

Leading your team during COVID-19 and beyond

A neuroscience guide for people leaders
& Our Wellbeing @ Work Survey Results 2020



Introduction

With the gradual easing of COVID-19 restrictions in most states across Australia including a relaxing of work from home directives, organisations are taking a slow, measured and cautious approach when it comes to returning to the office.

According to a recent NGO Recruitment survey of almost 250 people within the not-for-profit sector, 63% are satisfied or very satisfied working from home and 56% feel their organisation has communicated well during the pandemic.

But only 43% are looking forward to joining colleagues in the workplace, and even then, only on a limited basis, with most preferring a mix of working from home with one or two days in the office.

Not surprisingly, COVID-19 safety and public health is a huge concern for everyone. But employers also need to be extremely mindful of the added neurological, cognitive and physical strain experienced by their teams.

In the past few months, NGO Recruitment has had meetings and roundtables with over 50 not-for-profit sector CEOs and senior leaders. And the recurring theme of these discussions has been the need to reprioritise the wellbeing of employees during this time as much as for clients and customers.

Thankfully, we can use our knowledge of neuroscience to understand how to enhance our leadership and HR practices to bring our teams out of this pandemic as psychologically safe and sound as possible.

In this guide, Carol Lewis, HR expert and Director of The Human Equation, applies leading neuroleadership expert Dr David Rock's research (SCARF) model to our current challenges and provides tangible actions for supporting teams into a neuro-healthy workplace – whether continuing to work from home or returning to the office or a combination of both.

Regards,
Richard Green
Director, NGO Recruitment

63%

are satisfied or very satisfied working from home

56%

feel their organisation has communicated well during the pandemic

43%

only 43% are looking forward to joining colleagues in the workplace

40%

of respondents reported they are working harder from home



Results from our **Wellbeing @ Work Survey 2020**



Top 3 organisational challenges:

Issues with employee morale

Reduction on spend

Employee layoffs



Top 3 biggest challenges faced from working from home:

Social isolation

Communication with co-workers

General anxiety about COVID



Most common feelings experienced during Covid-19:

Challenged

Anxious

Motivated



Most beneficial support from your employer would be:

Flexible working

Leadership & learning

Mental health & wellbeing support

What concerns do you have about returning to your workplace?

"Public transport and staff wellbeing"

"Complacency about COVID"

"Overcrowded public transport"

"Concern that colleagues and clients won't adhere to social distancing guidelines and that community transmission will increase"

"More exposure to possible infection. Time being waste travelling. Less opportunity to exercise"

What changes would you like to see when you return to the workplace?

"Flexible work hours, option to work from home at least part time, people following social distancing and hygiene requirements"

"Better support for employees, financial and mental"

"Ability to maintain social distance and caring about the employees"

"The end of hot-desking and endless meetings, plus extra cleaning of communal areas"

"More flexibility around work hours and remote working"

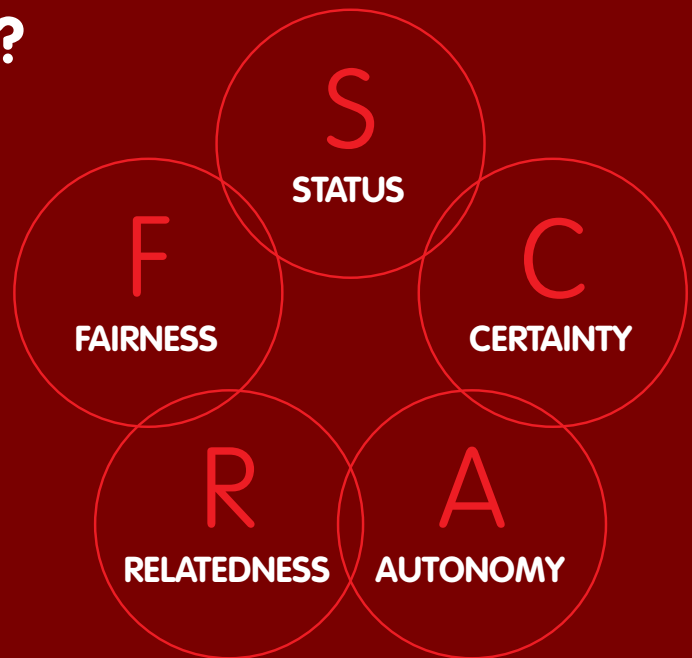
"Sit further apart, less face to face meetings"

What is the SCARF model?

The SCARF model is based on the research of Dr David Rock, director of the Neuroleadership Institute, a global initiative bringing together neuroscientists and leadership experts to build a new science for leadership development

Rock, who coined the word 'neuroleadership', took his understanding of how we respond to danger and applied it to what happens in everyday circumstances, including the workplace. Using MRI technology, he examined the brain facing what he calls a modern-day threat. He then went on to define and classify modern day threats into five domains creating the SCARF model: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness.

www.neuroleadership.com



Working in a threat state

Rock's research found that when we are in a state of threat, our brains do not perform at their best. The threat response is mentally taxing and deadly to productivity. Cortisol and adrenaline run through our bodies and our limbic system works more than our prefrontal cortex. There are a range of behaviours you may see when people are working in a threat state:

Decreased working memory because we cannot process new information or ideas, and it takes longer to learn new things.

Lower levels of performance, efficiency and engagement.

Increased hostility and unhealthy competition between people.

Decision-making is generally poorer.

In short, threats put people on their guard and when they are in this state, they cannot perform at their best.

Working in a reward state

As a leader if you can intentionally create the conditions where your teams feel rewarded across the five domains, these are the behaviours you are more likely to see:

Greater creativity and openness to new ideas.

Improved collaboration and teamwork.

Increased motivation, productivity, engagement and focus.

A reward state is neuro healthy where people work better and are more productive.

As a leader, also remember **you are a critical role model for your teams**. If you begin to panic, demonstrate worry or exhibit stress, this behaviour will resonate team-wide. Alternatively, if you make the effort to send positive signals across all five domains of SCARF, you can steady your teams and lead them out of this pandemic success fully.

Let's look at the SCARF model in the context of threats experienced during COVID-19.

"Leaders should view this as a crucial opportunity. What we do now will be remembered for decades to come. We should get as intentional as possible about building the cultures that will support us for the next 12 to 18 months and beyond."

David Rock, Director, Neuroleadership Institute



Status is our relative importance to others or where we are in the 'pecking order'. The impact of COVID-19 on our job security has threatened our status, our standing in our communities and in our workplaces.

CHECKLIST



Check in one-on-one with your people to remind them they are important

Now more than ever, make a point of checking in one-on-one with all your direct reports at least twice a week. If you have time, check in with non-direct reports as well. By this simple action, you are signalling they are important to your organisation and to you.



Create deliberate opportunities for inclusion and participation

Create as many opportunities as possible for inclusion and participation as people feel unimportant when they are left out.



Be mindful with your words and phrases

The mere word 'why' in response to a question elicits a threat response as it puts people on the defensive. For example, if you walk up to someone and say, "Can I give you some feedback?", you immediately put them in a status threat. Be mindful of your language.



Ditch this year's performance reviews or make sure you have a really well-designed process in place.

Performance reviews are inherently threatening to status as you are evaluating your employee. Consider cancelling them altogether this year. And if this is not possible, make sure the process is participative and focused on the future. Avoid performance ratings this year and concentrate on the conversation.



Certainty is our ability to predict the future and to know what is going to happen to us. We are hardwired to resist change because we want predictability and certainty. Since March, we have been unable to predict the future, either as a community or as an individual or in our workplaces. We have been triggered on the certainty domain.

CHECKLIST



Have a solid COVID-safe plan

The first thing you can do to create rewards for certainty is to have a solid COVID-safe plan in place. Involve employees in designing COVID-safe practices in your workplace, implement the necessary hygiene practices and reassure your employees they will be as safe as possible.



Communicate clearly and design good internal communications processes

NGO Recruitment's survey revealed communication with co-workers was the number two challenge working from home. It is therefore important to be crystal clear in your communication as an organisation not just about work, but also the broader economic and social policy environment.



Shorten the milestones

Shorten the milestones to give people more certainty. This means be clear about your short and medium-term strategies. Celebrate daily or weekly wins and adapt individual work plans so that people are clear about their short-term productivity expectations.



Give three times as much positive feedback as negative

People need more reassurance when things are uncertain. Give more positive feedback than you normally would and make it specific to the relevant situation or achievement.



Be clear about remuneration expectations this year

70% of our survey respondents reported they thought it was less likely they would get a pay review this year. It is therefore a good idea to remove this ambiguity and set expectations as soon as possible, particularly if you offer increases above the Fair Work Commission increase.



Autonomy is a sense of control over our lives and we like to have choices. With COVID-19, we have taken a massive hit to our autonomy. We have had no choice but to work from home with many of us also having to homeschool our children. Almost overnight, autonomy was taken away.

Brain science shows that giving people even some choice dramatically reduces stress. NGO Recruitment's survey showed the number one change people want when returning to the office is the autonomy to continue to work partly from home. 63% of respondents were very satisfied or satisfied with their work from home arrangements.

CHECKLIST



Dust off your WFH policy

Review and update your working from home policy to incorporate changing attitudes and anxieties towards the workplace in a post-pandemic world.



Survey your employees and act on it

Survey your employees as soon as possible about their working preferences and act on their feedback. The majority of our survey respondents would like a mix of working from home with a few days in the office. Letting employees choose whether or not and when to come back to the office will also provide them with more autonomy as well as create certainty.



Do not micromanage

Learn not to micromanage. All of a sudden, we had to focus not on start and finish times, but on outputs and outcomes and we can get even better than this.



Involve your teams in pivot planning

Involve your teams early on in designing new ways of working or other changes you need to make within your organisation.



Make it safe to make a mistake

We often penalise people for making a mistake by taking away their autonomy. But as people may not be working at their best, be clear that it is OK to make and learn from a mistake at the moment. Now is the time to turn negative feedback into reflective practice.



Relatedness is our sense of belonging and connectedness. Feeling safe with other people is important for us. But the social isolation we have all been experiencing has threatened our relatedness. We are just not connected in the same way and we do not know how much longer it might be like this.

NGO Recruitment's survey showed social isolation was one of the top three challenges faced by people working from home. Social interaction was overwhelmingly the main reason to want to come back to the office.

CHECKLIST



Create opportunities for employee social interaction

Be intentional about social events for your employees and also use professional development activities as a mechanism for social engagement as well as learning.



Support emotional wellbeing

Typical comments from our survey about returning to the office included requests to focus on and care about employees, continue with mental health support, be empathetic and humane. Support the neuro-health of your teams through your EAPs and other targeted interventions.



Facilitate opportunities for employees to help each other

In addition to supporting mental wellbeing, find ways for your employees to look after each other during this time.



Connect employees to the greater good

If you are able to, give back to your local communities and involve your employees to make them feel rewarded for contributing to the greater good.



Hone your constructive feedback skills

If you are having to give corrective feedback at this time, do so even more skillfully than usual and invest the time to do it well.



Fairness is our perception of fair exchanges between people. We are wired in life to receive our fair share of things, starting in childhood, to today at work, when we compare pay rates, office sizes and access to perks. There are so many examples of why we might be experiencing a fairness threat at the moment with the impact of COVID-19, depending on our industry, employment situation and home environment.

CHECKLIST



Provide flexibility to accommodate personal needs

Provide choice and flexibility around working arrangements for the foreseeable future. Acknowledge individual anxieties such as using public transport and be as accommodating as possible.



Tailor productivity expectations to individual circumstances

Ask yourself, are my expectations of this person fair in these circumstances? This will enable you to tailor performance expectations or work arrangements to them.



Handle workplace changes sensitively and skillfully

NGO Recruitment's survey showed redundancy was one of the top three concerns for employees, with restructures not far behind. Research shows that morale can remain high if you manage these situations fairly.



Don't play favourites

Share information consistently and apply your policies evenly. Now is the time to be even more conscious than usual about treating people equally.

Conclusion

COVID-19 and beyond

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many challenges for us all – how to lead our people and continue to deliver services for our clients. As leaders, we have shown we can successfully navigate through a collective crisis and along the way, we have learnt a lot about ourselves and our people.

We have found we can work remotely and stay connected. We have found employees relish autonomy and choice in their lives. We have found employees trust us more because our care for them is more visible than ever. Let's not lose sight of all these learnings as we move forward in our post-pandemic workplace, no matter what that might look like.





Richard Green
Director, NGO Recruitment

Richard is widely recognised as Australia’s leading not-for-profit recruitment specialist, with over 25 years’ not-for-profit sector and commercial recruitment experience. Since founding NGO Recruitment in 2004, Richard and his team have successfully placed over 3,000 candidates in more than 500 national and international not-for-profit organisations.



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Board Practice

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Carol Lewis
Director, The Human Equation

Carol Lewis is the founder and director of The Human Equation, a consultancy focused on helping organisations be the best they can. Carol is a senior HR practitioner, consultant and facilitator with particular expertise in working with leaders to enhance organisational culture and staff engagement. She specialises in the not-for-profit sector and has a strong understanding of its unique challenges.



Experts in not-for-profit HR practice

SERVICES

Design: Optimising the effectiveness of organisational design

Develop: Enhancing the potential of your people

Manage: HR policy and practice

Facilitation: Planning and events

“At this time, as leaders, we can either reflect the instability and danger of the world outside or model and enable safety for each person, between people, within teams and in our organisations and systems. We need to enable calm while not shying away from the truth, and find shared ways of managing challenges with consultation and rich collaboration.” **Dr Cathy Kelezman, President, Blue Knot Foundation (NGO Partner)**

“We've known for some time that it is important to develop a positive, collaborative and empowered workforce. This pandemic has taught us how important it is to care about one another.” **Carol Lewis, Director, The Human Equation**



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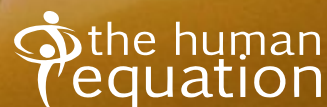
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