



COVID-19

How should you be calming your people? The 10 questions every employer needs to answer

Global health organisations, governments and stock markets are reeling by the onset of a novel strain of Coronavirus. At present, the virus has been detected in 123 countries, with this number likely to rise.

As world leaders and the scientific community try to grapple with COVID-19, people are trying to balance their daily lives with concerns about risks to themselves and their loved ones. All over the world, individuals are worried that they are potentially putting themselves in harm's way in their daily commutes to shared workspaces. So how are companies responding to the questions being put to them by their employees?

As the first in an ongoing series of insights to help organisations manage through COVID-19, FTI's People & Change team have compiled a list of the questions that all organisations must be answering right now to reassure their workforces and maintain business continuity in the face of the evolving pandemic.

1. *How is the organisation monitoring the situation, and who is making decisions for us?*

DO

Ensure that there is a clear governance structure for monitoring and making key decisions, and that all 'deciders' are aware of their accountabilities. You should be able to identify to your people those leaders/ teams or functions who are leading on this crisis, as well as detail how they are supporting business continuity and reducing employee risk.

DO NOT

Refer employees to any internal contacts without briefing them on their expectations in responding to employee inquiry about COVID-19. Do not assume that they are aware of current crisis protocols and if you are making changes to these, please ensure that they are aware of how current processes may evolve or are consulted as needed.

2. *How will we receive updates if we are not in the office or able to access the network?*

DO

Be explicit with employees on how they will receive information from you throughout this situation. If you lead an organisation where employees are office-based and are not already used to remote working, this is the time to ensure that your IT systems are equipped to provide stretch support in terms of access to tools and training.

DO NOT

Rely on one channel. Ensure you have multiple ways of reaching your people and ensure you are testing these now. Organisations that are slow to ensure a broad approach to keeping employees connected will likely face the most significant headwinds if there is a COVID-19 impact in their region.

3. At what point do emergency systems/ protocols kick in?

DO

Be clear with employees about your situation and how your risk assessment looks now... and where it may go. Many organisations in the worst affected areas have already closed offices. Some are flagging to employees that this may be coming soon. If you are anticipating major business disruptions, ensure employees hear it from you first. Ensure your people understand the process you are using to make decisions and, if appropriate, the triggers that will escalate your response.

DO NOT

Predict to your staff how this will play out. The media deluge on this story is immense, and it's not your role to parse it. What your people need from you is an understanding of how the business is responding, and the provisions it is putting in place to help employees balance their work responsibilities and manage their personal risk.

4. What is the relationship between what we hear from local health authorities and what we hear from the company? Which do we follow?

DO

Reinforce to employees how public health or government guidelines align with your business practices, and detail for employees those authorities that you are tracking to guide decision-making and escalation processes.

DO NOT

Waste time repeating all information that is available from other sources. Focus on communicating what employees need to know from the organisational perspective.

5. As a leader, how do I reassure my people?

DO

Reiterate your organisation's strategy for business continuity and managing risk. Engage your people in solutions around customer or client support as relevant. Be empathetic. Recognise employee concerns and prioritise detailing what COVID-19 means for employee health & safety policies; personal and family health insurance; sick leave; sick pay and how to conduct the daily job. Ensure a range of channels to communicate with employees and don't forget to communicate with people on leave.

DO NOT

Attempt to communicate all COVID-19 updates and news. Do not amplify rumour or information from non-reputable sources and ensure all communication is calm, balanced and factual.

6. Is the C-Suite, Executive Committee worried?

DO

Consider the behaviours of your management team in response to the crisis. Leadership behaviour and tone carries weight. Your people will expect the C-Suite to cascade authoritative, informative communications and have detailed contingency planning. Leaders who are accustomed to having a strong physical presence with their teams will need to adapt to leading remotely in those organisations where offices are closed and teams work remotely.

DO NOT

Allow management teams or their authority to appear absent – ensure that routine meetings and business continues.

7. What is the company doing to protect us?

DO

Clearly layout the steps your company is taking to reduce the health risk to employees, as well as the business risks to the organisation. If internal policies change – whether they relate to HR, IT, travel, hosting external guests – make this known immediately. Remind employees of new organisational risks as you identify them – such as recent reports in the [*Wall Street Journal*](#) that criminals are using the threat of the virus to spread malware.

DO NOT

Overload your people with information. Clarity and precision are key, so prioritise the areas where employees need to be vigilant.

8. What can we do to protect ourselves?

DO

Make clear your health & safety, travel, and business continuity policies. Ensure employees have the right to make the decisions that best help them manage risk for themselves and their families. Ensure that these policies are clearly communicated to all segments of the business.

DO NOT

Overload your employees with guidance that can otherwise be found from the various public health outlets.

9. How will the company look after me if I'm travelling for business?

DO

Reassure and explain to all staff what they need to know around business travel expectations. This topic is a high priority due to the risk of contracting the virus while in transit, but also the possibility of becoming quarantined or ill in another country. Ensure you can give clarity to all staff on current business travel policies including guidelines, restricted countries, protocols on accessing healthcare, etc. Recognise the concerns and fears your people may have around this topic and ensure they have the freedom to decline travel if they wish.

DO NOT

Be complacent about the multitude of concerns that travel raises. Many employees will be worried not just for their own health, but for those of friends, family, and the vulnerable in their lives. Equally, employees may feel that there will be professional repercussions if they do not wish to travel.

10. What are the policies around sick pay?

DO

Make sure you are very clear on your organisation's stance toward sick pay, and any temporary measures you may introduce to manage this situation. Evaluate if your policies reinforce behaviours that will encourage staff to come to work if they are ill. In the United Kingdom the Government has confirmed that Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) will be made available from day one when self-isolating. In the private sector, the [Harvard Business Review](#) has encouraged companies to review their sick pay measures and policies around this issue.

DO NOT

Signal that career prospects will be impacted if employees are not in the workplace. Recognise that the actions of some employees, whether ill or healthy, will be directed by the way their pay is affected. Organisations should clarify their stance on sick pay and communicate these to employees as quickly as possible to ease any unnecessary anxiety.

Useful links to European public health authorities

UK

[NHS Coronavirus safety information](#)
[UK Government advice](#)

Ireland

[Public Health Ireland](#)

France

[Santé Publique Coronavirus information](#)

Germany

[Bundesministerium für Gesundheit](#)
[Robert Koch Institut](#)

Spain

[Ministerio De Sanidad](#)

Italy

[Ministero della Salute](#)

Netherlands

[National Institute for Public Health and the Environment](#)

The FTI People & Change team

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We bring a wealth of experience in designing and implementing compelling leadership, engagement and change programmes. We work in partnership with you to enhance the performance of your people and optimise the efficiency of your organisation.

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