The
Health
& Safety
Conversation Guide

Everything you need to start talking
about health and safety at work

joyous

Contents

Safer organisations perform better. But safer organisations don't occur by focusing on hazards and incidents. Safety is a natural consequence of focusing on resilience.

The Model

At the core of this guide is our model of Resilience, which we break down into three Realms. These realms group the behaviours that have the most impact on Resilience.

The realms are Capacity, Variability and Culture.

Capacity

Variability

Resilience

Culture

Safety happens in resilient organizations.

Safety

Safer organizations perform better.

Business Performance

Growing a resilient workplace

Resilience is the ability to adapt and recover – to bounce back – following a challenge or problem. Resilient people respond well to a changing environment, deal with obstacles and move on quickly. Resilient companies do the same.

Why is workplace resilience important?

You can't plan for everything.

Take workplace health and safety as an example. The traditional approach is to analyse possible emergencies, threats and hazards, and to document the things people need to do if they come across these situations. Then, when something goes wrong you can find the specific solution to that specific problem, solve it and move on.

However, it's not always that simple. It is extremely difficult to account for every single situation that might crop up, especially when the work environment is always changing. How many companies actually had a pandemic contingency plan in place before 2020?

Resilient companies effectively react, respond and recover in the face of change

Resilient companies create policies, not to cover everything that could possibly go wrong, but to provide direction on dealing with things when they go wrong.

Resilient organisations are change-ready. They acknowledge change is inevitable and have strategies and business continuity plans for dealing with it. They're not caught on the back foot or unable to react to unexpected developments. Leaders need to empower and support people at all levels of the organisation to collaborate and solve problems; to become resilient workers.

Resilient people cope well with adverse situations and stress

Everyone sits somewhere on the resilience spectrum. Most of us find our capacity for resilience changes from day to day and situation to situation. Certainly it is easier to bounce back when our reserves aren't completely drained by constant stress.

There is a wealth of scales and measures of resilience.

Check out this article for an analysis, and you can try out this quiz to see how you fare.

But most at least partly agree on what constitutes personal resilience.

People who cope well with change tend to do well outside of their comfort zones and have faith in their own abilities. They are more likely to have a good support system – at work, and in their personal lives – so they don't feel like they are on their own when dealing with things. They are also open minded, adaptable, and likely to help others with their own challenges.

The good news is you can learn to be more resilient.

Learning resilience at work

Organisations should create a positive and supportive culture where people feel like they can trust and rely on those they work with. Open and effective communication is important; not just between peers, but between leaders and workers. Encourage people to lean on support networks within their teams, across and outside the business, and foster an environment where asking for help is a positive. And this applies just to remote teams as well.

Resilience training is also available and typically involves a combination of skills-based training, coaching and mindfulness exercises. This training is associated with increases in performance, subjective well-being, and reduction of psychological disorders.

Practical things you can do to aid resilience:

Make sure people know who they should go to for support and assistance. This may be their direct manager, a mentor or advisor, an HR rep or a more experienced team member.

Encourage people to take the initiative when the unexpected occurs. Let them decide how best to deal with the situation (within reason). Provide guidelines for escalation. Communicate your expectations, and communicate the expected impact of changes to the work situation.

Debrief after problems to help people reflect on what happened and how they coped. Did they react positively? If not, what would have helped them? Which type of support could make the most difference - is it tools or equipment? Training? Guidance?
What would they change about the current state of affairs? Understand exactly how that change impacts their work.

Implement well-being initiatives. Being resilient is easier when people feel physically, mentally and emotionally fit. Consider flexible working options, offer healthy snacks and drinks, limit after-hours demands and encourage social interaction. If everyone's working from home, be sure to schedule regular check-ins and team catch-ups to combat isolation.

Building resilience requires a commitment from the company and the people who work there. Leaders should anticipate changing conditions and any trade-offs (how do we juggle safety, quality and deadlines?), and be able to steer the company accordingly. The people doing the work should have a say in the policies and procedures governing how work is done. And everyone should be talking - always - about the current situation and ways to protect well-being and manage work safely.

Resilience training at work

Well-being

Satisfaction

Optimism

Task success

Performance

Performance rating

Positively impacts

Reduces

Anxiety

Psychosocial disorders

Depression

Can resilience be developed at work? A meta-analytic review of resilience-building programme effectiveness https://bit.ly/2JnUIS9

Physical & psychological safety

For many, 'safety' means physical safety: PPE, hazard registers and accident prevention. But psychological safety at work is just as important.

"Psychological safety is a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes." – Amy Edmondson

Psychological safety is what enables us to speak up, and to take calculated risks without the fear of reprimand. This matters for a number of reasons.

Empowerment

When people feel psychologically safe they are more comfortable making decisions for themselves. If there's no policy or procedure for the current situation, they are likely to use their own knowledge and experience to come up with a solution. If people feel unsafe, they will be unwilling to act and waiting for someone else to take the lead. People who feel safe are more resilient and can adapt better to changes or new events in their workplaces.

Ownership

When people feel psychologically safe they feel able to ask for help or admit to mistakes, and are more likely to report accidents. The aim of a psychologically safe workplace is not to eliminate everything that could go wrong, but to make it OK for people to speak up and seek help when things do. Compare that to a workplace where accidents aren't readily reported or where nobody will admit to knowing the cause of a problem for fear of blame or punishment.

Psychological safety is complex, but there are a few ways you can encourage it

- Create a shared understanding of the nature and importance of your work. Explain why it's important to come forward - who's depending on you? What happens when you don't?
- Invite input and ideas. Ask people how they understand their work situations and what they would do to make them better, or safer.
- Show appreciation when people come forward, and respond appropriately. Help solve problems rather than reprimanding people for causing them. Then debrief as a team to make sure everyone's on the same page for next time.

Well-being

Mental wellbeing is a continuum. At the positive end you have flourishers, and at the negative end you have languishers Flourishers drive positive business outcomes such as engagement, productivity, organisational commitment, and organisational citizenship behaviours. They also take fewer sick days, are more resilient, and are less likely to seek employment elsewhere.

Building a workforce of flourishers requires careful attention to a range of contributing factors.

Health factors

Health behaviors like eating, sleeping, exercising, drinking and substance use are all drivers of mental wellbeing, which is why positive behaviours should be encouraged in the workplace.

Work setting

Consider health and safety policies, physical hazards that may negatively impact your team, and the environment. You should also consider whether people are free to contribute their ideas and opinions at work.

Personality traits

Type A behaviour has strong links to psychological distress and burnout. Type B personality is characterised by a calm, reflexive, patient manner and typically lower levels of stress and anxiety.

People have have either an internal locus of control (believe they control the events and outcomes of their life) or an external locus of control (believe outside forces control the events and outcomes of their life). Employees with external locus of control are more likely to suffer from work-related stress and burnout because they perceive job stressors as beyond their control and are therefore less likely to cope with them.

Occupational stressors

These can be thought of in terms of resources supplied vs demands required. Resources include job control, physical tools, performance feedback, appreciation, social support, development opportunities, and supervisor support. Demands can be emotional and physical, and include things like work overload, sacrifices, work-life balance, and overtime.

Checking in on well-being

Do your employees have good person-organisation fit?

Do people feel comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions?

Is the environment both physically and psychologically safe?

Does the environment enable people to flourish?

Are you supporting your Type A employees to achieve while promoting healthy behaviours?

Are your policies and procedures well documented, so people know what's within their control and what behaviours and achievements will be rewarded or recognised?

Do people have sufficient resources to cope with the demands of their role?

Are you creating a work environment that minimises or removes unnecessary stress?

What can you do to promote a positive work-life balance?

Measuring & managing well-being

Start by acknowledging that mental well-being plays a large role in determining how people feel and function in the workplace.

Other easy steps you can take including create a psychologically safe workspace so people feel they can speak up when they need to, and leading by example and encouraging a healthy work-life balance. Confidential employee helplines and mental health courses for team leaders may also be beneficial.

Measuring mental well-being is always helpful so you can determine whether it is a significant issue within your team or organisation. More importantly, measurement can help you identify which individuals may be struggling.

Aside from using measurement scales there are also common warning signs to look out for. People with low mental wellbeing may exhibit behaviour changes such as irritability, restlessness, and difficulty concentrating. Physical symptoms can include pain, dizziness, exhaustion, and lack of appetite.

Managing well-being at work

If you have identified that there is a problem, ask any affected people what they need. Be sure to keep all discussions and arrangements strictly confidential.

- Consider flexible working arrangements – reduced hours, the choice to work from home, and/or extended deadlines.
- Seek advice from medical professionals, don't solely rely on intuition.
- Research and consider implementing employee mental well-being programmes, which can also have a positive impact on the bottom line. An independent review of mental health in the UK found that for every £1 spent on employee mental wellbeing programmes, organisations can expect an average return of £4.20.
- Make mental well-being part of the conversation - it's something that concerns everyone and there should be no stigma attached.
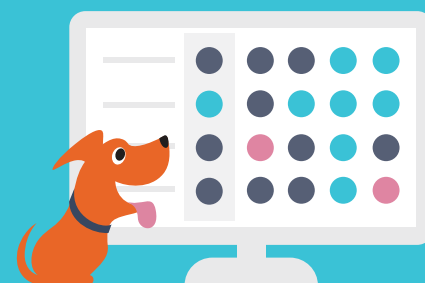
Well-being measurement scales

A common and valid scale used to measure mental wellbeing is the modular 'DASS 21' (Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale). Each module has 7 items and can be assessed independently.

Get the scale

If you are interested in knowing which employees are flourishing, a common, concise (8 items) and valid scale is 'The Flourishing Scale'.

Get the scale

Both of these measurement scales are free to use with author credit.

Using this guide

This guide shows you how to unlock each of the three key realms of resilience: Capacity, Variability and Culture.

It is designed as a reference guide that:

- Introduces each realm and its relationship to resilience.

- Explains each realm's importance to people at work

- Breaks the realms into measurable parts, each with questions and conversation starters

- Provides high frequency drill-down questions where relevant.

- Gives managers and leaders practical tips for improving resilience.

It also gives you some guidance on talking about specific Health & Safety events, and checking in with your people whatever their current working status.

Feedback design

Gathering feedback requires asking questions. But what if asking questions changes the very thing we are trying to understand? That's exactly what happens. It's a huge opportunity because the questions themselves can be subtle but powerful change agents. If you ask people about safety at work, they will think about safety at work, and may act more safely. So questions need to both stimulate feedback and provide an example of desirable behavior. All questions are in very simple language. Simple language is more inclusive, less open to misinterpretation, and easier to read.

Conversation sets

Q1 I usually feel that our work is under control.

When is your work most difficult?

First we ask people to indicate their level of agreement with a statement. This is always a simple statement of the ideal way of working. For example, "We know how we should adapt our work when needed" reminds both managers and their teams that adaptation is the ideal behaviour.

Then we provide a conversation prompt.
Conversations on important topics helps embed those ideas in the organization, and can surface additional information. They also provide opportunity for deeper dialog, which helps with relationship building.

Deep Diving into variability

For each of the three realms we include questions (like those above) that measure the state of the organisation. In the case of the 'Capacity' and 'Variability' realms we also include drill-down questions that are designed to be asked at a higher frequency (e.g. daily) to capture the dynamics of variation over a defined time period.

**DD** Today I was able to focus on the most important tasks.

What got in the way of doing your work?

Capacity

Capacity

The risk of things going wrong is much higher when people are overstretched. It is important that the capacity exists to get the work done well and safely – the workload is reasonable, time is used efficiently, and people have access to the right tools and support.

Capacity

Intensity

Flow

Support
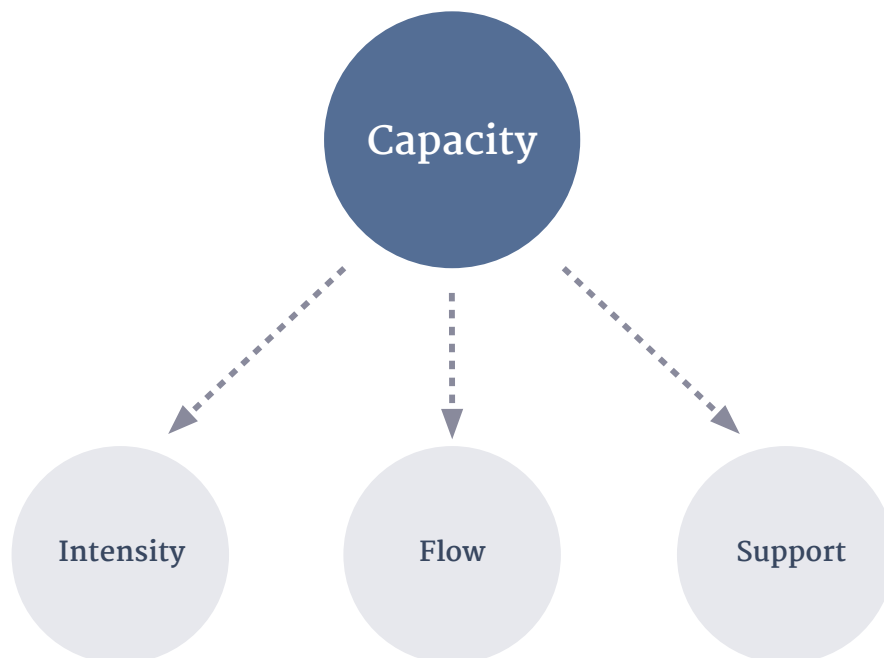
Measuring Intensity

Most people are quite happy being busy, but being overstretched is another story. When the workload is beyond the team's ability to cope, the result is stress and an increased risk of accidents.

Improving Intensity

Understand when and why the workload gets 'out of control'. Work with the team to find ways to better match resourcing to demands.

Can the team usually cope with their workload?

Q1 I usually feel that our work is under control.

When is your work most difficult?

Q10 We can handle our work even when it is intense.

What times do you least or most prefer at work?

DD Today was less difficult than most days.

What made it easy or difficult?

Measuring Flow

In a perfect world work just 'flows'. Making sure people have clear goals and that their jobs require a good mix of challenge and skill will go a long way to helping them feel engaged. This is the concept of Flow - when we get so engrossed in an activity that we give it our full attention.

Improving Flow

Understand when and why the workload gets 'out of control'. Work with the team to find ways to better match resourcing to demands.

Is work designed to be as efficient as possible so people don't waste their time?

Q2 We are set up to be efficient and focused.

What gets in the way of doing your job?

Q11 I am able to focus on my main tasks.

What would allow you to focus more on your main tasks?

DD Today I was able to focus on the most important tasks.

What got in the way of doing your work?

What does Flow look like?

- We completely concentrate on the task(s) to the exclusion of other tasks.

- Goals, outcomes and progress are clear; we don't have to wait to get feedback.

- Time seems to slow down or speed up.

- The process is intrinsically rewarding.

- The work is just hard enough. It's not so difficult that we struggle, but it's challenging enough to be interesting, and we get to use our skills.

- We work without thinking: our internal monologue takes a break.

- We feel like we have control over the task / situation: this is something we can achieve.

Measuring Support

To get a job done safely and well, people need access to the right tools, training, guidance and other resources. Often the people doing the work understand the gaps between what they have and what they need to meet expectations and stay safe.

Improving Support

Ask your team to choose which type of support could make the most difference - is it tools? training? guidance? What about that area would they change? Understand exactly how that change impacts their work.

Do people have the right tools, training and other resources to do their work well and safely?

Q3 We have the support we need to get the job done well.

What would help you to do your job better?

Q12 We are set up to succeed at work.

What would it be helpful to have easier access to?

**DD** Today we had what we needed to get the job done.

What were you missing?

Variability

Variability

People will naturally adapt their behaviour to changing conditions, and that should be a good thing. Leaders should help them adapt in ways that make them safer by anticipating changing conditions and what trade-offs might be needed and being deliberate in their planning so that surprises are less disruptive.

Variability

Conditions

Trade-offs

Surprise
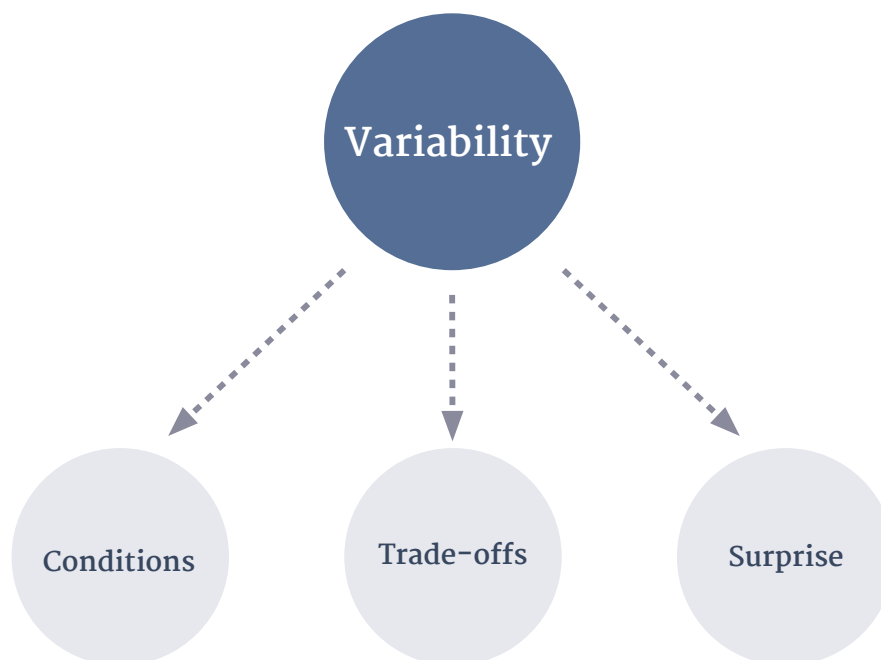
Measuring Conditions

The environment we work in is not constant. Work may be affected by day-to-day or hour-to-hour changes in customer demands, the weather, external noise, temperature and a myriad of other factors. Procedures and safety behaviours need to adapt well to changing conditions.

Improving Conditions

It is useful to understand how different conditions impact work. An ideal way to achieve this is by asking team members at a relatively high frequency (e.g. daily) over a fixed period (e.g. a month).

How well does our 'way of working' adapt to changes in conditions?

Q4 We know how we should adapt our work when needed.

What changes when the pressure is on?

Q13 We can do our work in all conditions.

What conditions do you find tiring or hard to put up with?

DD Today was business-as-usual.

What happened today that was unusual?

Measuring Trade-offs

Work often involves several objectives at once (e.g. safety, quality, deadlines) and those goals often conflict with each other. It is important that people can make deliberate choices that ensure that they remain safe while achieving other objectives.

Improving Trade-offs

It is important to be explicit about the importance of safety, but also acknowledge there are other demands. Help team members anticipate the situations when trade-offs need to be made, and how to arrive at the right choice.

Does safety get the level of priority it warrants in the context of other demands?

Q5 If we need to make trade-offs, we choose well.

What do worry might happen here?

Q14 Safety is our top priority.

When were you pulled in more than one direction?

DD Today my main tasks were clear.

What trade-offs did you need to make?

Measuring Surprise

Sometimes work is 'full of surprises'. That makes work more interesting, but if there are too many unforeseen events or too much disruption, then we end up working outside of what we've planned for and the risk of accidents increases.

Improving Surprise

Try to understand the patterns in work - if certain kinds of 'surprises' occur more often, create plans to handle them. The objective is to minimise the situations we are unprepared for.

What is the extent of disruption from unforeseen events?

Q6 **Work goes as planned.**

What came 'out of the blue' recently?

Q15 **Our work is not often upset by surprises.**

What disrupts our plans the most?

DD **Today went as planned.**

What surprised you today?

Culture

Culture

Procedures are essential to safety. But procedures that are disconnected from 'work-as-done' are of little value and can lead to people being cynical about safety. It is important that the people doing the work are motivated to contribute and involved in the process and that leaders are well-informed and encourage honest communication.

Culture

Learning

Empowering

Understanding
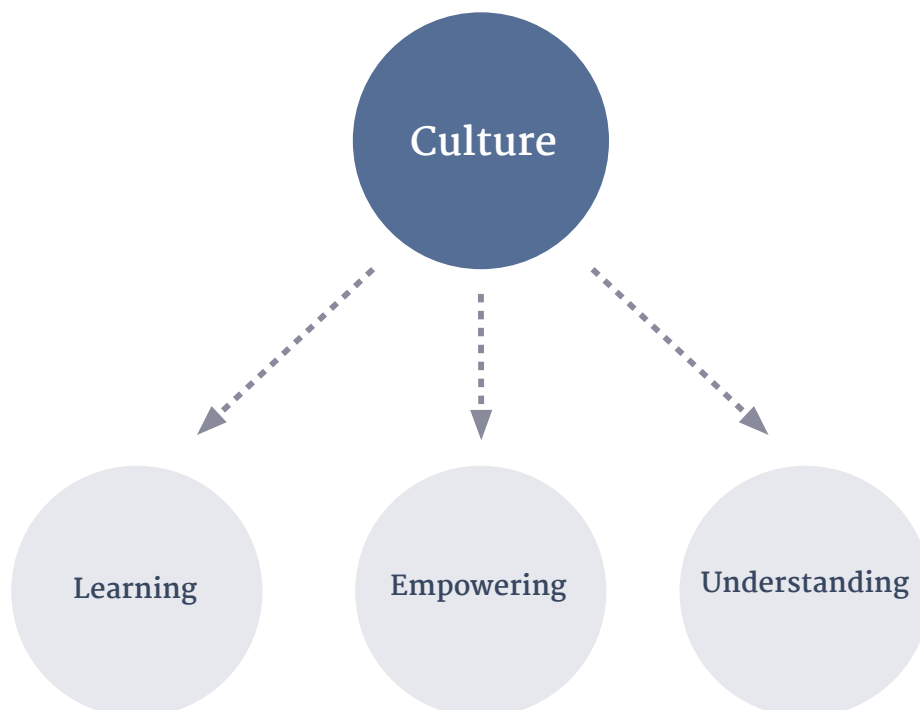
Measuring Learning

The people doing the work are in the best position to inform making it safer. But if people are not comfortable making suggestions they're not going to contribute to positive change. The goal is a 'blameless' culture with an emphasis on listening and learning.

Improving Learning

Make sure that people understand their suggestions are welcome. Try to get balanced input from across the team (not just the most vocal members) by asking each individual for their input, and show respect for everyone's opinion.

What is the extent of disruption from unforeseen events?

Q7 — **When things go wrong, we help each other learn to do better.**

What could we do better to learn from what goes wrong?

Q16 — **It is worth my time to make suggestions.**

How might we improve how we work?

Measuring Empowerment

Many people perceive 'health and safety' to be something that is dictated from above - it's about ticking boxes that someone else created. If people are to take ownership of safety they need to be involved in figuring out what makes sense for the real situations they face.

Improving Empowerment

Give people the goal of making work safer then let them figure out - as a team - how to best achieve that goal. Regular 'retrospectives' are useful - create a casual environment to discuss what has worked well or could improve.

Are people involved in the decisions that affect their safety?

Q8 We're allowed to make work safer in ways that make sense to us.

What ideas have you come up with to make work safer?

Q17 Our people help to make their work safer.

How can we help people think about being safe?

Measuring Understanding

If safety procedures are built around an incorrect or outdated view of what the work actually involves they can have a negative impact. It is important that leaders and other teams understand 'work-as-done' so that expectations and procedures are sensible.

Improving Understanding

It is easy to lose touch with how work is performed in practice. Make it a priority to spend time involved in the work, or at least keep up to date with how work is being done. Ask people what's changed recently, and check that people feel like the rules make sense.

Do leaders have an up-to-date understanding of the work, and do the safety rules make sense?

Q9 Our procedures make sense for the work we do.

When do the rules cause problems?

Q18 Our leaders understand the work we do.

What mistakes might a new person make?

Health & Safety Events

Talking about specific health & safety events

It's always a good idea to check in regularly with your people, and even more important when things are unsettled. These questions focus on the different things that might affect people during periods of disruption and isolation - including resourcing, support, and expectations. There are also different question sets for remote workers, and for those who are continuing to work as before.

We initially created this set of questions for the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic and the remote working conditions it brought about. The conversations can easily be adapted to any other Health and Safety event that causes work disruption.

What's the best way to ask these questions?

Try to use your existing communication tools. Feedback is best handled as a conversation, so ideally choose a tool that lets people respond directly to someone (eg their manager) with their answers.

If you have an open culture, you might try posting questions in group channels with a collaborative tool like Slack, Microsoft Teams, or Facebook Workplace. If you know your people aren't likely to be comfortable replying in a group setting, then stick to one-on-one messages or options like Google Forms, or Survey Monkey. Regardless of approach: quickly sharing and discussing the common themes with your employees is critical.
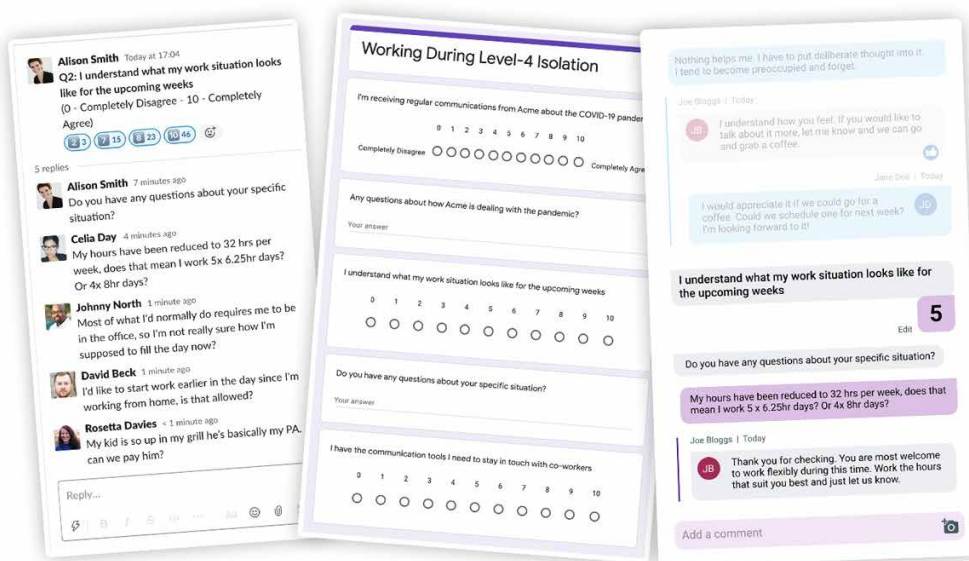
Slack: Ask people to 'react' to the question posted with number emoji from 0 - 10, then put the follow-up question below.

Google Forms: Setup the initial questions as linear scale, and then the follow-up as an open text question.

Joyous: We present the first question as a number rating only, then follow-up with a chat-like conversation.

General questions for all your people

Q1 I'm receiving regular communications from (COMPANY NAME) about the current situation

Any questions about how (COMPANY NAME) is dealing with this situation?

Q2 I understand what my work situation looks like for the upcoming weeks

Do you have any questions about your specific situation?

Q3 I have the communication tools I need to stay in touch with co-workers

Is there anything limiting your ability to communicate with co-workers?

Q4 I feel comfortable with the way (COMPANY NAME) is responding to the current situation

Do you have any concerns about how (COMPANY NAME) is responding to the situation?

Q5 I feel well supported despite these unsettling times

Is there anything we can do to help you feel more supported?

Questions specifically for people working remotely

It's important to gauge whether employees have all the things they need in order to work remotely. This extends to physical items (e.g. chairs, screens, desks etc) and access to systems, software, and information. This also extends to expectations. Do your employees have a clear understanding of their new working situation and the expectations that come with it?

Q1 I have the essentials I need to work remotely (tools, technology, equipment, software, systems, information)

Is there anything that would help you do your job better?

Q2 I'm able to work flexibly to accommodate my home life needs

What's your ideal way of working while you work remotely?

Q3 I know what is expected of me while I work remotely

Do you have any questions about your work expectations?

Q4 I feel supported and empowered to work remotely

Is there anything you need to help you work successfully?

Q5 My home situation allows me to work the way I want to

Is there anything at home that's limiting your ability to work successfully?

Questions specifically for people continuing to work as normal

These people are more likely to be experiencing feelings of stress and anxiety so it's very important to check in on them and gauge how they are coping.

Q1 I have the tools and resources I need to continue working during this time

Is there anything that would help you do your job better?

Q2 I feel safe to continue working during the current situation

Any concerns you would like to raise about your safety or ability to work?

Q3 I understand the precautions I need to be taking at work to keep myself and others safe

Do you have any questions about the new precautions?

Q4 I've been given clear guidelines around my expected workload for the coming weeks

Do you have any questions or concerns about your workload?

Q5 I feel well supported while I work

Is there anything we can do to help you feel more supported?

Questions specifically for people who are unable to work at the moment

The two main concerns for employees who are unable to continue working are their financial compensation and job security. It's important each employee knows where they stand in terms of future employment with your company and their rights to financial compensation for this period. Although they are not working, it's also important to check in with each employee to see how they are coping. Below are some questions you can ask.

Q1 I'm receiving regular communications from (COMPANY NAME) about the current situation

Any questions about how (COMPANY NAME) is dealing with the situation?

Q2 I understand how I'll be financially compensated during the coming weeks

Any questions about your financial compensation?

Q3 I've been assured of my future employment with (COMPANY NAME)

Do you have any questions about your future employment with the company?

Q4 I have the communication tools I need to stay in touch with co-workers

Is there anything limiting your ability to communicate with co-workers?

Q5 I feel well supported despite these unsettling times

Is there anything we can do to help you feel more supported?

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Everything you need to start talking
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