Check-ins are Critical during COVID-19 Impacts

The role of check-in conversations in risk & resilience

AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO SUPPORT REMOTE WORKERS

COVID-19 is requiring us to make rapid and multiple changes to the way we do work and managers are expected to adapt quickly and support their teams. It can seem overwhelming to managers and supervisors, who are trying their best to absorb loads of advice and to put that into some form of behavioural action in a sustainable way. Leaders need a low-risk, high-impact behavioural response.

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THE POWER OF ROUTINE CHECK-IN CONVERSATIONS

One of the most practical ways that leaders can support employees impacted by COVID-19 is to conduct ***individual routine, semi-structured check-in conversations*** with their direct reports – in order to ask them how they are and what they need. This takes the pressure out of trying to predict what people need and reduces mental effort, as the solutions come from the conversation process. Conversations enable relationships and they drive success.

As an example (below) a team can collaborate on a small set of questions to share during check-ins. Employees can reflect on, and prepare, answers to these sorts of predictable questions ready for 'briefing up':

1. How are you going? (or how has your day/week been; how are things going)?
2. What's been going well or according to plan?
3. What (if anything) has been a challenge or a bother for you?
4. What has been (or is) your way of handling that?
5. Is there anything that I, as a leader or colleague, can do to help you? (what sorts of information, action or resources might you need from others, to help you achieve what you want)?

- Outline sources of support, such as the EAP and offer to create an individual support plan with/for them
- Ensure to document your conversations and always follow up on agreed actions.

If any single leader has too many direct reports to provide regular check-ins, then we suggest a buddy-system and peer-to-peer mentoring be used as well, so that no one is left for too long without the benefits of this 'reflective and solution-focused' process.

The check-in conversation might be extended, during times of challenge or change, by a quick *'ready-to-work' dashboard*, such as:

1. Do you feel well and ready to work? YES or NO
2. Are you clear on the work tasks you need to do? YES or NO
3. Do you have practical ways to manage your focus and wellbeing? YES or NO
4. Have you been in touch with workmates to check-in? YES or NO
5. Are you in a position where you can work safely (without distraction)? YES or NO

THE MULTIPLE BENEFITS

This single, critical leadership behaviour (the structured check-in) has multiple benefits, including:

- Employee perception of support from managers – which research suggests strongly, is associated with better wellbeing outcomes for employees after stressful events.
- Identify needs, provide support and start to solve-problems. Scanning for signs of stress or declining mental health (PTO)
- Employees begin to 'brief up' to leaders about how things are going and what they might need. Feedback becomes easier.
- Maintains engagement, builds relationship credit and a sense of inclusion (helps to cover issues of diversity and inclusion, because you're asking each individual what it's like for them and what they need to perform and thrive).
- Helps to identify any of the 8 psychosocial risk factors in the workplace (work overload, conflict, change and lack of 'sense of' control, support, connection, recognition, role-clarity, fairness).
- Clarity of roles and realistic expectations in a time of change and challenge.
- Allows leaders to provide reassurance and empathy during times of challenge and change.

THE LEADS METHOD FOR EMOTIONAL CONVERSATIONS

During any check-in, especially during times of challenge and change, there's the possibly of strong emotions arising - such as anxiety, frustration, distress or grief.

A focused and compassionate way of defusing emotions and discovering the main issue - is the L.E.A.D.S. method (copyright), which strikes a balance between listening first and then collaborative problem-solving:

Listen	Listen with your full attention. Show/tell them you're listening. Check your understanding *I'm listening, how can I help? So what happened was XYZ, is that right?*
Empathise	Empathise with their feelings using simple phrases of acknowledgment and reassurance *I can see you're frustrated/upset by this, I would be too if that happened to me unexpectedly*
Ask	Ask questions to clarify what they want, need and expect to happen (this also defuses emotions) *What did you expect would happen in this situation? What would be helpful right now?*
Discuss	Discuss the issue at hand, take your time and share solutions in a 2-way process *Tell me more about it. What's your main concern? Let's talk it through, and share some useful ideas?*
Steps	Step out what action you both can/will take and always follow up later *Can I suggest that we try XYZ? What did you want to do now? What I can do (in my role) to help is..*

MORE: Listen to Audio Files, explaining how to use the LEADS method and a general 'helping conversation'

- Explaining the LEADS method: http://www.tacticalcomposure.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Part-7a-LEADS-for-Helping-and-Defusing.m4a
- Helping Conversation Script: http://www.tacticalcomposure.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Part-6-Helping-Check-in-Conversations.m4a

RECOGNISING THE SIGNS OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES & DECLINING WELLBEING

General Signs of Mental Health Decline

- ☐ Sudden negative, uncharacteristic changes in mood & behaviour
- ☐ Decline in attendance, performance, functioning and self-care
- ☐ Disturbance in sleep, energy levels, weight and physical health
- ☐ Increased mood intensity: depressed/sad; irritable/angry; worried/anxious
- ☐ Difficulty concentrating, remembering and decision-making
- ☐ Withdrawing or isolating from friends and family
- ☐ Increased substance use or addictions
- ☐ Difficulty coping with daily hassles and challenges
- ☐ Difficulty maintaining relationships with others
- ☐ Preoccupations, strange thoughts or odd behaviours
- ☐ Suicidal comments and behaviours
- ☐ A sense of worthlessness and/or hopelessness about the future

Signs of Anxiety

- ☐ Excessive worries or feelings of guilt
- ☐ Physical reactions of:
  - Racing heart, hot/flushed, aches & pains
  - Shaky, dizzy, lightheaded or faint
  - Nauseous or pain in the stomach
  - Feeling numb or tingly
  - Shortness of breath or fast, shallow breathing
- ☐ Feeling scared of going crazy
- ☐ Obsessive or compulsive behaviours
- ☐ Feelings of unreality or detached from yourself
- ☐ Difficulties sleeping
- ☐ Repetitive thoughts or concerns
- ☐ Self-medicating with alcohol or other substances
- ☐ Avoiding people or places

Signs of Depression

- ☐ Depressed mood most of the day
- ☐ Sleeping difficulties
- ☐ Tiredness or loss of energy
- ☐ Slowed or agitated movements
- ☐ Feeling guilty or worthless
- ☐ Difficulty concentrating
- ☐ Difficulty making simple decisions
- ☐ Thoughts of death or dying
- ☐ Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- ☐ Low motivation and/or Less interest in things
- ☐ Negative and self-critical thinking
- ☐ Thoughts of death or dying
- ☐ Hopelessness about the future, the world and themselves

Seek help/recommend help if any of these signs are persisting, worsening or impacting on everyday functioning, performance, relationships or wellbeing

Signs Observable at Work

- ☐ Emotional responses and erratic behaviour—uncharacteristic behaviour which may be overly sensitive, irritable, angry, teary or tense
- ☐ Obsession with parts of the job, and neglect of others
- ☐ Working longer or fewer hours than usual
- ☐ Disengagement and low morale
- ☐ Withdrawal behaviour, such as reduced participation in work activities
- ☐ Increased unplanned absence
- ☐ Increase in use of negative language and workplace conflict
- ☐ Physical symptoms such as appearing tired, headaches
- ☐ Changes in physical appearance such as less attention to personal grooming
- ☐ Reduced levels of performance

Signs of Potential Trauma

- ☐ Flashbacks (intrusive images of past events)
- ☐ Bad dreams
- ☐ Avoiding certain places or people
- ☐ Easily angered or irritated and/or
- ☐ Felt on guard or easily startled

Signs of Disengaged Employees

- ☐ Absenteeism (and time off task)
- ☐ Lack of discretionary effort
- ☐ Absence of teamwork
- ☐ Suboptimal productivity
- ☐ Decline in work quality
- ☐ Avoidance of team social interactions

Signs of Professional Burnout

- ☐ Compassion fatigue
- ☐ Emotional exhaustion
- ☐ Reduced motivation
- ☐ Increased cynicism
- ☐ Negativity
- ☐ Sense of isolation

Signs of Trouble in Teams/Workplaces

- ☐ Higher levels of unplanned absences
- ☐ Frequent misunderstandings or open conflict
- ☐ Slow progress with projects or tasks
- ☐ Complaints about service
- ☐ Non-optimal performance
- ☐ Not much fun or humour at work - morale is down
- ☐ People not feeling safe enough to raise issues
- ☐ Higher reported levels of stress and pressure