day. Start by looking six months ahead, or at least until the end of the year

Embrace change

● Try not to lose the good stuff. Some positives have come out of this, such as more flexible working. Speak with your employees and find out what people really want

● Have the leadership and executive team leading by example and engaged in as much of this as possible

#7 Dealing with mental health issues

Much of this guide has referenced mental health in some way, but it's important to have a section dedicated specifically to mental health issues, as they're going to be present in employees.

Many will emerge from lockdown with their mental health having taken a bit of a knocking. Others, who suffered from issues triggered by things in the outside world, may have noticed these issues subside over lockdown, only to rise again once returning to work.

Anxiety, depression, OCD, grief, loneliness and suicidal thoughts are particularly likely to be more prevalent post-lockdown.

Not all cases will necessarily be "serious" and require immediate intervention, but any form of mental health issue requires care, and we know it's something that management often struggle to handle.

Here's what you can do.

● Make mental health a business priority. Talk about it regularly, and ensure employees feel that they can be honest if they need to be

● Give people spaces to do this, like with check-ins at the start of each meeting

● Have managers hold 1:1 check ins with their team more regularly that makes wellbeing part of the conversation, alongside performance. Manager training can help with this

● Consider easing or reducing targets for the foreseeable future, at least until the end-of-the-year

- Consider being more flexible with holiday options or the ability to work from home
  - This can even be something simple like finishing a couple of hours earlier on a Friday

- Clearly signpost to all internal mental health services you have

- Familiarise yourself, and your managers, with warning signs

- Listen and empathise, don't assume

- If an employee isn't performing, don't assume why. Ask what's going on

- Leaders must lead the way - they need to share how they're doing and be curious as to what's going on with others. This is the single biggest thing you can do within a business without investing in external resources and support

- If you're in a position to do so, now is a good time to start mapping out your 2021 mental health and wellbeing strategy, and to ensure that employees feel supported at work. Ask them what they want and get them bought into it

- If you don't have any internal resources and aren't sure where to link externally, we've a free-to-access Directory which has a comprehensive list of free and paid services for people's mental health- google "Sanctus Directory" to find it

- Tell your employees who to speak to if they're struggling. Make it clear that the door is open for them so they aren't left trying to figure things out for themselves

Summary

● Acknowledge that there is likely to be cases of mental health issues, of varying severity, within your business

● Remember that it's not your job to "fix" these for people, but it is your responsibility to create an environment where people feel supported

● Clearly signpost to all internal or external resources, and equip your managers to better have these conversations
○ Thinking about something like manager training could be a good place to start

Stay safe,
George & the Sanctus team x

The content for this handbook was inspired by Benjamin Graham (Head of Coaching at Sanctus) and one of our partners, Jodie Crawford (Head of People UK at Red Bull)

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