SUPERVISOR'S TOOLKIT

UNIVERSITY of Windsor | Department of Human Resources

Having Supportive Conversations

The last year has been an emotionally overwhelming time for many employees. As the University continues to plan for a safe return to campus activities, many employees may feel worried and anxious about coming back, while others may feel enthusiastic and energized about the return to some "normalcy". Having supportive conversations can help ease the transition back to campus. Supportive conversations should make the individual feel safe discussing mental health concerns and other challenges that they may be experiencing and feel supported. Such types of conversations require trust and working from a place of compassion. This document highlights some guidelines that supervisors should consider when having these important conversations.

Build Trust	Building trust with your team members is key to having supportive and difficult conversations. As a supervisor you play a key role in creating the conditions in the work environment for employees to feel safe bringing forward concerns/challenges. Be honest, fair, and respectful in your interactions and actively engage team members in discussions to explore solutions, address concerns, and work through change and transition. Having regular one-on-one meetings with direct reports and regular team meetings can help build rapport, trust, and provide opportunities to talk about issues of importance to employees.
Notice Changes	If you notice changes in an employee's behavior, mood, drop in productivity, engagement, focus, reach out to them to start the conversation. It is important that you do not add your assumptions or opinions about why those changes may be happening as that may discourage the individual from engaging in the conversation. Start the conversation with what you have observed, for example "I have noticed lately that…, do you want to talk about it?" or "I noticed that you haven't been yourself lately, is everything okay?". Other changes that you may notice include: • Appearing tired, anxious, or withdrawn • Difficulty making decisions, solving problems, getting organized • Increased absences from work Even if the individual does not want to talk, knowing that you care can help them in their journey. Noticing and asking about another person's wellbeing lays the groundwork for supporting them.
Have the Right Mindset	It is important to come into the conversation from a supportive stance. Avoid "you" statements as that can make the individual feel judged or criticized. Ask questions to help you understand their experiences and how they may be feeling. Remember that you do not have to be an expert or therapist to show compassion and empathy to individuals who may be experiencing mental health concerns or other life/work challenges.
Listen	Listen not only for the spoken words but also feelings. Listen carefully and do not interrupt with unsolicited advice or criticism. When the individual is finished speaking, ask questions to help understand the situation such as "Help me understand…", paraphrase what you have heard and ask for confirmation. For example, "Sounds like you are feeling overwhelmed with competing priorities from home and work, is this correct?"

Express Understanding	If you have experienced something similar and are comfortable sharing, let them know as this may help to validate their self-worth and confidence. Make sure not to switch the topic of conversation to your struggles or experiences. Take the time to validate their feelings "I can image what this might feel like….", "It must be very emotionally draining to….", "That sounds like a lot to deal with."
Do Not Minimize Feelings and/or Experiences	Be careful not to make statements that would minimize how the individual is feeling or what they are going through as this would send the message that you do not fully understand or do not care. Statements such as "You are probably just having a bad week", "I am sure it's nothing", "I've felt like this before, you will get over it soon enough" should be avoided.
Offer Supports	After the individual has finished sharing, take the time to thank them for sharing, ask them how you may be able to support them during this difficult time and offer to keep the conversation going. For example, "Thank you for telling me about…if you want to talk more, let me know", "Do not hesitate to reach out to me, I am here to help you", "Let me know how I may be able to support you at work". Do not assume that employees are aware of mental health supports and other resources available to them. For example, "Have you considered accessing the services available through the EFAP?", "Do you want me to share the link to the Employee Mental Health Resources website?" - Employee Mental Health Resources - Employee and Family Assistance Program It is important that you do not insist on support or resources that the individual may not want or be ready to accept but if you believe that the individual is having a mental health emergency, please call 911, assist them to go to the nearest Emergency Department or contact the Community Crisis Line at 519- 973-4435.

Resources Consulted

- Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety. Mental Health – Having Courageous Conversations. Retrieved from: https://www.ccohs.ca
- CMHA Ontario. Return to the Workplace: A Psychological Toolkit for Heading Back to Work, 2020
- Forbes. 13 Ways Managers Can Initiate Tough Conversations with Employees. Retrieved from: https://www.forbes.com
- Snapclarity. 5 Tips to Help Managers Have Better Mental Health Conversations with Employees. Retrieved from: https://www.snapclarity.com
- Workplace Strategies for Mental Health. Supportive Conversation Library. Retrieved from: https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com

Putting the COVID-19 Employee Pulse Check Survey into Action
This initiative has been designed to address the areas of focus and key actions emerging from the survey results.
Areas of Focus: Mental Health & Wellbeing, Communication, Engagement and Supports