Leaders’ Tool Kit: Conversation tips for assessing needs of staff working remotely

The sudden shift to remote work was difficult for some employees, and the realization that the University will continue with remote work until at least December 31 may cause concern for some employees. Leaders should make regular connections with their staff teams and direct reports to ensure they have the support and resources they need to be engaged and productive while working from home. Below are some ideas that anyone who supervises staff, faculty, or postdocs can use to start a dialogue with their employees, either as a group meeting or on a one on one basis.

Thriving in remote work environments

We recommend that leaders share the Thriving in a Remote Work Environment guide with their teams. The document is intended to serve as a guide to supports and services that may make working from home a little easier and may provide a starting point for a conversation about how the staff member is doing, what their challenges are, and what they may need to be successful in working from home.

Empathy and flexibility are key

Rely on your empathy and emotional self-management as you navigate conversations about the upcoming semester. Here are some things for you to think through as you plan for work-from-home strategy discussions with the people you supervise.

- Be empathic and recognize that each person’s home situation is now their “office” situation.
- Work to build your own resilience and that of your team. Resilience is a product of feeling connected and valued. How can you foster this for your direct reports? How can the people you report to support you?
- Your team may have gone through a crisis management period. Explicitly transition out of crisis-mode and into discussions around sustainable remote work.
- Be an advocate for your staff and create a psychologically safe work environment. Psychological safety starts with healthy work relationships.
  - Validate a range of emotions, acknowledge things may be stressful.
  - Ask employees to share fears and concerns.
  - Share how you will protect employees.
  - Ask employees what other protection they feel they need.
  - Communicate reasonable expectations and encourage feedback.
  - Celebrate and recognize effort every day.
• Advocate for your employees’ material work needs. When employees make requests for resources, suggest they copy you as their manager. If there is push back, then you can step in to try to eliminate the road block.

Prepare for the conversation

Questions for leaders to consider as the prepare to connect with the staff they supervise:

1. Have you, the leader, reviewed the latest info about Managing during COVID-19?

2. Have you, the leader, reviewed the latest info on Working during COVID-19? Have your employees reviewed the latest information?

3. Does your staff member have the proper equipment (hardware/software) to enable them to complete their job remotely? If not, what do they need? Confer with your department administrator to inquire what equipment is available.

4. Does your staff member have a remote work space and workstation within their home? Are there any challenges or concerns that they have with the area or workstation? Is the workstation set up ergonomically?

5. Have you scheduled regular meetings with your team (weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, etc.) to ensure good communication? Are your discussions only about deliverables, or are you trying to maintain the personal connection and keep the team together?
   Resources: Meeting Planning Resources, Workplace Advice Line.

6. Are you setting clear expectations about deliverables with the staff members you supervise? Do they understand what is expected of them? Think about necessary tasks and timelines and be prepared to discuss with your team.
   Resources: Managing Sensitive Employee Issues e-course, Leaders Toolkit: Supporting Staff with Childcare or Other Family Obligations.

7. Is the person who reports to you also a primary caregiver for children, elderly parents, or other individuals? Are these responsibilities impacting their ability to do their job? Be prepared to discuss options for flexible work if requested.
   Resources: Child Care and Elder Care, Child Care and Parenting Plan Smart Service, Elder and Family Care Plan Smart Service, Foundation of Effective Parenting E-course, New Parent E-course, Leaders Toolkit: Supporting Staff with Childcare or Other Family Obligations.

8. Does the staff member have any other concerns about continuing to work remotely? Are there conditions at home that could make continued remote work unsafe or unhealthy for the employee?
9. Is there any training that would assist the staff member in working more effectively in a remote environment? Are there other resources the staff member might benefit from personally or professionally?

**Seek additional resources**

The COVID-19 situation is very fluid. We have tried to capture some key resources for you and your staff, but recognize that additional resources may be required.

We encourage supervisors of faculty and staff to connect with their HR Contact if you have questions or concerns that have not been addressed, or if there are other resources or tools may be needed.

**Contact us**

For COVID-19-related employment-related issues, University of Alberta staff can direct their questions to hrs.covid19@ualberta.ca