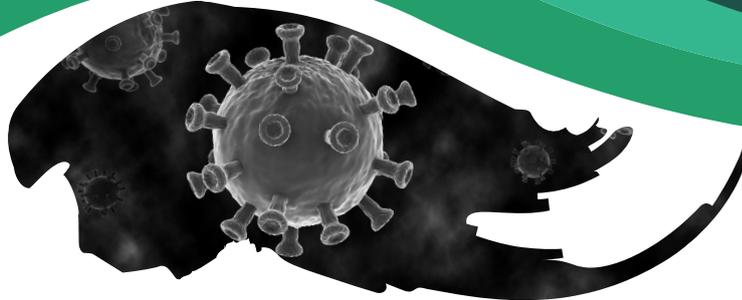




Leading Through the Outbreak of COVID-19

every connection matters™



As a manager or leader in a workplace, our staff look to us for guidance, support, and reassurance, particularly during times of heightened stress or change. They can play a vital role in a team's recovery from a crisis.

The key focus of a leader is to assist their staff in a supportive and proactive manner to minimise any risk factors in the workplace. The coronavirus pandemic has placed additional demands on leaders as we navigate through a period of uncertainty and unpredictability. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the scale of the outbreak and the severity of the crisis, effective leaders must remain calm, without underestimating the impact the crisis could have on them.

Mental Health in the Workplace

Most employees with a mental health condition will effectively manage their condition with little to no impact on their ability to perform their role; however, at times, the employee may require additional support or adjustments to assist them.

COVID-19 will impact the mental health and wellbeing of all staff to some degree, especially those with mental health concerns, such as anxiety.

It is vital for leaders to remember everyone will have a unique experience and response to a crisis; no one will have a complete, accurate picture of the consequences of COVID-19. Their perspective is informed by what they have heard and been told by their support network. Providing current and up-to-date information from reputable and reliable sources can help reduce any potential hysteria and fear around the outbreak.

As your organisation enacts Business Continuity Plans and puts in place health advice to prevent the spread of COVID-19, it is important to continue to keep your staff updated with your response.

Communicate outcomes of any operational and leadership meetings and any planned risk management strategies.

What you Can do as a Leader

The support of a manager during this time is very important for someone experiencing heightened anxiety or worry. Your role is not of a mental health expert, but as a leader who can guide them through support options available and help them make reasonable adjustments to assist them.

There are several behaviours and steps we can take as leaders to navigate through pandemic.

- **Speak openly about mental health and encourage others to do the same:** it is important to normalise everyone's responses during this period, and to recognise that everyone's reactions will vary. Set an expectation with your teams to show respect to their peers, listen to each other's concerns, and role model this behaviour yourself
- **Promote a positive work environment:** minimise any further psychosocial risk factors, such as job stress, workload, deadlines, role clarity, and adequate resources, to continue to work through any workplace modifications
- **Reach out to employees:** if you are concerned about any employees, reach out in a one-on-one setting, to understand their needs and offer options of support
- **Be present and available:** implement alternative strategies for your staff so you are available to them while working remotely
- **Acknowledge professional challenges:** employees may be experiencing challenges due to changes in their personal circumstances, such as quarantine, self-isolation, loved ones in the high-risk category or changes in circumstances.

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acacia EAP
employee assistance program

Managing Remote Teams

Whilst most people working from home can attest to the positives of this structure, there can also be challenges. Often these challenges are compounded by technical difficulties.

Here are some tips for managing remote working teams:

- Provide training in the tools and systems you require your staff to use while working remotely, particularly video conferencing platforms
- Use video calls as a tool to engage with your remote staff. Video calls reduce the likelihood staff will engage in multitasking, reducing distractions and improving meeting productivity
- Commence a daily huddle or pre-start buzz to increase your visibility of who is working on what. This simple short meeting can help your team connect with each other
- Allow "Do Not Disturb" modes to be used throughout the day to allow staff to maintain focus and get work done, as they may in a quiet space in the office or by forwarding their calls to voicemail
- Continue regular one-on-one check-ins to monitor progress towards work tasks and deadlines, as well as the team's mental health and wellbeing
- Create opportunities for social gatherings and connections that may typically occur in a workplace (such as a lunchroom). This could be a regular virtual morning tea where staff could join when they can for a quick social chat whilst enjoying a coffee or tea.

Despite workers being confined to their home environments, technology provides many opportunities for engagement and interaction.

Conversations with your Employees

Engaging in a conversation with an employee you are concerned about can be confronting and challenging. As leaders, we may feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility or worry that we might say the wrong thing.

Here are some simple tips to help you if you are conversing with an employee presenting with heightened worry, anxiety, or concern about COVID-19.

Some Conversation Starters:

- Let the employee know you have noticed a change in their behaviour
- Use open-ended questions
- Ask them how they are feeling in response to the outbreak, or the organisation's response.

Engage in the Conversation:

- Listen and ask questions; don't assume you know their story
- Thank them for discussing their concerns with you
- Show that you are listening by maintain eye contact and ensure your body language is open and relaxed
- Repeat your understanding back.

Respond with Support:

- Confirm your role and discuss escalation options
- Ask them what you can do to assist them
- Offer them support services for their emotional wellbeing, such as the EAP
- Arrange to meet again to check in on them.

Support is Available

It is common for leaders to focus on the operational needs, organisational challenges, and the emotional turmoil of direct reports without considering their own needs as equally as important. All leaders are humans first and foremost.

