Facilitating flexibility: a manager's guide

- It is important that staff feel listened to, and that concerns they may have about the latest lockdown are understood. In this regard there is no substitute for a conversation, whether individually or part of a wider meeting or discussion in your team. Proactively introduce the topic of workload and flexibility in your formal or informal conversations with your team members, in your group conversations and in individual 1:1s. Ask questions and let them lead on what they need.

  Use the principles included in How to Bring Wellbeing into the Day to Day and Having a Wellbeing Conversation

- Be adaptable in the flexibility and workload support you provide. Staff needs may change over time — for better or worse — so even if you do put support in place now you need to frequently check that it is still working. Use your formal and informal opportunities to check in with staff as to any changing needs.

- It’s important to remember that flexible working and home working are not the same. Home working is about location, put simply where work tasks can be delivered from. Flexibility goes much further than this and allows for working hours to be scheduled in a way that suits an individual’s personal/family/caring/wellbeing needs.

- It’s important that staff do not feel that they have to use annual leave to create flexibility to support their own wellbeing or their caring responsibilities on a day-to-day basis. Ideally annual leave should be reserved for use for rest and recuperation throughout the course of the working year. Notwithstanding this, we do understand that some staff may wish to use their annual leave to help balance responsibilities at this time.

- Discussing concerns and support needs should not be limited to staff with known caring responsibilities. Lockdown may affect all staff in different ways at different times and all staff may benefit from a greater degree of flexibility, not just those with caring responsibilities.

- You should also try to be as fair as possible — having a conversation with all your staff will help with this. This will help you avoid a situation where an individual with the loudest voice, or the person who asks first gets the most support, to the potential detriment of others. Try to understand the needs of all staff and then develop your plans for flexibility and workload support.

- A key concern for staff is workload. Even if they are empowered to work flexibly, if there isn’t support with their workload then this could still increase stress and have a negative impact on wellbeing. In this extraordinary time, the Vice-Chancellor and UEB colleagues have reiterated the University’s position that we accept people may not be able to deliver on every aspect of their roles right now. Staff should be supported to work flexibly to manage, and potentially reduce their workload, focusing on key priorities identified with their manager. It’s ok to support staff to do what they can when they can if they are struggling during the lockdown period.

- There is often a focus on activities that can be stopped or paused, but in practice it can be difficult for staff to make these decisions with confidence. You should outline to all staff the priority
activities that need to be maintained as a department or service. These are the activities that absolutely need to be completed, for example supporting students and teaching delivery, or statutory compliance activities. Any other activities may still be important but are not essential and should be undertaken when possible, but equally staff can be empowered to make decisions to pause or delay this activity if needed. Think about the extent to which activities need to be delivered too — at this time some tasks may not need to be gold plated when basic compliance will suffice. In determining which activities are essential you should liaise with your Vice-President and Head of Faculty or Executive Director.

- You may need to actively re-assign priority tasks to other staff members to ensure that essential activity is delivered. In doing so you need to be careful that addressing a workload issue for one staff member doesn’t exacerbate an issue for another. Staff members who are taking on new work need to be supported as well, as they may be unable to undertake their normal duties or meet previously agreed deadlines.

- Whilst staff may be assured about the short-term flexibility being provided, academic staff may be concerned about the long-term impact on their career and promotion prospects. A process of adjustments to the Academic Career Pathways criteria has been developed and will be communicated in advance of this year’s promotion process.

Other important things you can do to support staff:

- Model positive flexible behaviours to send a clear message to staff that they also have permission to work flexibly. What you say and do has a huge impact on how someone else feels. Remind staff that they have permission to set their own boundaries within their working day to support the need for self care. Staff should know they can take breaks at a time to suit their needs, that they should make time to take exercise and get outside in daylight hours.

- Think about your team and the way they work in the context of outcomes, rather than presence and availability. Visibility is not the key to performance, instead, instill trust in your working relationships, set clear expectations around work tasks and give your team members the autonomy to deliver on them.

- When thinking about how to utilise limited time throughout the working day, these Facilitating Flexibility: Practical Ideas might be helpful for individuals and the wider team.

- Now more than ever, ‘It’s always the way we’ve done it,’ is not a helpful mantra for us to follow. Ask yourself, ‘what will break if this task is stopped?’, ‘who is asking for this and why?’ ‘Is this task urgent or even important’? You might find the Four Quadrant Plan helpful in prioritising what’s important in both your work and home life.

- Flexibility isn’t a barrier to collaboration, communication and team working. Staff have already taken great strides since the start of the pandemic to ensure communication and connectivity is sustained across teams. Remind staff to keep doing more of the same. Consider setting up a wellbeing hub for your department.

- Think about how you can acknowledge the efforts of your team in everyday conversations. It’s important to ensure staff know the value of their contribution particularly when they may not feel they can be as productive as usual. Remind your team they are doing a great job. Giving a genuine compliment or praise can boost someone’s confidence who may otherwise be feeling
vulnerable and low. Say thank you. Consider using Recognition Awards to recognise individual or team efforts.

- Remember that flexible working is positive. There is a wide range of research and a strong evidence base for how flexibility can support inclusion, help to reduce the gender pay gap, support sustainability initiatives, attract and retain talented individuals, increase productivity and support wellbeing.

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