

Think Tank: Helping employees return to the workplace

Speakers:

Erica Hanlon, Clinical Counselor

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Erica Hanlon: Hi everyone, you are listening to the Think Tank Podcast. My name is Erica Hanlon, I'm a licensed professional counselor and life coach. And we are bringing this special episode to you because we know that a lot of workplaces have been trying to adjust to and accommodate for COVID-19 restrictions. So for example, maybe your workplace has been closed or you've been letting employees work from home, and now there's another transition going on as many organizations are starting to bring employees back into the workplace. So today I'm joined by Paula Lowe-Chin who works in our organizational risk management center and provide support to managers, supervisors, and human resources representatives. So Paula, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Paula Lowe-Chin: Well, thank you so much for having me Erica. As you mentioned, my name is Paula Lowe-Chin, and I am a part of the organizational risk team here at Resources for Living. And a lot of our work is focused around supporting our leaders, our management, and the supervisors in the companies that we work with. And we do this by helping the management staff to assist individuals or just in general situations that could cause or pose any type of risk to the company as a whole. And so we're able to do this in a lot of different ways. So today we're going to focus on some really practical ways that we can help our management and our supervisors as we prepare to transition back to the work environment after adjusting with COVID-19 and the coronavirus pandemic.

Erica Hanlon: Awesome. So maybe before we jump into some of those tips, do you want to share with us some of the concerns that you're hearing about? Some of the calls you're getting? What are those themes?

Paula Lowe-Chin: Absolutely. As you know, people are very anxious about returning to work, this includes both management and frontline staff and employees.

And this is just because there's been a lot of uncertainty. People are not really sure what to expect as they transition back to work, as well as they're not really sure what to expect as they go back into the working environment, having to work with the general public. A lot of people are concerned what precautions will be put in place in their work environments, as well as how things will look and feel differently just as a whole across the board. So that is the overall general sentiment. It's just a lot of anxiety and uncertainty.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. So how are employers preparing the workplace and helping their employees prepare for this transition back to work? What kind of things are you seeing?

Paula Lowe-Chin: So I see where a lot of employers are doing a really great job at adjusting, first of all, the way that they're cleaning and sanitizing buildings. Most employers have implemented situations where they now have cleaning crews. That wasn't something that was typical to see throughout the workday. Now we're seeing where companies have hired people to go in and actually clean and sanitize areas, not once or twice, but even throughout the workday. Something else that we're seeing employers are doing their best to prepare for is how to return the workforce and keep people socially distanced. In several environments, people are working in cubicles, those can be close quarters.

And so employers are seeing if we were to bring back a percentage of the work staff, how can we make sure that the people who come back are operating within the social distancing guidelines while still being safe. Another thing that I'm seeing a lot of employers implementing recently is screening as people come into environments, as well as requiring face coverings just to even enter the building. So employers are taking those things into consideration, the things that the CDC has recommended. And again, this is new for everybody, so they're kind of taking it day by day, but making sure that they are putting some precautions in place.

Erica Hanlon: Awesome. So we know that even with so many of those precautions in place, a lot of employees might be hesitant about going back to the workplace, that they might have concerns or anxiety. So how do you suggest managers and employers address those kinds of concerns?

Paula Lowe-Chin: So the main thing just as I speak to different management staff is to check in with your employees. And one of the things that was mentioned earlier is that people are really anxious about returning to work. It's kind of a double-edged sword because people want to be back at work, but

they want to know that while they're at work, they're safe. So one of the main things that employers can do is to make sure that they're checking in with their staff, just to see how they're feeling. Because even though a lot of these policies will be implemented, this is still going to be very new for people. And so just the thought of going back into an environment that could be perceived as unsafe. Again, I may know coming out of my household that everyone in my home is Corona free or COVID free, but coworkers may worry, what if my peers or my coworkers have people in their families that are sick. How are things like that being monitored?

So I think definitely checking in with employees, and this is regardless of if they're working from home or if they're actually physically returning to an office space, just touching bases with them and seeing how they're doing. I think also asking if there's anything that they can do to help. Employers, they will be transparent and they'll share how they're feeling with those check-ins, but they also want to be validated and not feel as if they're talking, but those things are not being heard or they're not being listened to. Because what it could do in effect is cause the opposite, where they may be stop communicating if they feel like they're not being heard when they're sharing some of those things.

Another thing that I stress and as management staff is not any different from frontline staff, you're just sometimes in different positions, so maybe putting yourself in that person's shoes. It's easy for us to say as management staff, I'd like you to do this or that, but in reality if you were in that same situation, is that something that you would want to do or is that something that you'd somebody in your family to have to do. And of course, because business has to continue to operate, in every situation you're not necessarily able to fully empathize and adjust a business model or adjust something that you're doing. But I think just taking that extra moment to think, if this was me, if I was in that person's shoes, would I be willing to do what I'm asking my subordinate to do. I think that's really important just being able to empathize with your employees.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah, absolutely. And I think another thing that we're hearing about a lot in the news and kind of everywhere is about the closure of schools. And I know we're about to go into the summertime right now, but school or not, even during the summer, a lot of parents rely on care like daycares, summer camps, all of those kinds of things. And a lot of those places have been closed because of COVID-19 and this poses a challenge for working parents, and when there's a challenge like this for working parents, then it creates a challenge for employers. So what suggestions do you have for employers when it comes to trying to balance the needs

of the business, but then also trying to balance the needs of these working parents who are their employees?

Paula Lowe-Chin: I think this is a great question and I wish I could say that there's a perfect answer to this, but unfortunately there's not. Based on the type of business operation that's being run, some parents will fortunately be able to be allowed to stay and work from home, and I think that is a great support for those parents who are able to do so. Some parents, because their jobs require them to be out in the public, staying home is not an option. And so something we've seen some of our employers do is they're offering payment or payment towards extended childcare so that their employees can still get their job done, but they also have assistance with providing care for their children. And sometimes this doesn't mean that they can provide the amount or the monetary need to cover an entire day, but maybe allowing that person to cover a half of their day or maybe allowing that person to have a modified work week schedule.

Because one of the things that we know is that when someone has to work from home, if they're trying to do double duty as a parent and as an employee, chances are that something is not going to be getting that person's full attention. And so even offering, if it's an option, a modified work week where a parent has time to focus exclusively on being an employee, and then they know that they're going to have that time to focus on being a parent. So that, that way maybe they can even seek out additional supports within their personal environment, maybe friends or family that can assist.

If they know, Hey, I'm going to need this amount of time for assistance with my child so I can focus on work, it makes it easier for them to be able to seek out that assistance if they know that they can have a modified work schedule to do so. And as I shared, this is not going to be a reality for all of our employers. So employers are going to have to get creative and as we hear of new and innovative ways for employers to do so, we definitely will share that with you all as well.

Erica Hanlon: Absolutely, that's great. Now, communication is always important in any relationship, personal or work-wise.

Paula Lowe-Chin: Yes.

Erica Hanlon: But during times like these, and I think in the workplace, when there's so much uncertainty, communication is even more critical. So what are

some of the biggest communication mistakes you've seen workplaces make?

Paula Lowe-Chin: So one of the things, again I think employers have been doing a wonderful job with is sending out information via email. I think that can be a phenomenal thing because you're able to reach a large audience and you're able to do it very quickly and provide them with the information that's needed. I think where employers have to be careful is in sending out too many email communications on the same topic or maybe sending out multiple emails within the same day, because what that could tend to do is if an employee feels like they're being inundated with emails, they may start to tune them out because they feel as if you know what? I already got an update for today, I don't need the third or the fourth or the fifth update. So I think being very clear and concise and getting those emails out, maybe one or two for the day if possible, that's definitely important. You don't want to overwhelm the employees with repeat emails about the same thing.

Something else to be careful of is when you are sharing information, making sure that it's up to date. If there's been information that's come out and it's two weeks old, we know that in these times, things are changing on a day-to-day. So we want to make sure that the information that's being shared is relevant. It's something that's pertinent to the actual day that we're in and not something that is maybe from a week or two ago. Another thing that I've heard that can be crucial, and sometimes employers don't think about this is there's a lot of companies that don't operate on a nine to five schedule. And so if that's the case, you have these employees who are working sort of these off hours, these nontraditional hours, they may not have the same access to email that somebody working in a typical nine to five office setting would.

So I think making sure that those employees who have those nontraditional schedules are also being informed and they're being kept in the communication loop in regards to what's expected of them is also very important. And I think last but not least again, be very clear and be very transparent. The unknown is what really makes people feel uncertain. And so we know that again, you're not going to have all the answers at all times, especially in a situation like this, but try as best as you can to keep your employees up to date on what's happening.

And so an example of that would be, if we know we're going to have, let's say some people transitioning back into an office setting and management has a goal to do it at the end of the month. Let's try give

people a week or two notice if possible, so that they can not only mentally prepare for that, but so that they can start to get used to that idea. We wouldn't want to spring that on somebody because again, that's going to increase their anxiety. So again, being clear, being concise and giving that information with as much time as possible for employees to process it, is something that management can do to kind of avoid some of those communication mistakes that we've seen.

Erica Hanlon: I love that. Those are so many good tips, and I think, yes, like there's so much uncertainty, just getting that information kind of helps bring the uncertainty down a little bit. It helps answer at least some of those questions, and maybe it's not going to be answered perfectly, but it takes away at least some of that uncertainty. And I love the idea of giving people like time to process the information too, because people I think are really stressed right now. And speaking of stress, a lot of employees, maybe they don't know how to manage their stress, and when people don't manage their stress, they're more susceptible to burnout. And when people are burnt out, you're looking at things like attendance issues, maybe like complaining at work, like kind of having a negative attitude or maybe other performance issues. So what can employers do to help their staff avoid burnout or address burnout if they're starting to see like symptoms of it?

Paula Lowe-Chin: Again, this is a phenomenal point that you bring out. As I'm speaking to both employees and I'm speaking to management staff, not just the employees are getting burned out, but also managers are getting burned out. So I think it's important first and foremost, before even addressing how to help the employees is reminding managers that you are susceptible to burn out as well. I think we talk a lot about work life balance, but I think especially now when the days are all rolling together, because people are spending a lot of time in their houses, it's very important to do a self-check before you can even assist others. I always like to use the analogy, as a parent, if you're burnt out and exhausted and something happens to your child, it's difficult for you to provide the type of care that you would want to. So you have to self-care a little bit.

And I think that's extremely important as a manager, because number one, it helps you to be in a good place when you're making decisions and trying to support your staff. And number two, it also helps you to be able to empathize with your staff because you might be in a similar situation where you're also feeling burnt out. So I think doing a check in of yourself and allowing yourself permission to recognize that you know what? Hey, I might be feeling a little bit burnt out and verbalizing that rather than

thinking that you have to be a machine and kind of hold it together for everybody. You have permission to also feel a little bit exhausted especially with everything that's going on. So first and foremost, checking in with yourself and making sure that you're doing some of those self-care things.

In terms of your staff, I think again, we talked about checking in with staff, especially as they either return to work or as they're in their homes. And I think a really big part of checking in with them is also checking in on their mental health and their wellbeing and not just checking in, but maybe even taking it a step further and encouraging them if needed to take some time off. One of the things that I've heard almost resounding across the board is, as people are working from home, they end up sometimes doing more work, but because there's more work, they also feel guilty about taking time off. And so you're doing more work, but you feel guilty because you know you need to take time off, but you're like, I'm at home, I shouldn't need to take time off.

That's not accurate. And so I encourage supervisors to encourage days off just for mental wellness. It's a proven fact that if people are tired, their effectiveness levels go down. And so it may seem as if encouraging someone to take a day off or a day or two off might be counterproductive. But in reality, you might be increasing that person's productivity by allowing them to take that mental health day. So I think checking in with the staff and encouraging them to take those days, if, and when needed can definitely help with productivity. Something else that I've also heard is that employees are sometimes nervous about coverage. So now I've asked for the time off, you're encouraging me to take time off. What am I coming back to? So again, management is a tricky spot because you've got your own work, but you also want to support your team that you have.

So I think just helping, even maybe before an employee goes out, planning for that, helping to make sure that coverage is going to be there so that they're not hesitant to take that time off because they know they're going to have support while they're out. And again, I know this is not going to be the case in every work environment and in every situation, but I think wherever possible, you definitely will see a better output long-term if people are rested and they're not as burnt out versus if you just keep working them because they are eventually going to get tired and the effectiveness and the efficiency unfortunately decreases when people are burned out.

Erica Hanlon: Yes, that's so good and I love the point about managers having to recognize and take care of their own burnout, because if they're not able to do that, it's going to be that much harder for them not only to be productive at work, but also to manage their staff. So while we can expect that, probably a lot of people are experiencing stress right now. How can an employer recognize an employee who's maybe more than just stressed? That this is an employee who is maybe like a state of distress? How can like what kind of things should they look for and then how can they best support those employees?

Paula Lowe-Chin: And so this is again, another popular question that has come up a lot lately. And so one of the things I remind employers is that you know typically on a regular, what's a normal baseline for your staff members. And so I encourage people to look for significant behavior changes from the previous. And so if you had an employee who may be used to come into work on time, they were very bubbly and it was just their personality to be very social. Again, if we now see that that person is maybe even showing up for work late, they're having a couple of days in a row that they're tardy. Maybe they're now not even interacting or engaging with their coworkers. That's typically a sign of distress because it's such a dramatic change from a person's normal behavior. So sometimes things will be that blatant and apparent.

Other times it may be something small, maybe you're assigning this person tasks, and this is normally a person who, for the most part, they get their things in on time. Maybe now you're noticing a lot of errors in their work. That person is seeming distracted and as a result maybe they're not hitting deadlines the way that they showed or just the quality of their work is changing. So again, something to pay attention to. Another thing would be that that person is very easily distracted or maybe even in a days, right now with everything going on again, I hate to keep kind of beating a dead horse and saying everyone's anxious, but anxiety is a person constantly focusing or fixating on something that they really don't necessarily have control over. And so a person may be physically present either at home working remotely or back in an office or a workplace setting, but they may not mentally be there. So they're not paying attention their days they're easily distracted, or you're just maybe even noticing them gazing off. That could definitely be a sign of distress.

And then on the converse, somebody appearing extremely overly energetic might also be a sign of distress. And this could be because maybe that person was experiencing stress and they're now trying to

mask it and in an effort to mask it they're actually going overboard. And so, again, it's contrary to a person's normal behavior. Something else, again, very small, but just even grooming or hygiene. If somebody usually is paying attention to their appearance, we want to take note of the fact, if we start to see them slipping in areas like that, because that's usually different than normal and then last but not least blatantly a person blatantly telling you that they're struggling is something or a way that you can know that this person is having distress. Usually people don't like to express when they are having struggles. So I always tell managers if somebody has taken the time and the effort to come to you and share that it's usually because they're in a pretty rough place at that time or that moment.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. So I know we're hearing a lot about an up take in substance use issues and substance misuse. Like what can employers look for when it comes to those kinds of things?

Paula Lowe-Chin: I'm so glad that you brought that up. I'm sure as people are watching the news or seeing alcohol sales or have been through the roof during this pandemic because people, unfortunately they're coping with this sometimes in an unhealthy manner. And so I think again, supervisors are going to have to be just a little bit more vigilant in kind of checking for those things again, if you're smelling someone, they smell like they may be under the influence of alcohol or another substance, if it does have a scent. Also checking for just again, their appearance. Are they looking sluggish when they're coming to work? Are they moving slowly when they're performing their job? Things of that nature. And also don't be afraid if you guys have a workplace policy to test somebody, if you have reasonable suspicion. This is a time definitely where we don't want to let things slide under the rug and maybe just kind of chalk it off as normal behavior. Because a lot of people are using this time to self-medicate and that's happening very often with alcohol or other substances at this time.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. And I imagine the longer you let that issue go, the harder it will be to address later on whether it's substance use or some other kind of mental health related kind of issue, the longer you let it go, then the harder it can be to address later on because a lot of times those problems, if they're not addressed, they only get worse. And so I think that begs the question. If you see some of these symptoms, if you see some of these signs and you're concerned about it, what then what's next?

Paula Lowe-Chin: Well, I think that one of the things as we talked about earlier was checking in. So I think if you're seeing some of these things, it's not enough to just say, "Okay, I see this, let me send you for a reasonable suspicion test." If it's substance abuse related. I think again, you want to empathize with the person and you want to acknowledge the fact that you see something going on. So if maybe you have an employer I'll use the substance abuse example and you're noticing maybe they're coming to work with glassy eyes, things of that nature. I think being very objective and pointing that out to them, usually people become defensive if they feel as if they're being attacked. So I think being very objective and pointing out, "It appears that you're coming to work with glassy eyes." Or "It appears that you're coming to work under the influence and I'm really concerned about you."

I think pointing out that you care more than just the fact that you observed something is very important. I think the other thing is taking advantage of the resources that you have, and this is whether you see someone displaying a substance abuse issue or whether the person is displaying any other type of issue that we previously discussed. And one of those resources that you have available to you is the organizational risk management center. As I pointed out earlier here in the Organizational Risk Department, we're specifically here to support management, leadership and supervisors. And so reaching out to us, if you have a difficult situation with an employee, maybe just even to navigate how you can have that conversation with the employee. I know being a manager myself in the past, sometimes it was difficult. You don't want to have those tough conversations with your employees, maybe because you don't want to damage your relationship that you have with them, or because maybe it might not be received well coming from you.

So definitely reach out to us, we are here as a support to walk you through some of those difficult conversations, as well as to help navigate you to an alternative. So if an employee comes in and let's say, they're having a problem with attendance, and they've now disclosed to us at resources for living through a confidential conversation, maybe the reason they're having those attendance issues is they're having a problem with their spouse at home. We can now maybe get them linked to our marriage and family therapist and maybe now we've resolved that issue around the issues that they're having with their spouse and as a result, we start to see a change in their attendance.

I think at minimum, what that tells the employees that you care for them, you want to help them get the support that you have. And what it says to

you is that you're not alone. You know, that you have help to be able to assist your employees and you don't have to do this on your own.

Erica Hanlon: That's so good. So, Paula, I love that you talked about how management consultants can help managers sort of navigate some of those employee concerns, but tell us about some of the other services that you all provide.

Paula Lowe-Chin: Sure. Some of the services that we provide are specifically around grief counseling and critical incidences recently with the increase in people passing away or just with traumatic incidents in general, in this heightened environment. We want to remind management that you do have the option to have a counselor, either come out physically onsite to provide direct services to your staff, or we can offer those services either via tele-video or telephonically. And again, this is so that you have somebody who is assigned specifically to you and to your work group and depending on the circumstance, if you've maybe had an employee pass away, or maybe somebody has just been in a really bad accident at the workplace, we're offering those critical incidences. So for somebody to be there with you and your team specifically.

Another thing that we offer are our management referrals. As I shared before the organizational risk management team is here to support management and what that looks like is you can either ask an employee to call in directly, or you can actually refer an employee. So if you have an employee that you're noticing, some of those signs of distress that we talked about earlier and employer can actually refer them to the Organizational Risk Management team and in certain situations, we can even follow up and let you know, we can confirm for you. If that person has been linked to a counselor, we can confirm for you how that person is doing in treatment. And a lot of times you'd be really surprised, but the employees feel comfortable sharing things with us that they might not necessarily feel comfortable sharing with their employer. And that's because we've promised them to keep their information confidential and so they do feel sometimes they will open up more because they know that they have that privacy factor there.

So those are two of the main things that we can assist with and then last but not least, we also offer some trainings. And those again, can be very specific depending on the team and there to assist with things like stress management or change in the workplace, the things that we're talking about today.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. And I've done some of those trainings, and I know that a lot of times those can be delivered virtually. So people could be anywhere, anytime you could have some people work at home, some people who are in the workplace and they can all attend those trainings. So I know that, that's a really valuable resource.

Paula Lowe-Chin: Yes.

Erica Hanlon: So I thought that this is so amazing because there are just no instructions.

Paula Lowe-Chin: I agree.

Erica Hanlon: It's like, we're waiting for some like grownup to show up and tell everybody like, this is what you should do. And that just hasn't happened. Like nobody's been here before nobody really knows what to do. We're all kind of figuring this out as we go and I think having that ambiguity, having all this uncertainty it really poses some unique challenges. So your input today is amazing I know that listening to this podcast I think will provide a lot of help and support to our managers and our supervisors who I think are just in a really tough spot right now.

So thank you so much for being here. Do you have any last thoughts, any kind of like final takeaways for people who are listening?

Paula Lowe-Chin: Just to kind of add to your sentiments that this is really new territory for everyone and so I encourage people to be patient, be patient with yourself and be patient with your organization and be patient with your employees. Recognize that again, this is new, this is different and this is a situation where every day we're navigating through it, but just remembering that we're all navigating through it together. And so as your employees might seek out help from you as the management, remember that it's okay for you to also seek out assistance when you need help and for you to take a break and do those check-ins because you are the buffer in between frontline staff and upper management. And that's a really difficult position to be in, especially during a time of uncertainty. So again, patients I stress and just taking care of yourself as best that you can.

Erica Hanlon: Awesome. Thank you, Paula so much for being here today I know that there are so many unknowns right now with the virus, with workplaces and policies and how much toilet paper is at the store. But I think you provided some really great information on things that people can

control, things that people can manage and where to go for support. So thank you again for being here.

And I just want to remind everybody that we are here for you, you're not alone and we are here for you 24/7 365 days a year. Because we know that problems don't always happen nine to five, Monday through Friday. And also you have a website that's available to you. It's available to your employees to help with any kind of struggles that you have there are lots of amazing resources available on there as well. So thanks everyone for listening and stay safe.

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