

Managing Reactions Associated with Transitioning to the Hybrid Workplace (Manager'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, it will be important to monitor your employees' experience, as it may vary substantially from one person to another. Some employees may welcome working on-site. Dressing for the workplace, being in an office environment again and experiencing real time, in-person communication and collaboration may be revitalizing. Other employees might have more difficulty with the new working realities of a hybrid model.

The Mental Health Continuum ([mental-health-continuum.pdf \(canada.ca\)](https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/hc-sc/pdf/mental-health-continuum.pdf)) enables managers to detect where all of their employees are situated on the spectrum of mental well-being and take appropriate measures to ensure they are and remain on the healthy side of that spectrum. The purpose of this tool is to provide managers with guidance on how to support employees who may struggle with a return to working on-site to maintain a healthy mental state.

Following are some strategies to address an employee's anxiety or resistance:

Identify and acknowledge your employee's feelings and needs regarding their transition to a hybrid workplace.

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
- Establishing new routines and adapting to new schedules
- Uncertainty regarding workspace location and whether or not 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 have all been through a lot.

If employees are experiencing a sense of loss and/or fear with transitioning to the hybrid workplace, or apprehension about the future, respond by listening with your heart and acknowledging their dilemma before insisting on conformity or action.

Give people a chance to adjust to the change

You might be tempted to hit the ground running, setting employee schedules, catching up with colleagues or overloading your calendar with meetings. Pump the brakes. To the extent that it is possible, give employees and yourself some time to ease in. Allow yourself and others time and space to feel comfortable socializing with colleagues again or being in face-to-face meetings. Employees who have already been experimenting working in a hybrid workplace may want to share their experiences and what they appreciate about being back in the office.

Communicate clearly

Leading a hybrid team requires more attention, follow-through, and monitoring to ensure their psychological health and safety are secure. Ongoing communication to keep employees in the loop on progress, decisions, needs, goals, requirements, and expectations is critical. Communicate clearly, early and often, and through multiple channels. Engage in discussions with your team regularly to understand their experience. It will be important to share, during your team meetings, some of the positive aspects of the hybrid model as a way to support your employees to adjust to the new working environment.

Manage your own transition and get support

As a manager, you may find yourself sharing your employees' concerns and you may feel conflicted about your obligation to facilitate the transition. If this is the case, take time to come to terms with your feelings as you navigate your own transition. Sign up for a workshop offered on managing the emotions of change.

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 the employee is entering into a conversation where the stakes are high for them, so give them the time and the space to name and express their needs and emotions first, and throughout, as needed.

PHASE 1: BEFORE THE CONVERSATION

- ☐ Imagine the climate you want to create and the outcome you want to achieve with this discussion, and draft the opening statements that reflect an invitation to have a conversation.
- ☐ Invite the employee to a one-on-one conversation. Convey the desired outcome and climate, and clearly identify your intention.
- ☐ Ask the employee what they need from you 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 achieve an environment where you feel heard, feel like you have the right to your opinion, and that I will do everything I can to support you.”

PHASE 2: BEGINNING OF THE CONVERSATION

- ☐ Repeat your intention with respect to the discussion and tell the person that you are going to listen. Use your opening statements to convey the outcome and the climate you want to achieve.
- ☐ Ask the person what they would like to achieve through this discussion.
- ☐ Be calm and open to their point of view.
- ☐ Focus on the employee’s needs first.

“My intention with this conversation is to support you as much as I can, to share information, and to find out what questions you have that need answering. I care about the impact on you.”

PHASE 3: DURING THE CONVERSATION

- ☐ Listen and observe your employee’s body language as you begin the discussion.
- ☐ Let the person explain their rationale to you.
- ☐ Listen and observe their body language as they explain.
- ☐ Ask open-ended questions to encourage the individual to speak up. Remain curious.
- ☐ Listen and observe their body language as they respond.
- ☐ Do not minimize or trivialize what the person is going through; believe their feelings, they are real.

- ☐ Avoid giving advice, judging and/or evaluating the person's words in relation to your values / organizational values.
- ☐ If you do observe negative body language, pause and address it using “I” Statements. (See [“I” Statements](#) section)
- ☐ If needed, refer them to the Employee Assistance Program at 1-800-268-7708 or 1-800-567-5803 if hearing impaired.

“I can see how stressful this is. How are you coping?”

PHASE 4: SHARE YOUR 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); but gently remind the employee that the situation will need to be dealt with.

“I see that this is having a big impact on you, and you are still anxious. Let’s take a few days to process what we’ve shared and then we’ll come back together to revisit this. In the meantime, reach out to the Employee Assistance Program, they can help you explore these feelings in a more personal way.”

- ☐ It’s time to share your needs as a manager when:
 - There are no strong emotions in the way.
 - The employee has had the space to express themselves and feels 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 using “I” statements. (See [“I” Statements](#) section)
- ☐ State the organizational expectation, and not your personal opinions, on the subject matter.
- ☐ Avoid making it a debate but do speak from a needs-based perspective: yours as a manager, theirs, the team’s, the organization’s.
- ☐ Look for common interests/needs between you and the employee, particularly on professionalism, contribution, collaboration, excitement, dynamic and engaging environment, socializing, action-oriented, efficiency/saving time, influence, methodical implementation, etc.
- ☐ If you don’t have an answer to a specific situation, please consult the [Future of Work: Transition to Hybrid and Beyond](#) intranet site or contact via an email [Future of Work at ISED](#) or [Labour Relations](#).
- ☐ Commit to following up on questions and agree on when to meet again.
- ☐ End with a message of ongoing support and empathy.

“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 heard you when you said you are having difficulty and at the same time, I have a responsibility to implement these changes. I think we both have an interest in delivering on our collective commitments/deliverables effectively. I also want to support you and keep things equitable across the team. Can we commit to trying things out slowly and continuing this conversation to make adjustments as needed?”

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. The employee will not be 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.

3-step approach for situations when emotions are high:

1. **Acknowledge** emotion and invite the person to name it; name it yourself if they are struggling to do so, even if it is a guess:

✓ Lead with empathy and listen actively with compassion, make a connection

"You seem upset. What's going on for you?"

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

✓ Name facts and feelings, ask clarifying questions

"What do you mean when you say you feel pressured and intimidated?"

3. **Refocus** on goals:

✓ Reiterate issues at hand, focus on generating options together, and discuss next steps

"One issue is that you're afraid of what will happen. Let's go over all the questions we have so we can brainstorm solutions."

"I" Statements

***Notification to avoid defensiveness**

"We judge ourselves by our intentions and others by their behavior." – Stephen Covey

The 'I statement' 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.

Inflammatory or judgemental descriptions of the behaviour may result in defensiveness and should be avoided, as in the following:

- ✗ When you leave the boardroom a *filthy* mess, ...
- ✗ When you *disrespect me*, ...
- ✗ When you *rudely* interrupt me while I am on the phone, ...

There are three main elements in an “I” statement:

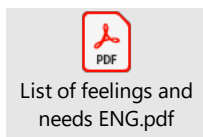
1. **Name the behaviour** (using facts and observations, not value judgements or accusations)
 - ✓ When I hear you speak critically of the transition, ...
 - ✓ When I observe that you are anxious while at work and shy away from others ...
 - ✓ When your connectivity issues have been traced to locations outside our commute zone ...

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:

- ✓ When I hear you speak critically of the transition, I feel discouraged because of the number of conversations we have had and the support I have tried to provide.
- ✓ When I observe that you are anxious while at work and shy away from others, I am worried about you.
- ✓ When your connectivity issues have been traced to locations outside our commute zone, I feel disappointed because I have worked hard to make this transition smooth for everyone.

***List of feelings and human needs for reference:**



document attachment 1



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 them.

Examples:

- ✓ When I hear you speak critically of the transition, I feel discouraged because of the number of conversations we have had and the support I have tried to provide. I need to better understand your concerns.
- ✓ When I observe that you are anxious while at work and shy away from others, I am worried about you. I need confirmation that you are taking care of yourself and that you are getting all the support you need, from me or from other sources.

- ✓ When your connectivity issues have been traced to locations outside our commute zone, I feel disappointed because I have worked hard to make this transition smooth for everyone. I need your support in order to count on every member of the team to support this transition.

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.

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

For policy clarification, or for guidance in complex accommodation situations, contact [Labour Relations](#) or visit the [Workplace Accommodation Centre](#).

