Team Topic and Number: Workplace Wellness

Team sponsor/chapter (if applicable): Mid-Atlantic Chapter

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Worldwide pandemic conditions are creating human and financial impacts and causing businesses to prioritize People's safety. Business continuity efforts are reliant on employees to perform optimally when businesses reopen. CRE organizations play an essential role in supporting the physical and emotional needs of employees reentering the workplace. By addressing People and Place, with well thought out approaches and protocols, offices can mitigate virus transmission and provide the safest operations possible, while stimulating employee productivity.

Workplace Wellbeing addresses People and Place to provide safety, comfort, and empowerment at a time of uncertainty and high stress. The perfect storm of anxiety is powerlessness and uncertainty, which is what most employees are experiencing. CRE rises to the challenge to provide a positive workplace environment that instills confidence and invites creative solutions.

People

Workplace Wellbeing during and beyond the Covid-19 pandemic will require new habits and creative thinking around communication, flexibility, connection and engagement.

Good communication is paramount during this time. Communication may take many forms. Information prior to returning to the office will help staff know what's being done and what to expect when they arrive. Because the entire workplace experience will be different than before, videos, signage, and graphics will reassure people of the new social norms and behaviors that are expected. The communications plan must include information and training on new protocols (temperature checks at entry, HR policies on staying home when ill or having childcare/school issues); new policies on assigned workspaces, conference spaces, cafeteria usage; and the open/closed status of amenities such as coffee station, pantries, and fitness centers. A mechanism for employee feedback is also critical as circumstances will evolve and adjustments will need to be made.

Empathy and compassion must be integrated within communications to reassure employees whose lives were abruptly disrupted by the pandemic. Home was suddenly the epicenter for everything – family life, schooling, entertainment, and work. Employees juggled many roles with limited resources and often in isolation. Organizations can assume that all associates, regardless of their stage in life or career, have experienced unexpected stress caused by financial, emotional, or logistical strains.

Both employer and employees must remain flexible to adjust and adapt as reentry logistics are tested and more is known about the virus. Office hours may change to stagger entries and alternate schedules. Employees with homebound children must balance work productivity with caring for, and sometimes teaching, their children. Modifying work schedules will not only reduce stress; but also allow employees to work when they are most productive. Collaboration can be made easier with calendar tools that provide transparency into availability.

Connection and engagement will help ease employee anxiety. The biggest challenge will be maintaining physical distancing while trying to remain socially connected. Finding ways that fit an organization's culture and the circumstances of the employees will require a good balance. With physical distancing requirements these interactions are best done virtually. Some ideas are: Create cross functional teams to strengthen relevant relationships between groups, develop a buddy system, encourage continuous education through video learning and possibly gamification. Leaders of virtual meetings should encourage a "camera on" mindset and actively engage with participants. Consider team building activities, brain storming sessions, happy hours or commit to joining in a live fitness class. During times of uncertainty, it's important for people to connect with others and if it happens to be around a mutual interest, even better.

Clear, transparent, and up-to-date communication is imperative. A live, on-line dashboard provided to employees from a company provides clarity around the organization and the changes to the workplace. Additionally, giving them employees access to update the dashboards gives a feeling of control and partnership in an uncertain situation like a pandemic.

Understanding that the pandemic could impact people's mental and emotional health, managers and leaders have an ethical responsibility to monitor others' emotional health and offer support when it is needed. Good mental health can be characterized by the ability to learn, manage a range of positive and negative emotions, form and maintain relationships, and cope with change and uncertainty.

Tools to help recognize a diminishing state of mental health should be updated and circulated to managers regularly. Here are a few:
- https://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Warning-Signs-and-Symptoms

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zt4sOjWwV3M&feature=emb_logo
- https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus

Place

To address staff concerns regarding a physical response to a pandemic workplace, every organization must take a series of measures to make employees feel safe. While every organization varies, a comprehensive approach will include cleaning, distancing, paths of travel, and physical changes to the workplace.

Frequent and visible cleaning protocols will be required and appreciated by staff who will see that management understands their concerns. New protocols may include a "clean desk" policy where each person is responsible for wiping down at the beginning and end of their workday as well as using a disposable paper mat for their dedicated worksurface. Ready access to disinfectant wipes & hand sanitizer (at each station) will be the norm.

Physical distancing will continue to be best practice at 6 feet apart. Throughout the workplace visual cues will be utilized to remind employees to change behaviors and maintain social distancing.

Entry points and paths of travel will be modified to designate patterns to help maintain social distancing. Temperature scanning or health questions may be required, along with a mask; touchless access rather than touching keypad.

If open/monumental stairs between floors exist, these may be encouraged rather than using an elevator. If using vertical transportation, elevators may be placed in "local" service to minimize keypad touches or an operator may be required.

Desktops may be required to be empty to mitigate virus transmission. In addition, occupancy will be reduced to maintain distancing and reduce risk of transmitting to entire staff.

Initially, workstations may be retrofitted with new materials, reoriented so people face away from each other will also be implemented.

Other physical changes may include touchless faucets, soap dispensers and paper towel dispensers/air dryers in the restrooms. Restrooms will also be subject to more frequent cleaning. Issues regarding opening doors to restrooms and stalls will also need to be solved for, as well as staggering the number of people.

Cafeteria/kitchens/pantries/coffee service areas will also need to be adjusted to reduce contact and maintain distancing. Including elimination of salad bars/buffets for pre-packaged foods, contactless payment systems, pre-ordered meals for pick-up or delivery.

Another critical component is indoor air quality. HVAC systems will need to be reviewed and upgraded to allow for increased airflow, better filtration, and UV lighting to better sanitize the air. As newer spaces are designed, this will be included as a matter of course.

Phased re-entry to the workplace will be required. Employees may be asked to do temperature checks and sign affidavits vouching for their good health. Since most staff adjusted to WFH over the past few months, many will be encouraged to continue to work from home to allow for a phased re-entry into the

workplace. In order to support this approach on a long-term basis, management may wish to consider providing staff with an ergonomic furniture allowance for a home office set up. This would encourage staff to procure furniture that supports them physically working from home in a safer manner.

These are just some examples of the physical changes of the workplace through effective communication, upgraded and visible cleaning protocols, implementation of proper distancing procedures, paths and modes of travel as well as changes to workstation environment-whether working from home or in the office-along with office amenities will demonstrate to staff that the organization understands their concerns and is addressing them in a proactive and ongoing manner-to support workplace wellbeing.

Preparing CRE for re-entry
CRE staff will soon be on the "front line" interacting with associates. As they move between departments and floors they will be bombarded by associate's questions: is the HVAC safe, how often are you cleaning the restroom, is the coffee maker safe, are you carrying the virus throughout the office? And CRE staff will be asking: how can they make the best decisions, empower their team to achieve common goals, and be an effective leader when facing unprecedented levels of uncertainty? Improvisation can prepare them and their staff to reduce anxiety and deescalate conflicts. There is a need to create powerful communicators, selfless listeners, acute observers, and team-oriented collaborators. In short, leaders who create new opportunities despite uncertainty. The foundational skills of improvisation will help CRE staff to think fast on their feet, adjust in the moment, and take powerful action when confronting uncertainty. Improvisation will not remove uncertainty, but it can give you a new power tool to reduce anxiety.

In conclusion, the role CRE has never been more critical. By impacting both people and place, we can reassure returning employees that the organization understands their concerns and will support their workplace wellbeing.