



---

# Managing Reactions Associated with Transitioning to the Hybrid Workplace (Employee's Perspective)

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, ISED pivoted to a largely virtual work environment; and we are now embarking on a new transition, towards working in a hybrid environment. In fact, hybrid work arrangements will be the norm for many organizations.

With the transition to hybrid working arrangements on the horizon, you might be struggling with the thought of having to leave the safety of home to work in an environment that's filled with uncertainties. Despite the challenges of having made our living spaces into our working spaces, many of us have now become used to the comforts of working from home and being in control of our environment. Having experienced the advantages of more flexibility in where and when we work, you and/ or your teammates may now be feeling anxiety, or even trepidation, about returning to the office. Some of you may be happy about the hybrid model while others may be altogether stressed about it.

## **Strategies that have been shared with Management**

Your manager has likely been given access to a version of this document that provides strategies if their employees are experiencing some important psychological impacts or repercussions that are leading to a reluctance to return to the workplace. The following four areas were highlighted to them and may provide you some insight into what your colleagues may be going through. Some employees may express concerns and strong emotions about working in a hybrid workplace. To prevent the potential for emotional escalation, support your employee in naming and identifying their concerns and feelings. Validate their concerns and feelings by repeating what you hear them expressing; avoid minimizing or dismissing them.

There are a number of potential concerns that may cause employees to feel anxious or less enthusiastic about working on-site. Here are some concerns that you may want to listen to and look out for:

- Maintaining work-life balance, especially after spending more than two years with family, pets and loved ones during the pandemic
- Worries about the new workplace environment
- Apprehension about in-person, work-based socializing and productivity
- Worries about returning to a crowded office, elevators, food court
- Establishing new routines and adapting to new schedules
- Uncertainty regarding workspace location and whether other team members will be in the office or in the same location.
- **Health and safety**

## Tips and Tricks for adjusting to the new environment

### **Be compassionate with yourself and others**

It is important to acknowledge the journey everyone has been on in the past two years and to give yourself, and others, empathy. When you reconnect with people, remember that you all have been through a lot.

If colleagues are experiencing a sense of loss with transitioning to the hybrid workplace and fear or apprehension about the future, respond by listening with your heart and acknowledging their dilemma. Psychological and social support is a key factor to feel in a healthy and productive workplace.

### **Give people a chance to adjust to the change**

You might be tempted to hit the ground running, catching up with colleagues or overloading your calendar with meetings. Pump the brakes. To the extent that it is possible, give yourself and others some time to ease in. Allow yourself and others some time and space to feel comfortable socializing with colleagues again or being in face-to-face meetings. Social connections are a key factor in breaking the feeling of isolation.

### **Clear Communication**

Leading a hybrid team requires more attention, follow-through, and monitoring to ensure their psychological health and safety are secure. Ongoing communication by your manager to keep you and your colleagues in the loop on progress, decisions, needs, goals, requirements and expectations is critical. Scheduling regular bilateral meetings is really important. Communicating clearly, early and often, and through multiple channels will be common. Expect this and thereby avoid feeling exasperated by it.

### **Manage your own transition and get support**

You may find yourself with real accommodation concerns and you may feel conflicted about your obligation to be a productive employee. If this is the case, take time to come to terms with your feelings as you navigate your transition. See the Supports section for helpful options.

# Four Phases of a Collaborative Conversation About Transitioning to the Hybrid Workplace

When you take the time to prepare for a collaborative conversation you greatly increase your chances of success. Remember that you *and* your manager have a duty to implement the transition responsibly. You may have very personal reasons to discuss the support you will need; looking to your manager as a partner will help achieve that. Your manager has needs too, so don't forget to allow them the time and the space to name and express their needs.

## **PHASE 1: BEFORE THE CONVERSATION**

- ☐ Imagine the climate you want to create and the outcome you want to achieve with this discussion and draft your opening statements.
- ☐ If you don't receive an invitation from your manager to discuss the transition, you may opt to request one. Convey the desired outcome and climate, and clearly identify your intention.
- ☐ Let your manager know what you need from them to feel comfortable to engage in this conversation.
- ☐ Prepare yourself for handling complex emotions. (See Roadblock section)
- ☐ Know your limits and triggers: work through your own emotions by visualizing outcomes, practicing and reaching out for support if needed. (See Supports section)

*"I want to establish a working relationship where I feel heard, am being treated equitably and where I am receiving reasonable accommodation."*

## **PHASE 2: BEGINNING OF THE CONVERSATION**

- ☐ Repeat your intention with respect to the discussion and tell your manager that you are going to respect their needs too.
- ☐ Ask your manager what they would like to achieve through this discussion.
- ☐ Be calm, open and listen to his/ her point of view.
- ☐ It is okay to focus on the impact on you and your needs. . (See section "To Avoid Defensiveness") At the same time, actively listen for ways where you can satisfy their needs as well as your own.

*"My intention with this conversation is to find ways to be a productive member of the team while finding support for what I am going through."*

## **PHASE 3: DURING THE CONVERSATION**

- ☐ Ask open-ended questions to encourage fulsome information sharing and explore openly your interests, the impact on you and what you need. (See section “To Avoid Defensiveness”.) Remain curious.
- ☐ Listen and observe your manager’s body language throughout the discussion:
  - As they respond to you. (Are your words landing well or missing the target?)
  - As they react. (They are a person, too; and they may have emotional reactions to the situation as well.)
- ☐ If you do observe negative body language, pause and address it. The “I” Statements technique (found in the “To Avoid Defensiveness” section) can be used here as well, starting with a neutral physical description of the body language (“When I ..., you leaned back, crossed your arms and looked away. I feel concerned. I need support to find an option that works for both of us. Would you agree to remain open to discussing different options?”)
- ☐ How are *you* reacting emotionally to the exchange? Always, let them explain their rationale to you rather than react emotionally, and then respond consciously and collaboratively.
- ☐ Avoid judging and/ or evaluating the person's words in relation to your own values.

*“I can see how important this is for you. How can we both be satisfied with this process?”*

#### **PHASE 4: EXPLORING YOUR MANAGER’S NEEDS AND OBLIGATIONS**

- ☐ If strong emotions continue to exist, for you or for them, name the emotion and suggest a break, of minutes or days, specifically to process that emotion (See Supports section). Gently remind the manager of your mutual intended outcomes and suggest that the emotions may hinder that.

*“This is still having a big impact on me [OR] I am interested in finding a reasonable accommodation within the established rules and I see you tense up when I mention my accommodation needs. [THEN] I would prefer to take some time for us to reflect upon what is reasonable in this situation. I am happy to come back together to revisit this in a few days. In the meantime, I am going to reach out to the Employee Assistance Program to explore these feelings more fully. Is that something you can support?”*

- ☐ It’s time to share their needs as a manager when:
  - There are no strong emotions in the way, yours or theirs.
  - You have had the space to express yourself and feel you’ve been heard.
- ☐ Once both parties are coping with their emotions, proceed by reiterating your intention with respect to the conversation, the climate you wish to create, and what you wish to achieve.
- ☐ Be prepared to explore the organizational expectations on the subject matter.
- ☐ Avoid making it a debate, but do speak from a needs-based perspective: yours, theirs, the team’s, the organization’s.
- ☐ Look for common interests/ needs between you and your manager, particularly on professionalism, contribution, flexibility, work-life balance, collaboration, excitement, dynamic and engaging environment, socializing, action-oriented, efficiency/ saving time, influence, methodical implementation, etc.

- ☐ You may have questions that cannot be answered in the moment. Consult the **Future of Work: Transition to Hybrid and Beyond** intranet site or contact via an email Future of Work at ISED to inform yourself fully.
- ☐ Commit to following up on questions and agree on when to meet again.
- ☐ End with a message of ongoing support and commitment.

*"I appreciate all that you have shared with me and intend to make this transition as smooth as possible for us and our team. I think we both have an interest in remaining professional. I also appreciate that you have several things to consider while figuring out how to address my request for accommodation. I want to assure you I am committed to quality work and supporting the organization as best I can. I also remain available to discuss this further. Thank you."*

### ROADBLOCK: When Emotions Are High

*"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*

~ Maya Angelou ~

When emotions are high, pause and address them. Nobody is able to take in essential information if emotions are in the way. In difficult moments, always go back to your intention. That will help you stay grounded and on track.

Remember, either you or the person across from you might be having a negative emotional reaction that can easily interfere with a successful collaborative conversation. Let's look at what you could do in either situation.

### **3-Step Approach if you are experiencing an anxiety-provoking situation:**

**1. Acknowledge** the emotion to yourself and share it with the other person in the conversation. If you cannot identify it, state that you are feeling emotional and go from there:

*"I feel anxious/ upset/ fearful. [OR] I don't know what I am feeling or why, but I am getting emotional. [THEN] Something here is not working for me."*

**2. Reframe** statements to validate understanding and to clarify intent:

- ✓ Name facts and feelings, ask clarifying questions

*"Could you help me understand what you mean when you say 'no exceptions'? That makes me worried about my request."*

**3. Refocus** on goals:

- ✓ Re-iterate issues at hand, focus on generating options together, and discuss next steps

*“One issue is that you’re afraid of creating inequity within the team. There are very clear rules about how and when accommodation should be undertaken. Can we find a way to have an impartial review of the situation to ensure it is fair?”*

### **3-Step Approach if the other speaker is experiencing an anxiety-provoking situation:**

Managers are human too, and it is possible that your recent interactions have created anxiety or are perceived as a potential threat to your manager’s ability to achieve the organization’s goal of returning to the workplace. If you see your manager exhibiting avoidance or impatience with you, it is possible for you to improve the situation.

By taking these 3 steps into consideration, the conversation can continue to move forward so that together you can find a common understanding.

1. **Acknowledge** that this has been a recurring issue between the two of you and that your intention is to find a mutually satisfactory resolution:

*“I know that we have had several discussions on this subject and my intention is to sincerely be able to find a mutually acceptable solution.”*

2. **Reassure:** Inform him/ her that you are aware of organizational needs and that you are not trying to create unfairness within the team or interfere with the achievement of an organizational or team goal:

*“I know that the hybrid model is an organizational decision and I want to avoid creating unfairness or the perception that I am against that decision or team goals.”*

3. **Offer your help:** Ask your manager what the concern is. Ask them what their goal is. Offer to help them meet their goal (their need) so that they in turn can help you meet your need:

*“What concerns do you have about this situation? What is the goal you would like to achieve? Is there anything I can do to help you meet your goal (your need) so that we can meet in a common ground/interest?”*

### **To Avoid Defensiveness**

The “I” Statements communication tool allows us to take personal responsibility for our feelings and needs when others aren’t behaving as we wish they would. It is not about “changing” the other person, but rather about respectfully communicating our personal feelings and needs as a way of influencing a change of behaviour.

Using neutral language in a calm way allows us to take a non-judgmental approach to bringing the behaviour to the person's attention. More inflammatory descriptions of the behaviour may result in defensiveness, as in the following between an employee and their manager:

- ✖ I can't believe you decided against my accommodation request without even having the decency to say so to my face, ...
- ✖ Why do you always blame me when things go wrong? ...
- ✖ When you rudely interrupt me while I am on the phone, ...

*"We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behavior"*

~ Stephen Covey ~

There are three main elements to "I" Statements:

**1. Name the behaviour** (using facts and observations, not value judgements or accusations)

- ✓ During yesterday's staff meeting, when you said that everyone would be limited to 2 days of remote work with no exceptions, ...
- ✓ When you raise your voice, ...
- ✓ When you try to talk to me while I am on the phone, ...

**2. The impact**

By understanding the impact of their behaviour on us, others can be motivated to change their behaviour. It is important not to assume that the person had negative intentions when carrying out the behaviour. By clearly stating and owning our feelings\* about the behaviour, we take personal responsibility for them, and avoid laying blame or accusing the other person. Examples:

- ✓ During yesterday's staff meeting, when you said that everyone would be limited to 2 days of remote work per week with no exceptions, I felt anxious because I am overwhelmed and am leery that I can perform in those circumstances.
- ✓ When you raise your voice, I feel intimidated and have a hard time concentrating on what we are discussing.
- ✓ When you try to talk to me while I am on the phone, I get confused because I have to listen to two conversations at the same time.

**Here is a list of human feelings and needs that can help you put into words what you want to express and that will preserve the relationship**



List of feelings and  
needs ENG.pdf

*document attachment 1*



Liste de sentiments et  
besoins FR.pdf

*document attachment 2*

### 3. The need

Expressing your needs regarding the situation, in a clear and concise way, allows the other person to understand your expectations of him/ her.

#### Examples:

- ✓ During yesterday's staff meeting, when you said that everyone would be limited to 2 days of remote work per week with no exceptions, I felt anxious because I am overwhelmed and am leery that I can perform in those circumstances. I need understanding. Would you be willing to discuss and see how we can find mutually acceptable ground in order to remain effective?
- ✓ When you raise your voice, I feel intimidated and have a hard time concentrating on what we are discussing. I need calm in order to discuss issues or problems. Would you accept to make an effort to keep your voice at a reasonable level during our discussions?
- ✓ When you try to talk to me while I am on the phone, I get confused because I have to listen to two conversations at once. I need to concentrate when I'm on the phone. Would you agree to wait until I am off the phone before talking to me, or send me an email asking me to come by and see you when I am off the phone?

How you deliver an "I" Statement will vary based on the situation; it can be conveyed one piece at a time, but try to do it in order. It is important to be clear about each of the three segments of the message and to share them at some point in a conversation so that the other person knows what behaviour you are talking about, what the impact is and what your needs are. Without that information, a change is unlikely.

## SUPPORTS: We're Here For You

The **Informal Conflict Management and Professional Coaching Services (ICM&PCS)** team is here to help you practice before engaging in the conversation. We offer confidential advisory services and coaching to help you prepare for and navigate conversations when the stakes are high. You can contact the **ICM&PCS confidential mailbox** within the **Ombud Office**. Additional information and training support can be found on the [Informal Conflict Management and Professional Coaching Services](#) (ICM & PCS) intranet site. It is important to note that the ICM & PCS is not mandated to support the negotiations of the hybrid model which will be adopted between you and your manager. The ICM & PCS will however help support a productive conversation in a healthy and constructive environment.

For coping with strong emotions or a resulting crisis impact, refer to the Employee Assistance Program: 1-800-268-7708 (or 1-800-567-5803 for persons with a hearing condition).

For guidance with accommodation situations, consult the [Workplace Accommodation Centre](#) intranet site.



In addition, you can always contact your respective union representative to discuss and for advisory services.

