

Here's How HR Managers Create a Healthy Workplace During a Health Crisis

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Health has been on everyone's mind since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many offices are still 100% remote to help ensure employees' safety, a reality that has its pros and cons. Some people do well with working from home, while others struggle.

Creating a healthy workplace is essential, whether people are physically present in the office or not, especially during a public health crisis. Human resource managers have the responsibility of creating a culture of health and building organizational policies that support employee wellness.

This can be a daunting task. Regardless of the type of health crisis that occurs, there will always be difficult decisions to make. A skilled HR manager will rise to the occasion, however, and help employees get through the crisis and stay healthy at work. Here are some of the steps they take to provide the support that's needed.

HR's Role During a Crisis

Most people don't realize just how important HR teams are during a public health crisis. [Human Resource departments](#) have to balance the needs of employees with the needs of the business to ensure that people have the support and flexibility they need while helping to maximize productivity. During a health crisis, these needs can be at odds with one another.

Health crises affecting an organization can come from different sources. An extreme weather event could affect team members' housing stability or jeopardize their ability to work safely. A global pandemic like COVID-19 could necessitate that team members work from home temporarily, changing the way the entire office runs.

HR helps create healthy workplaces for employees, whether they are working from home or in the office. Workers in different situations have different needs. A worker at home might not need much support in staying safe from catching a virus in the office, but they might be dealing with problems like

isolation that can affect mental health and should be addressed.

In addition to providing support for employees, human resource managers must help to prevent any liability that might affect the organization. During a public health crisis, [an effective human resources response](#) can mean the difference between weathering the storm and a company's demise.

Difficult Decisions Under Pressure

Most public health crises seem to come out of nowhere—even if there are some warning signs. Ideally, HR departments should keep an eye out for potential threats so they can plan accordingly. However, dealing with these kinds of crises tends to require some difficult decision-making under pressure.

In addition to major decisions, like whether or not employees should work from home for safety reasons, there are practical decisions as well. Should workflows change to accommodate how employees will be completing tasks under crisis conditions? Do they need more check-ins and support?

Many of these decisions will involve budgetary considerations. Additional training may be necessary, and the company may need to consider investing in employees' health and wellness to help them get through the crisis while remaining productive. HR will have a major role in all these strategic decisions, which may need to be made very quickly.

Mobilization and delegation are often key for HR managers developing a crisis response plan. They may need to get managers throughout the organization involved in creating new leadership plans, work assignments, and operational details. HR should facilitate these decisions and changes, but they must understand when to hand the reins of certain details over to someone else.

Physical and Mental Health for Employees

Creating a healthy workplace for all employees means understanding that there are some universal needs and some that vary from person to person. HR departments must take both physical and mental health for employees when responding to a public health crisis.

Companies that prefer to have people working in the office may have to contend with factors like regional regulations and mandates, employees' comfort levels, and practical considerations. It's not fair to ask employees to come back into the office when their jobs are non-essential or can be performed from home, as long as a health threat remains, for instance.

However, HR must balance the organization's needs with the other factors and determine when it makes sense to bring people back into the office. How much will employees work from home affect productivity? Will measures like wearing masks or getting vaccinated become mandatory—and will those policies cause the organization to lose good employees?

Additionally, mental health is an important consideration. Morale and productivity are influenced by employees' mental health, and HR departments need to support workers who are struggling with the effects of a public health crisis so they can stay mentally healthy in their work and personal lives.

Great HR Teams Encourage Mental Health Maintenance & Employee Self-Care

It isn't fair to let employees work everything out for themselves during a public health crisis. They may be dealing with unexpected changes they weren't prepared for. As an example, many working parents were thrust into chaos during the COVID-19 pandemic when their children had to stay home from school and daycare, forcing them to figure out the balance of childcare and work. Or, in the aftermath of a weather event like a hurricane, employees may not have stable Internet connections—or even a place to live.

These stressors add up. Even people who are safe and can work from home often find that their mental health suffers when a public health crisis affects their lives and work. That's why self-care for mental health and well-being is so important. Great HR teams provide resources like [a wellness toolbox](#) to help employees find stress-busting strategies that work for them.

Coping skills aren't something a person is born with. Anxiety, depression, chronic stress, negative moods, and difficulty focusing are all common during a health crisis. Leaving employees to sort things out without support isn't good for them or the business. Because everyone is different, however, it's

important to ensure that there are different options for mental health maintenance and self-care.

Depending on the size of your organization and the attitude of the leadership team, there are lots of ways to help employees stay healthy. These can range from virtual or in-person events (such as social events or support groups) to yoga subscriptions to flexible hours. Gauging the needs of an entire workforce is challenging, but necessary for providing proper support.

Preparing for the Future & Realizing the Limitations

HR departments were largely unprepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. There was no roadmap for handling the crisis and HR managers had to scramble to make tough decisions that would affect the success of their organizations. While some businesses made it through, others didn't.

The pandemic was a wake-up call for many. Savvy HR departments have used the lessons from the pandemic to create crisis response plans and solid policies they can turn to if and when another public health crisis should affect their employees.

Proper preparation will be key in mitigating future problems, but it's also important to acknowledge the limitations of HR during these kinds of crises. Human resource managers should take responsibility for equipping employees with the resources they need to cope, but they cannot be responsible for employees' response to a crisis and related changes within the workplace.

Even with all the tools available to them, some people won't take care of themselves and may not rise to the occasion. When that occurs, a good HR manager must know when it is appropriate to give someone time to care for themselves and improve, and when it is time to cut ties. This is one of the most difficult aspects of working in human resources, but it is essential for the good of the organization.

Managing Workers in HR's Evolving Role

Human beings are messy and fragile, with complicated lives that don't always mesh with business needs. HR departments have always had the difficult task of reconciling the complex lives of humans with the need for consistent productivity. However, if COVID-19 taught us anything, it was that HR

must play a larger role in employees' lives in our modern world that blurs the line between work and life.

Although human needs are inconvenient for companies, employees are also their biggest assets. They need to help ensure that workers are healthy and as happy as possible in a competitive marketplace that changes quickly. When crises strike, the margin for error is even smaller and the stressors are grateful.

Human resources professionals know that their work is far more meaningful than just onboarding employees and settling office squabbles. Unfortunately, it has taken many leaders a long time to understand just how valuable HR is to an organization. It took a pandemic to convince many C-level executives that [human resources are critical to a company's success](#). Today, some organizations are realizing the role that HR must now play in strategic planning and crisis response plans.

The evolving role of HR is still emerging, but one thing is clear: in today's world, employee health and wellness matter more than ever. For organizations to thrive and adapt to the demands of the world, they need people on board who understand people. We need HR teams that will do whatever they can to create effective strategies for bringing the best out of their employees—even during a crisis.

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