



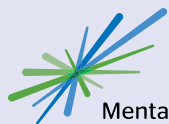
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# LEADING

IN A HYBRID  
WORK ENVIRONMENT



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One thing I've been hearing consistently from teams across the Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) during the pandemic is that our managers were feeling the squeeze. It's easy for leadership to get lost in urgent deliverables while downloading tasks for their managers to delegate.

But, as leaders, we can't forget that those same managers are also contending with the very real challenges and limitations their staff are facing during the pandemic. Not only do they need to ensure that work gets carried out. In some instances, they also have to become a de facto support system for colleagues who may be experiencing heightened stress and anxiety levels.

At a managers' meeting in the summer of 2021, our managers had a candid discussion about some of the specific situations they were encountering – which they didn't necessarily feel equipped to handle. These included detangling performance issues from those that could relate to declining mental health, creating space to deliver difficult performance evaluations (without the benefit of face-to-face meetings), and protecting their own mental health while shouldering leadership expectations and managing the health and productivity of their teams.

They were clearly waving a red flag and, as the organization's president and CEO, I couldn't turn away from their distress. I turned to our team of workplace mental health experts, who partnered with our Public Affairs department to create a toolkit to address these managers' specific needs.

Indeed, in implementing Canada's first National Standard on Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace (which the MHCC championed and adopted), we reinforced a corporate culture that is open to debate and discussion on mental health issues – one that supports staff members who wish to raise concerns.

We must also work to cultivate a culture of mental wellness just like any other organization.

The most important thing I've learned in my short tenure at the helm is that you can't let setbacks or challenges discourage you. It's far easier to ignore distress than address it. So when your employees bring you their problems and express their vulnerabilities, that trust is the biggest sign you're moving in the right direction. Rather than turn away from staff in their time of need, we at the MHCC choose to walk alongside them.

**THIS MANAGER'S TOOLKIT WON'T SOLVE ALL THE CHALLENGES A BUSY WORKPLACE HAS TO CONTEND WITH DURING A PANDEMIC. BUT IT'S A GREAT START.**

**Michel Rodrigue, CPA, CMA, MBA**  
**President & CEO**



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# ADDRESSING PERFORMANCE ISSUES

*“I feel like I can’t provide any constructive criticism to my team when everyone is trying their best to cope during the pandemic.”*

## 1

### Approach the conversation with compassion

In the COVID-19 context, poor performance is unlikely to happen in a vacuum. It’s possible that stressors outside of work are affecting the employee’s performance – be it parenting challenges, financial strain, pandemic anxiety, or something else. That said, it is still possible to offer constructive feedback while being mindful of these contributing factors. **Give your team members the benefit of the doubt and approach performance conversations with empathy and understanding.**

## 2

### Provide specific examples

No one responds well when feeling attacked. So, instead of making broad statements about poor performance, point to specific examples of projects or situations that could have been handled better. Allow the employee an opportunity to explain, or at least provide more context around what happened. **If performance is especially poor, having a number of examples may help employees better understand where your concern is coming from.**

## 3

### Work collaboratively to find solutions

Once you’ve established the reasons for your concern, work with your employee to find solutions.

- Let them know you want to work **with** them to improve the situation.
- Be open to suggestions that you might not have considered, like allowing the employee to decline certain meetings so they have more time to focus on their work.
- Adjusting their hours to make it easier for them to manage their personal obligations.

Give the solutions a trial period, then check in to see if they are helping or if it’s time to try something new.

For additional support, check out the [Supporting Employee Success guide](#).





## 4 Provide additional training or professional development opportunities

Employees are more likely to respond positively to your concerns when they feel supported in their efforts to improve.

Where appropriate, **consider offering them training to build new skills or upgrade existing ones** (e.g., in writing, public speaking, and project management). Even something as simple as a book suggestion can be useful for supporting an employee's professional development (especially if your budget allows you to cover the cost).

You may also consider **pairing up the employee with another team member to help them improve in a certain area** (providing that team member has the capacity to assist). In a virtual setting, it can be a useful way to build team camaraderie as well.



## 5 Document progress

After giving an employee feedback, training, and coaching to improve performance issues, follow up regularly to document any progress. While you need to note when performance is not improving, **it's especially important to celebrate any wins.**

- For example, if time management has been an issue, be sure to acknowledge any instances where a task was completed with time to spare.
- If a specific skill was the challenge, note any evidence of practice and training that are paying off, such as clearer writing or more skilful project management.



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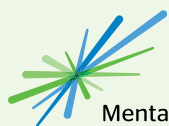
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# CONFLICT RESOLUTION

*“I know there’s tension on my team, but it’s hard to get to the root of the problem when everyone has the option to simply turn their camera off and disengage, and I only hear about conflict second-hand.”*

## 1

### Consider underlying causes of aggressive behaviour

If an employee appears disgruntled or even aggressive, consider what other contributing factors might be at play. Whether it’s pandemic-related stress, an especially hectic period at work, or another hardship (which the employee may choose not to share), it’s important to be mindful that you are not likely seeing the full picture.

When it’s time to approach them, **show compassion by asking whether there is something else going on that they might like to talk about.** If this type of interaction feels unnatural, consider how you might build your communication or conflict resolution skills.

## 2

### Discourage gossip and rumours

Every office is bound to have some form of gossip, but its damaging impact on team dynamics can be difficult to reverse. While it’s impossible to eliminate entirely, whenever possible, discourage hallway meetings (or in virtual settings, mean-spirited side chats), whispered conjectures, or other private discussions about colleagues.

**Prioritize transparency to help cut down on the need for speculation, and encourage employees to come to you directly if they have any questions or concerns they’d like to discuss.**

## 3

### Rethink workplace conflict in a virtual setting

Spotting conflict and harassment takes effort, especially in a virtual environment. While you may not see employees yelling at each other in a video call, that doesn’t mean harassment (or cyberbullying) isn’t taking place. Pay attention to subtle cues that something is amiss (e.g., a hostile tone in an email exchange), and remind your team that professional behaviour and communication are just as important — if not more so — in the absence of face-to-face interactions.



## 4 Encourage solutions-based discussions

When employees are given the opportunity to voice their concerns, whether one-on-one or in a larger group, encourage solutions-based thinking. While some venting can be cathartic, it can also lead to a pattern of unhealthy and unproductive rumination.

**So if a team member, for example, shares a negative experience about another colleague, ask them what they think might improve the situation and what they'd be willing to do.**

## 5 Check in regularly with all team members

It can be easy for managers to get bogged down in a “squeaky wheel gets all the grease” mentality. But **it's important to set aside time** (and grease) for **all** team members. While some employees are vocal about their issues with other colleagues, others will stay quiet unless prompted.

**Remember that cultural norms, personality differences, personal preferences, or past experiences can affect the balance of communication and the perception of inclusion within a team.**

Regular check-ins will let you to hear from staff who may otherwise stay mum and give you a fuller picture of the team dynamics you should be aware of.

## 6 Bring in a mediator if necessary

Sometimes, resolving internal conflict can require the expertise and objectivity of a third-party mediator. Whether it's a resource inside or outside your organization, an expert in conflict resolution, change management, or communications may help you get to the bottom of any issues being overlooked.



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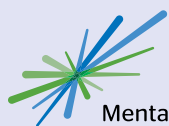
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# ONBOARDING

*“Now that the team is rarely in the same place at the same time, bringing someone new into the fold feels like an uphill battle. I worry about my new staff feeling isolated and unprepared.”*

## 1

### Create a welcome package with an onboarding plan

While it may seem obvious, creating a detailed employee onboarding plan can go a long way toward alleviating stress for new team members and others involved in the process, especially in a virtual setting.

Try developing an onboarding “syllabus” that maps out their rough schedule for training, meeting team members, and tasks for any free time (recommended reading materials, HR training, etc.). If possible, try to introduce some fun into the proceedings, like a virtual scavenger hunt with a small prize at the end (no one wants a game without a prize!).

## 2

### Set up a buddy system

Assigning an onboarding buddy can be a great way to help new team members build social connections, understand their roles in the broader team context, and learn the ropes outside of formal training. Buddy systems have also been shown to **boost productivity and increase satisfaction** with the onboarding experience. For experienced employees, serving as an onboarding buddy can be an excellent opportunity for growth and the development of managerial skills.

## 3

### Invite the new person to a variety of meetings

Even if the purpose of a meeting is not directly related to the new person’s role, **involving them in a group discussion is a great way to help them become part of the team.** Encourage them to ask questions and share any ideas that come to mind (being careful not to pressure them to do so — listening and observing is still beneficial). Including new employees in a variety of meetings will also help them meet new colleagues and build important social connections.





## 4 Arrange individual or small group meetings

Early in the onboarding process, encourage or arrange individual meetings with team members so the new person can get to know people individually or in very small groups. New team members may not feel confident reaching out themselves, and more seasoned employees may not have considered the challenges they face.

**While setting up initial meetings may seem awkward, it can be very helpful for building relationships.** Think of them as the virtual way of going for a coffee.

## 5 Bring the team together over shared interests

**Set aside time for your team to bond over their personal hobbies and interests.** Doing so will help new team members build relationships with colleagues and help team members get to know them in return.

If some members enjoy trivia, for example, consider hosting a virtual trivia challenge. If others prefer crafting, everyone could work on their crafts and chat during a designated meeting time. Whatever the specifics, keep an ear out for common interests that could help bring the team closer together.

## 6 Make yourself available for frequent check-ins

When someone is new to the team, especially in a remote environment, **frequent communication is key.**

In addition to scheduling times to meet, do your best to be available for impromptu check-ins as well, even if it's an informal email exchange or a virtual chat to answer a question. The more supported the person feels early on, the more likely it is they will develop the skills and confidence to flourish in their new role.



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# PROTECTING YOUR OWN MENTAL HEALTH

*“The time I spend trying to support my team as best I can takes a toll on me, too. Sometimes I feel like I’m drawing from an empty well.”*

# 1

## Recognize when your plate is too full

Sometimes managers don't feel entitled to raise concerns over their own workload. If you're consistently working overtime, struggling to remember the dates and details of your projects, or frequently feeling anxious when you think about work, **you may be taking on too much.**

**Even if the quality of your work hasn't declined, your mental health may have.**

- Changes in sleep, mood, appetite, or motivation could indicate that you're performing at an unsustainable pace.

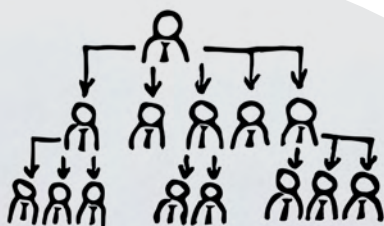
# 2

## Have an honest conversation with your supervisor

Just as you hope your team would approach you with workload concerns, you shouldn't hesitate to do so with your own supervisor.

Since upper management isn't typically as involved in the details of day-to-day work, they may not realize how much you have on your plate. In a virtual setting, back-to-back video calls and the extra time and effort required to manage a remote team may mean you need to hand off some of your work to someone else.

**Be honest with your supervisor about how you are feeling and how they can best support you.**



## 3 Use your vacation time

Too often, managers feel compelled to work harder and longer than anyone else on their team. In truth, one of **the most important things you can do as a leader is to be a model for achieving work-life balance and protecting mental wellness.**

Take time to disconnect, recharge, and focus on the people and hobbies that mean the most to you – whether that involves taking a trip or spending a week at home in your PJs. When you're on vacation, give yourself permission to let your mind rest and turn toward things other than work.

## 4 Set clear boundaries

Chances are your job doesn't require you to be on call 24-7. So don't be! **Set clear limits to protect your time and mental wellness**, such as blocking off an hour for lunch in your calendar (and actually eating lunch), silencing call or chat alerts during concentrated working periods, or committing to not checking emails on evenings and weekends. Once you've developed a list that works for you, tell the rest of your team so everyone knows what to expect. You may even want to encourage them to do the same thing.

If you're finding it difficult to establish which boundaries are right for you, email the [MHCC workplace team](#) to learn about webinars on this topic.

## 5 Don't forget to delegate

Part of managing a team is **learning to delegate certain tasks and responsibilities.** The more effectively you can loosen up on the reins, the easier it'll be for you to take a step back when you need to, whether that's turning your attention to other projects or taking some well-deserved time off.

Remember, just because a colleague takes a different approach doesn't mean your own way of doing things won't lead to a positive outcome. **By learning to let go of some control, you'll demonstrate trust, empower your team, and most importantly, take some of the weight off your shoulders.**

## 6 Use the resources available to you

Managers can be excellent at encouraging others to use resources. So why not use them yourself? Not only can organizational benefits help you maintain your well-being, employee assistance programs and professional associations may offer managers coaching and other resources to help you get through stressful situations. And don't forget about community resources such as [Wellness Together Canada](#).



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# RECOGNIZING DECLINING MENTAL HEALTH IN EMPLOYEES

*“Some members of my team are performing well but have become noticeably withdrawn. Others are suddenly missing deadlines after years of great performance. I’m not sure what’s going on or how to approach the situation.”*

# 1

## Look for changes in mood, behaviour, or performance

When an employee deviates from their typical attitude, behaviour, or performance, it may be a sign of declining mental health. Changes in mood or behaviour can be brushed aside if work performance is consistent, but it’s important to be mindful of *all* patterns of change. These changes can be as subtle as leaving the camera off during meetings or a decline in personal grooming. At times, something may just seem “off.”

These observations can also lead to important conversations about mental health.

### You could begin by saying something like:

- “You’ve been doing a great job, but I notice you haven’t been as involved as usual in team meetings. Is everything OK?”
- “I’m concerned about you. I’ve noticed some changes in your work lately (give examples). How are you doing?”

# 2

## Create a safe space for having open conversations about mental health

Remind your team members how important it is for them to reach out if they are struggling, whether they’re working from home, in the office, or in the field. Let them know you will make time if they need to talk, and you are there to support them. Also bear in mind that they might want to talk privately or have additional support or representation during a discussion (e.g., from a health and safety rep, union rep, or another trusted employee).

If someone does approach you, be sure to turn off distractions and practise [active listening](#) so they have the chance to share freely. Offer empathy and compassion, along with an assurance that you’ll do your best to assist in any way possible, whether that means making accommodations, helping them connect with resources, or simply setting aside future times to talk. After the meeting, try to schedule a little buffer time to give you both a chance to reset before moving on to your next tasks.

For more guidance, take a look at our tip sheets on [helping your team](#) and [helping someone in mental distress](#).



### 3 Have regular check-ins and meetings

Regular check-ins will help you recognize changes in each team member's usual mood, behaviour, and performance. These one-on-ones can also strengthen your personal relationship and build the kind of trust that will make employees more likely to get in touch with you if there's a problem.

It's equally important to hold regular team meetings that aren't about work – the kind that give everyone a chance to simply check in. Casual meetings can help build relationships, reduce isolation, and provide a forum to celebrate personal victories. Even for meetings focused on work, always leave space to talk about life outside of it.

### 4 Share internal and external resources

Make sure your team knows what internal programs are available (employee benefits, employee and family assistance programs, etc.) and how to access and use them. While frequent use of mental health benefits was once considered an organizational red flag, we now know it's a positive indicator showing that employees are prioritizing their mental health and not letting stigma stop them from seeking help.

You can also let them know about useful external resources, such as those at the [Wellness Together Canada](#) portal and the Mental Health Commission of Canada's [COVID-19 resource hub](#). A collection of resources created specifically for leaders is also available in the [Building Mental Health into Operations During a Pandemic](#) toolkit.

### 5 Consider The Working Mind and/or Mental Health First Aid training

[The Working Mind](#) is an evidence-based course on addressing mental health stigma in the workplace. It also builds resilience for participants while showing them how to recognize signs of declining mental health, in themselves and others. A variation of the course developed specifically for managers includes strategies to support mental wellness for team members. Whether for yourself or your whole team, the course is a powerful tool for fostering awareness of mental health problems and improving attitudes toward them.

[Mental Health First Aid](#) (MHFA) is a trauma-informed, evidence-based course that gives participants the skills they need to assist a person experiencing a mental health crisis (or a decline in mental well-being) until further treatment is obtained. Having dedicated MHFA-trained employees is a valuable workplace resource, particularly during a crisis.



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