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## On the brink of reopening

### As a manager, you will be facing some new tasks ahead

**The period since 11 March 2020 has been one of societal lockdowns followed by a gradual reopening after Easter last year and then another societal lockdown just before Christmas. Fortunately, things will start getting better as the vaccination programme proceeds. Now is the time to prepare ourselves for reopening workplaces. As a manager, how you handle the reopening is critical for your employees' well-being and performance.**

We have done it before. Now it is time to do it again. So, managers across the country need to be ready to welcome their employees back to the workplace. But how?

It is not just the calendar year that is different now. Our levels of mental resilience, energy and moods are also different - maybe not for everyone, but for many. For some people it really put a strain on them having to manage their jobs while also juggling children who needed to be home schooled. For a long time, we have also only had limited opportunities to nurture our social needs, both privately and at work. Quality time spent with friends and family has been significantly reduced for a long period, and many people's experience of the corona pandemic has been like a dark cloud of worry. People have worried about their health, future and potentially losing their job, and many have felt lonely.

#### **There will be new managerial tasks**

As a manager, you will be facing some new tasks in the coming period. There may be some limitations in terms of how many employees can return to the workplace - though, as we approach the summer of 2021, we expect that more and more employees will be able to return to the workplace. Some employees will be able to get back into gear quickly, while others will need more time to adapt and 'tune in' - both physically and mentally - after a long period of lockdown.

As a manager, your job is to ensure that your employees feel safe and do not worry too much. You need to consider how you can address a partial or full reopening, while at the same time considering the guidelines of your company and the Danish Health and Medicines Authority with regard to keeping infection rates down and creating a safe framework at the workplace.

You also need to consider the structural changes to working life: for example, the increased flexibility and less time spent commuting, plus a significantly changed private life that many of your employees have been used to for a long period. How has this impacted their behaviour in relation to their work? Have their expectations of you as their manager changed? Do employees' expectations of what returning to work will be like align with your visions of their future working conditions, efforts and culture that you to see in the workplace moving forward?

You will have to be a manager for employees who for many months have had very different working conditions, tasks and, not least, private lives. It is therefore best if you base your leadership on an individualised and case-by-case approach.

### **Employees who have been physically present at the workplace during the pandemic**

Some of your employees have been physically present at the workplace during the past months. Some have been busy and might have had more tasks than usual, as they have had to fill in for others who you were forced to send home. Some of them may be stressed by the changes that have taken place, both at home and at work. On the one hand, they may feel lonely from being relatively isolated at the workplace, but on the other hand, they may also worry about having to face their colleagues again and risk being infected. It is time for you to sit down with your employees and show that you take an interest in how these times have impacted them. Are there any new tasks that need to be made permanent - that create value for your employees? Do your employees need to be given a break or extra help now that some of them may have taken on more than their fair share of the workload, while others were sent home or working from home? When it comes to infection risks and worries, it may be useful to involve the employees in your considerations about how to handle the physical framework.

### **Employees who have been working from home**

A lot of your employees (perhaps even yourself) have spent the past months adjusting to the new framework of working from home. Even though it has been a hectic time for many in their attempt to balance working from home, home schooling and family life all at once, many families have found that they have been able to spend more time together and that working from home has been a significant factor in making them less worried about infection. These employees will therefore be facing a new situation and they will be waiting to hear from you, their manager about how you and the company will manage the reopening. How will they manage the increased risk of infection that they will now inevitably be facing? What are your expectations for their performance and physical attendance with the new guidelines and is that compatible with their desire for maybe having more flexibility in the future as well?

On a purely mental level, those who have been working from home need your help to return to the workplace. Maybe some of them are particularly worried about being infected, and you need to address those concerns. What is needed is a new structure for work, and it will presumably be implemented gradually. It may be advantageous to schedule a few physical meetings where you and the employees meet in a distanced setting so that they get used to the idea of being in physical contact with others, while at the same time preserving the important social relationships and contacts. Be aware of the fact that it may feel like a major change for your employees, and that you as a manager will best be able to address this with a gradual process. However, most importantly, you must decide what your visions are for the reopening and the kind of workplace you want to see, so that they know which direction you will all be moving in.

### **Employees who have been sent home**

Your employees who have been sent home will also have spent a lot of time thinking about how the reopening will impact them and their opportunities to keep their jobs and meet their colleagues again, and what their future will look like. Even though many who have been sent home have been worried about losing their jobs, it will still have been a relief to them that they have not been at a high risk of being infected, and that they have kept their incomes during a partial or complete period of being sent home.

There is a lot of focus in the media on people being dismissed and higher unemployment rates, both in Denmark and around the world, so many employees will be feeling somewhat powerless and are maybe anxious and worrying about whether they will be forgotten, made superfluous or if they are indispensable.



For employees who have been sent home, you need to be aware of which experiences they have under their belt after the past many months. Many of those who have been sent home have had nothing to do, and they may have found it difficult to stay motivated. In many ways, those employees who have been sent home need to be brought up to speed. This is not like returning from a holiday, as many people will have been isolated and perhaps be feeling left out and worried about what will happen. So, you need to be particularly clear about your strategy when addressing the employees who were sent home. They might need you to repeat why they were the ones chosen to be sent home. You might also feel like the relationships you have with them have suffered a bit - for good reason - and it may take some extra work to regain their trust and make them feel at ease. Therefore, most often, those employees will prefer a gradual return to the workplace. Do not forget that the social 'community' you have with your colleagues also needs to be nurtured and re-established.

## What more can you do as a manager?

### Create the space and time for reflection

You will be facing a period where the focus still needs to be on adaptation and change. This is the time to step up as a manager, but how? You must allocate the space and time you need to reflect on what your employees are going through. You also need to think about what your strategy is for your business area, how to set things up on a practical level and how to get the individual employees onboard with these changes. What do your employees need from you? Consider which decisions can be adjusted and which decisions cannot. At a time when you and your employees need to find a common platform, it is important that you are clear about what is up for discussion and what is not. Try to put more effort into running ideas by others and getting feedback, maybe from the HR staff or your colleagues.

It is important to recognise that your employees need time to adjust to new ways of working after the pandemic recedes. Employees who are returning to work after a long period of working from home may find that the physical setup of their workplace is different, and their working hours may have changed as well. Salaried employees who have become used to remote working may need time to change their mentality to adapt to working at the office again. In order to navigate these changes successfully, the management team will need to ensure that employees understand what is being asked of them and what steps the company is taking to protect their health.

### Create safe frameworks

Employees expect their employer to help them return to work safely. When it is possible to reopen the physical workplaces, the management teams will be facing the challenge of preserving a safe framework. For example, there may be a need for guidelines on distancing, cleaning, disinfection etc. There may also be changes to the physical setup of the workspaces: for example, desks being moved further away from each other or work schedules being changed to reduce the number of people who are in the same building at the same time.

### Stay calm. We react - and this is perfectly normal

As humans, we react when the world around us and our working conditions change. Change management is the most important tool you have as a manager during times such as these. Your job is to guide and support your employees to the best of your ability, so that you also have efficient employees with a high sense of well-being, when they all return to the workplace.

### Take responsibility - you are the one showing the way forward

Create clear expectations for how tasks are to be handled and assist with ongoing prioritisations. Make it clear that it is alright to make mistakes and that together you must venture into unknown territory once again. Make it clear that you will support your employees. Stay calm and make it clear that there is a plan.



### **Take one step at a time and maintain the overview**

Keep an eye on the big picture rather than being overwhelmed by individual tasks in the coming period. Create a structure for your employees, speak to them about targets, the direction you are going in and your visions. Help them create specific work routines in the period ahead where some might be physically present at work and others will have to wait a bit longer.

Make sure to delegate the tasks that other people can take care of - and postpone the ones that can wait. Prioritise your role as a manager. It will pay off.

### **Put a stop to the negative stories, but allow for worries that might pop up**

Be very clear to your employees and let them know that you are there for them if they have problems or questions they need help with. There may be situations where some employees are afraid of being infected or where there are things you are not considering, and it is important that they notify you of such issues immediately.

Create a setting where it is alright to talk about problems with each other - but keep it to a certain limited timeframe, so that the worries do not impact the whole work day and become the main focus.

Create a space for your employees where they can share their thoughts, experiences and impressions so that a common overview and a shared understanding of the situation you are in can materialise. During times such as these, you need to keep your employees close. Focus on ensuring that there are not too many unclarified/ unprocessed questions or experiences when they leave the office.



### **Communicate, communicate, communicate**

Let people know what you know - and also what you do not yet know. Provide information on a frequent basis and keep having frequent 1:1 meetings where you can follow up on individuals. Have a fixed agenda for your meetings, including items such as well-being, reactions to the reopening and how tasks are solved.

### **Be available and be present**

Be considerate towards your employees - and be aware that your employees may need extra feedback from you in the coming period.

Recognise the work that your employees do and accept that change takes time. Show that you trust them to do their best.

Stay informed about how individual employees solve their tasks and manage their home life, so you can better understand what they are going through.

### **Increase the stability, but maintain flexibility**

Display decisiveness and respond quickly and effectively to new developments. Monitor the situation and make decisions when needed. Stand by your decisions - even the unpopular ones. As far as possible, show a mutual flexibility when it comes to solving tasks, scheduling working hours, etc. You will need your employees to be flexible in the coming period, so show that you can also be flexible. Listen to the needs of individual employees so that you can find good solutions together.

### **Do not forget about yourself in all this**

- Be mindful of your own resources and limits.
- Seek advice, run ideas by others to get feedback and share your experiences with your colleagues.
- Make sure you take regular breaks - breathe and pay attention to what you are feeling.