

Supporting Staff Through Times of Uncertainty

Guidance for HR and Leaders



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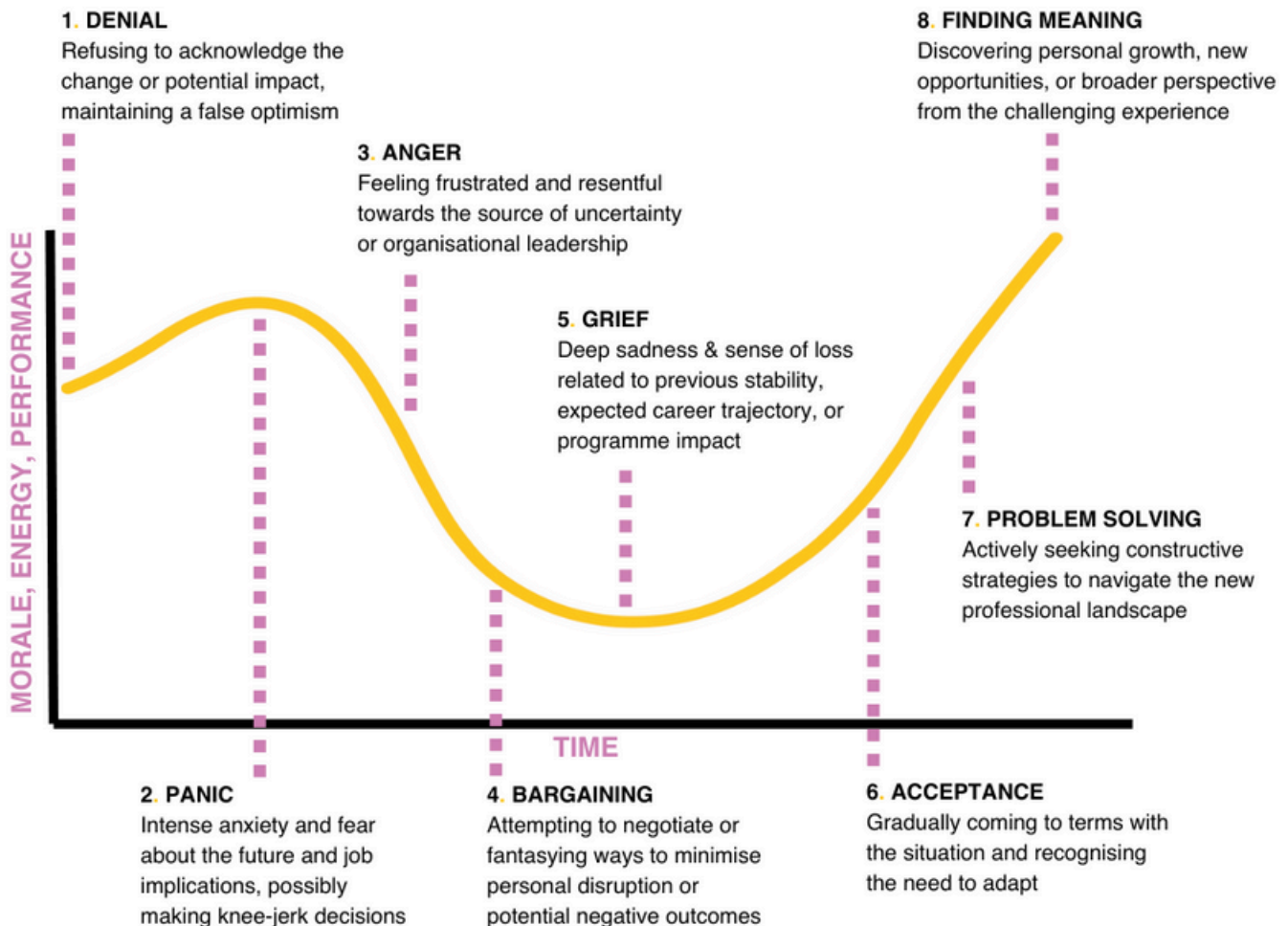
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Economic downturns. Organisational restructuring. Global crises. Technological disruptions. All of these things and more can create profound uncertainty at work.

But whatever the cause, if you're an HR professional or leader, and your staff are experiencing stress or anxiety in the wake of uncertainty, then you have a crucial role to play. By fostering a caring environment, communicating well, and providing the necessary tools to support staff during a challenging time, you can help them travel the road ahead with resilience and courage. With that in mind, here are five steps you can take:

1. ACKNOWLEDGE PEOPLE'S FEELINGS

Uncertainty at work can cause anxiety, fear, stress and grief. People may fear a job loss. Their motivation and engagement may suffer. Their decision-making and problem-solving capability may decline. And while some may adapt quickly to the uncertainty, others will not. Emotions will vary and change over time. The 'grief model' below will apply for many people:



Wherever your staff are on this model, what can you do to help them acknowledge their feelings? Here are some places to start:

Help people see that their feelings are normal and valid

This will help them feel less alone, and reassure them that something more sinister or damaging isn't happening to them. Validate their concerns and demonstrate compassion. And recognise that different individuals respond to uncertainty differently.

Provide regular 'check-ins' to listen to staff and assess their wellbeing

This could include weekly 20-30 minute one-on-ones with members of your team, in which you find out how they're doing, and connect struggling staff with additional support (see suggestions for this support below).

Host weekly sessions for managers to reflect on team dynamics

Together you can spot emerging patterns or concerns and share support strategies.

Focus on building psychological safety and a trauma-informed approach

This is especially important if staff are working in a hostile or high risk

environment. 'Psychological safety' means creating a safe environment where staff feel comfortable sharing their concerns and asking for help. And a 'trauma-informed approach' means understanding the impact of trauma and stress on individuals and taking steps to mitigate these effects. See the 'further reading' section at the bottom of this resource to learn more about both of these.

2. COMMUNICATE OPENLY AND OFTEN

There's a saying we often hear from crisis managers: "in times of distress, information is safety". Communicating openly and often will help build trust and rapport during this time. Some things to consider:

Provide frequent and consistent updates

In times of uncertainty, people might find it harder to absorb information. And so good communication with your team is crucial right now. Keep it simple, clear and short. And repeat key information. Share what you are doing to navigate the challenges, show compassion and empathy in your communication, and acknowledge how people feel.

Use different channels of communication

Leaders and managers sometimes forget that staff might not read (or hear) everything you say. This applies whether you are communicating one-on-one, or organisation-wide. So use emails, meetings, noticeboards, calls – whatever is appropriate in your context.

Encourage two-way communication

Staff should have the opportunity to ask questions and have their concerns addressed, either through anonymous surveys, company-wide meetings where employees can ask questions directly of leadership, one-on-one chats or other open forums.

3. SET THE RIGHT TONE

Anxiety can be contagious. Remember that people are looking to you to manage the contagion and present a sense of groundedness and direction. Setting the tone by presenting calmness, confidence, and ethical decision-making, can help you guide employees through the uncertainty, which can preserve morale, engagement and motivation. If you have a crisis management team which is activated during this time, then ensure their messages to staff are consistent. Here are some ways you can set the tone:

Bring a perspective of hope

Try to find and maintain a 'growth mindset' and bring a perspective of hope in the middle of a crisis. This requires you to harness your skills of resilience, adaptability and learning, and coming back to the vision and shared collective purpose of your work.

Continue to foster a sense of purpose

Draw connections between people's daily tasks and your broader organisational goals. This will help them feel valued, and retain a sense of purpose and belonging.

Provide clear direction

This will help provide a sense of stability. Decisiveness will be important even if staff don't like your decisions. Explain your decisions, and if appropriate share what impact this will have, and the next steps you intend to take.

Maintain social engagement

Encourage social connection, acknowledge staff efforts, and promote self-care. Foster a supportive environment and continue to create opportunities for team-building.

Get the support you and your team need

This could include Leadership Coaching to help manage the uncertainty; training for your managers on helping their teams navigate change; establishing peer support systems; and supporting managers to practice active listening and other people skills.

4. PROVIDE PRACTICAL & EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

The kind of support you'll need to offer will vary from person to person, and will change over time, so keep monitoring people's wellbeing.

Practical Support

It may be helpful to offer flexible working arrangements (hours or location) for some, a phased return to work, or opportunities to work on different content. In some situations it may mean offering support with CV writing, signposting to other resources etc. Or it may include helping staff think through safe plans if it is related to physical safety. To help you decide on the right support, ask yourself:

- What adjustments or resources would help staff feel more supported in their work during this period?
- What specific barriers are affecting people's ability to work effectively, and how can you help address them?

- What types of flexibility would make the biggest difference to people's wellbeing and productivity?
- What additional support—career, financial, emotional, or safety-related—would be most valuable to people right now?

Emotional Support

The role of HR and leadership is not to eliminate the uncertainty, but to guide employees through it with clarity, confidence and compassion. On a personal level try to recognise and appreciate your team by regularly acknowledging their contributions and celebrating small wins, so that staff continue to feel a sense of achievement and contribution to something bigger. It may be helpful to provide access to Counselling, Coaching, or group sessions like our popular Resilience Check-Ins.

5. LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Lastly, how you show up and role model wellbeing is as important as your technical response to the uncertainty. Investing in this will help you think more clearly, make better decisions, and be more effective. The basics should be a priority: eat well, drink water, get enough sleep, exercise, and maintain social interaction. This will help maintain stamina and resilience. Some additional measures we advocate include:

Put clear boundaries in place

You will need down time. Consider what this means for you and put in place some boundaries so that you can detach from work.

Ensure time and space for personal relationships with loved ones

Make sure you protect this

Make time for 'de-stress' activities

Consider what will help you relax, process your emotions, reduce tension, and maintain your wellbeing. This might be running, painting, gardening, doing puzzles or something else that you enjoy.

Seek professional support if you need it

This could be advisory support, leadership coaching or counselling. Activate those support structures that will help you navigate this time.

And remember...

Supporting staff through uncertainty means taking a multi-faceted approach, to address both practical and emotional needs. It is this combination that will enable staff to maintain their wellbeing as they navigate these times.

FURTHER READING

9 Ways You Can Create Psychological Safety In Your Organisation

When members of a team feel able to speak up, to raise a concern, or to disagree with others, they work harder, perform better and are more creative.

bit.ly/3Q4VDmG

Things To Know About ... Creating A Trauma-Informed Workplace

Are you 'trauma-informed'? Here two of our psychosocial team explain why this is an important question for all HR, managers & leaders to consider.

www.thrive-worldwide.org/blog/creating-a-trauma-informed-workplace

Navigating The Redundancy Process

It's sadly a reality of work. We've created this guide for HR, managers and leaders.

bit.ly/3Q3pNGW

FURTHER SUPPORT

Resilience Check In

Space for an individual or group to pause, reflect and plot a path through a difficult time, guided by a facilitator.

www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/resilience-check-in

Advisory Support For HR & Leaders

A confidential space with a staff care specialist to share concerns, think through solutions, and seek advice

www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/advisory-support-leaders

Leading People Effectively Through Change

Develop an action plan to guide a team through a time of change, whatever form it takes

www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/leading-people-effectively-through-change

Thriving In The Midst Of Change

Support for your staff to help them respond in the best possible way to a period of change

www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/thriving-in-the-midst-of-change

Leadership Coaching

Expert support to help you meet a challenge or develop your potential

www.thrive-worldwide.org/service/leadership-coaching



Want to talk?

We're ready to support you

thrive-worldwide.org/contact-us