

## How to Re-enter the Office Work Setting

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### How can returning to the office facilitate reinvention?

Think of times when you returned to a traditional place after an absence: coming home after a vacation; going back to work after an extended assignment (e.g., deployment, secondment, global assignment, executive training); visiting parents', siblings', or friends' home after a time away. In each of these cases, transitions back to familiar settings can be either unremarkable by simply re-engaging in customary habits, or transformational by creating an inflection point for reinvention.

In this global pandemic, work lives have dramatically changed by working from home, relying on digital connections, facing business upheaval either in cost reduction or growth requirements, and establishing new routines. Work boundaries have been redefined from a physical workplace where people go to, work at, and return from to boundaries based on living a set of [values about how to serve customers](#) and treat each other.

Under severe pressure, some rocks become diamonds and others become dust (idea from Wayne Brockbank). As people now return to work in familiar office spaces, considering how this reentry becomes an opportunity for reinvention may help us not waste the chance to turn our demanding experiences into significant learning and change.

### After Action Review: Look backward to share experiences and lessons.

The global time out has affected each person differently: homeschooling children; missing significant social gatherings (e.g., graduations, weddings, funerals, birthdays); finding new personal routines for sleeping, working, eating, exercising, and connecting with others. In nearly all cases, social distancing has often led to personal isolation of some kind.

As employees emerge from working at home to return to office work, they often want to share experiences and personal stories. Business, team, and HR leaders can sponsor meetings where team members share personal experiences and reconnect by sharing stories. These more personal forums might start by acknowledging that contextual pressures (e.g., health fears, social isolation, home quarantine, new routines) challenged each individual differently. Employees might respond well to personal questions such as:

- What did you learn about yourself and how you responded during the corona crisis?
- What did you like about being sheltered that worked well for you? Why?
- What was particularly hard about your personal circumstances? How did you deal with it?
- What was one experience (story) that most characterized your reactions to social distancing and remote work? What do you hope you learned from that experience?

- Who are the “heroes” who served you? How can you thank them?

This personal forum allows employees: to reconnect with each other not just by “listening to” but “hearing” each other’s experience during this crisis: to bring into the workplace a chance to practice the essential human skills of compassion and empathy, and to go beyond an intellectual “this is what I did” to a more emotional “this is what I felt.” These emotional ties at work bind employees to each other.

Having heard each other’s personal experiences, employees can then explore insights about work with this probe: “What did we each learn about work that we want to stop doing or continue to do?”

- Stop doing. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to enormous attention on identifying and eradicating the coronavirus. In [our work at RBL](#), we have identified twenty of the most common organization viruses that affect the work setting so that they can be named and removed.
- Continue to do. Recognize the things that employees missed by being away from work and the positive routines that should be continued.

These personal and business after-action reviews should not be a one-time conversation but an on-going dialogue.

### **Forward Vision Preview: Look forward to reinvent.**

Transitions review the past but also offer unique opportunities to create the future. Focusing on a future vision may inform today’s actions when business, team, and HR leaders:

- Reaffirm the right culture. Discuss, define, and implement a new culture not only in terms of values and behaviors but in terms of [the right culture](#) that turns customer promises into daily employee behaviors and organization processes.
- Prune. Determine which work activities not done during the lockdown were not missed. Remove unnecessary reports, approvals, meetings, measures, policies, and practices that were not missed or adding value (see [workout ideas](#)).
- Prioritize. Prioritizing, one of the most difficult things to do, requires identifying the work activities that create the most value for employees, business results, customers, investors, and communities. These activities might include targeting customers; making strategic, product, and service choices; or removing or reengineering work processes, organization capabilities, and talent. Our post-pandemic crisis situation can provide a unique opportunity to thoughtfully audit what could be done better and then invest money, time, and energy on priorities.
- Tolerate uncertainty. Having lived for months in a world of uncertainty, don’t try to reinstall certainty. Replace declarative statements (“From this day forward, I (or we) will . . .”) to experimental statements (“I am (or we are) going to try . . .”) to take small steps for reinventing the future.

A *forward vision preview* complements an *after-action review* to reinvent the return to work.

### **Watch out for recidivism.**

New Year's resolutions don't often last; weight loss is often followed by weight gain; transferring learning from one site to another is very difficult because the old setting has old cues that reinforce old behaviors even in a new place.

Norm Smallwood and I have written about [Leadership Sustainability](#) and the challenge of avoiding recidivism, a condition where old patterns return. The following are some simple tips to keep in mind as employees identify what they want to be different in their return to work:

- **Simplicity:** Focus on implementing the few key behaviors that will have the most impact.
- **Time:** Allocate time so that behavior matches intentions.
- **Accountability:** Go public to take personal and organizational responsibility to do what is desired.
- **Resources:** Support the desired changes with new HR and other systems.
- **Tracking:** Develop metrics to monitor and report progress.
- **Melioration:** Constantly learn from mistakes to improve and adapt.
- **Emotion:** Draw on shared values to keep motivated.

Using these seven tips will help sustain reinvented work.

## Now what?

Life's greatest lessons often result from transitions. Most of us have experienced personal hardships. At the time, these hardships were discouraging and seemingly unsurmountable. But the lessons learned from these difficult times often create insights that we want to take with us in a transition to shape a more positive future.

Likewise, the pressure of this global pandemic may be a unique opportunity to create diamonds and not dust of our experiences by creating personal and professional transitions where individuals and organizations reinvent work.

We hope you will visit [www.rbl.net](http://www.rbl.net) for a host of tools for returning to office work.



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