

# Helping Employees Stay Focused During Times of Change and Uncertainty

Uncertainty can be stressful, no matter whether it arises close to home, such as changes in the organisation, or on a larger scale, such as a political change like "Brexit" or another national event. During times of change and uncertainty, employees' stress levels can make it hard for them 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 pivotal 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 some things that you can do to help your team:

**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 well-being. As a manager, it's important to be aware of this and provide support during tumultuous times. Learn about the signs of stress and what you can do to help people cope.

**Remind all employees to take advantage of the stress-management resources available through your organisation.** The assistance programme offers stress-management and wellness resources. Make sure employees know how to access these resources. Remind them that using the programme is confidential.

**Make it clear that inclusion and mutual respect are core values in your workplace.** During times of uncertainty like Brexit, which has led to 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. Apple CEO Tim Cook sent an email to

all employees shortly after the 2016 U.S. presidential election asking them to “move forward together.” He wrote, “We have a very diverse team of employees, including supporters of each of the candidates. Regardless of which candidate each of us supported as individuals, the only way to move forward is to move forward together. . . . Our company is open to all, and we celebrate the diversity of our team here in the United States and around the world—regardless of what they look like, where they come from, how they worship or who they love.”

**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?

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 the person that their tone and language could be perceived as hostile by others and needs to change.

**Provide perspective.** If your organisation is going through a major change or 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 organisation has been through a significant change. In addition, reemphasise 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 organisation 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. Even small things like having lunch together, can help your team. A little laughter and lightness can shift the mood to positive and help boost morale. Spending time talking about common interests like pets, sport, or TV shows can go far in helping bridge gaps.

**Create an issues-free zone.** If the change that's affecting morale involves a major political or news event, set aside safe zones at work. Agree, for example, that once employees enter the break room, 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 work colleagues goes a long way towards creating a supportive workplace. Start a gratitude board in your workplace. Or take advantage of the reward and recognition schemes your organisation offers, and encourage employees to use them to recognise work colleagues 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 the assistance programme is available to provide support during this time.** Trained professionals are available through the programme to provide guidance and support to help you deal with worry, stress and anxiety. It is available 24/7 and is confidential.

If you or your employees are experiencing stress or are distracted due to national events like Brexit or other national, political, or organisational changes, recognise that it is a real concern that may affect 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.

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