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NEW ZEALAND INSTITUTE OF
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Real-time: Coping During COVID-19 Leading teams who are working from home during challenging times

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Any person "conducting a business or undertaking" has a duty to manage the health and safety of workers performing remote or isolated work. At NZIWR we have decades of experience of WFH, much of it while dealing with tough stuff. The result? We have unique insights that are proving useful now. Here are our tips to help you lead your teams with empathy, making them feel supported. Doing so is more likely to foster their long term commitment than coming down hard.

Problem: You and your team are going to be physically exhausted and emotionally drained. I have worked extensively on Resilient Grieving. To a greater or lesser extent we are all grieving right now, grieving the loss of our normal lives, and living with overwhelm from the size of the pandemic, the restrictive reality of living and working in lockdown, and anxiety over what might lie ahead. I'm reminded of the post-quake period in Christchurch, when it was quite acceptable to acknowledge our 'quake brains', referring to the citywide loss of concentration and focus, and overriding exhaustion from the whole experience. Expect to be tired yourself. This is normal. Expect others to be tired too.

Solution: Understand this is not your average WFH environment, be kind to yourself and others, grant yourself permission to have a nap when you need it. One way to make sure it's a short nap, and that you do wake up again feeling revived, is to get yourself ready to sleep, and then have a shot of coffee beforehand. We call this the 'coffee kip' - the coffee kicks in after about 20 mins making sure you only have a brief refreshing sleep. We know from shift workers and pilots that the best, most refreshing, daytime sleeps are 20 mins. Another good option is to adopt the Pomodoro technique (where you work in short single-task focused 25 minute sprints and then take a 5 minute break). Ruthlessly prioritise each day.

Problem: It's hard to take business as usual seriously in times of crisis. With such extraordinarily massive challenges happening on a global scale and right here inside your own home, not only is it hard to concentrate, but all the minutiae of regular work tasks can suddenly seem futile, pointless, irrelevant.

Solution: Cut yourself and others some slack. We all feel the same. The best way to stay motivated is to consider the alternative - what would it really be like to have no work, no structure, no purpose to your day?. If you are sensing motivational issues among team members, pushing back on particular tasks, work together to consider the purpose of each task - find the part each of the daily functions has in contributing towards the bigger picture. Identifying the 'why' is critical for motivation. Good questions to discuss are: why is this job important to you, what benefits does it bring, to yourself, to your family, to the wider community, and economy?

Problem: Disconnection between different life stages: While we may all be in the same boat - he waka eke noa – everyone's waka (boat) not only look different but there are also major differences in who's actually in each of our waka and the resources we have at our disposal. Empty nester employers/managers out there (like me) can work from home with little distraction, but others have young families, some with only one care-giver, some have huge space, others have none. The pressure that comes from trying to work usual hours, alongside family needs, and endeavouring to look after your own mental health, is massive.

Solution: Be flexible, don't expect the same from everyone in your team. Don't expect every team to be the same. Don't expect WFH to operate in the same way as BAU. Being flexible (both mental agility and adopting a flexible attitude) is a cornerstone of Real-time Resilience. Work out what's going to work best for your team - there quite possibly won't be a perfect solution that fits everyone's needs. We know from self-determination theory that the more autonomy offered, the more productive and engaged people are likely to be. Using sharing platforms like google docs allows teams to work asynchronously but still collaborate, tools like Teamwork are great for project management, and early morning Zoom meetings can be recorded for those who have little kids to watch later.

Expecting the usual levels of productivity is unrealistic right now. Most people are doing their best. Everyone operates better from a place of compassion than oppression.

Know your legal requiements:

Legal requirements
In terms of day-to-day operational communications, managers should also ensure that they:
- set realistic and clear instructions on workload, roles and task allocation and timelines;
- check in with staff to ensure they are not having issues with accessing technology to complete the work;
- monitor workloads; and
- check that work can be successfully completed remotely, and adjust the task if required.

Social isolation
Social connection will also be critical during this time, with a risk of employees feeling disconnected and isolated. It is important that everyone in the organisation makes a conscious effort to keep in touch with their colleagues and teams, be it by email, phone or video conferencing. Colleagues may arrange to video call each other for coffees, lunches, or even a Friday night drink to maintain a sense of normalcy.

Employers should look to:
- regularly check in to ensure employees feel connected;
- be accessible and willing to listen when employees reach out; and
- encourage employees to stay active, eat well and keep in touch with their colleagues.

Source: DLA Piper, HSWA 2015