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Notes on Change

NIST Employee Assistance Program

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Having experienced some traumatic changes these past two years, many of us are now faced with the prospect of returning to our campuses for the first time in a long time. That's good news. Nonetheless our return is a big change from the teleworking that most of us have become adjusted to. For some this change may bring a sense of anxiety and apprehension marked by uncertainty about what to expect, such as new safety protocols, hybrid working schedules, the possibility of contracting COVID from co-workers, and — for those hired during the pandemic — meeting co-workers in person for the first time.

Being mindful of the host of feelings experienced by everyone returning to campus — from excitement to apprehension — is important in facilitating a smooth transition to the newly structured world of work.

I also recommend that those coming back to campus recognize and pay tribute to those who have been working on campus throughout the pandemic and, in that way, demonstrating dedication to their jobs and NIST's mission.

We have not only experienced the impact of a pandemic for two whole years, but we bore witness to the killing of George Floyd, racial tensions and social unrest, and major climate disasters, not to mention the trauma inflicted on our colleagues in Boulder by a mass shooting and the devastating wildfire of Dec. 30, 2021. An indelible mark will be left on our psyche as a result of events outside of our control. While recognizing that the effects will be different for each of us, we will never forget.

The big picture of managing change

It is uncertain how people will respond upon their return to campus ... there is no crystal ball. What we can rely on are things we have learned in coping with the personal and professional upheaval brought on by the pandemic.

What seems evident is that the workplace will be different. What the pandemic has taught us is that working from home can be productive beyond expectation; because of that we may not see as many people on campus as we were used to. Restrictions such as masking may remain in place. The Gaithersburg-campus cafeteria (a place where many NISTers would congregate to informally chat or talk business) is no longer accessible and won't be for some time. Some may experience a sense of disorientation that things aren't what they used to be and are marked by new protocols and safety measures in an environment of uncertainty and apprehension. But as familiar faces appear and a sense of in-person community develops, a sense of reprieve may be experienced.

Business experts, organizational psychologists and other experts speak about what to expect upon return to the workplace. In his book *Managing Transitions*, organizational consultant William Bridges focuses on the following three psychological phases of adjusting to organizational change:

Letting Go (the initial shock of the change, marked by denial and mourning what was familiar);

The Neutral Zone (this period between the initial shock and a “new beginning” is commonly fraught with uncertainty); and

The New Beginning (settling into new protocols, policies and operations).

Bridges describes the Neutral Zone as a critical period that frequently includes learning new systems, adjusting to new protocols, relearning and refining skills (muscle memory), getting reacquainted with colleagues, and meeting new colleagues face to face for the first time. During this period, management needs to be attuned to the varying adjustment styles of employees.

Some recommendations

Be mindful. Most of us have been away from the workplace for more than two years, and adjustment is inevitable. Others of us have been on campus but working without the normal levels of interaction with colleagues. Following is a list of suggestions that facilitate a smoother transition to an optimally functioning organization.

Avoid moving too fast. After two years away from the office some of our skills (even social) may have atrophied somewhat, much like the muscles of an injured limb. Our social and technical memory will return. If you haven't ridden a bike in years, you most likely will be a bit wobbly when you mount up, but with a bit of patience and practice you will regain your skills. As we reorient ourselves to a familiar but new environment, grant grace to people to digest and process the change. Some may be a bit tender. Approach and encourage them with kindness, compassion and curiosity. Seek to understand and reconnect. These actions will go a long way toward creating a productive and safe workplace.

Value progress. Acknowledge and celebrate success as we reintegrate. Expect initial frustrations and impatience during this time. Offer perspective where needed. Incremental progress is the cornerstone of rebuilding and recovery.

Communicate, communicate, communicate, and communicate again. Communicate with consistency and transparency, because this is a time that can be fertile ground for rumors that can sabotage progress.

Be present. Take time to connect with staff individually and as a group. In most cases, people just want to be heard, seen and acknowledged. For human beings, it is a natural reflex to assemble as a community in times of crisis. During times of uncertainty, connections with others bring balance and increase resilience to stress.

Try to make someone's day by reaching out or checking in. Live by the motto “Be kind because everyone is fighting some kind of battle.”

Emphasize our shared goals and desires and recognize the roles we all play in making NIST the world-class organization it is.

Be kind to yourself first. It bears repeating: Put on your oxygen mask first before you assist someone else. This airplane cabin instruction illustrates the need for self-care during these challenging times.

Make time for laughter and humor. I can't stress this enough. The gift of humor is a salve for the soul and is one of the best ingredients for strengthening bonds with others, shifting perspectives and lessening tensions. Like kindness, humor is a social contagion that is worth spreading.

Take a break, breathe, stretch, get up and walk around, nurture yourself ... these things are rejuvenating.

It's all in our attitude. We choose and control our attitudes. Attitudes can be changed. Does your attitude lend itself to happiness and positive outcomes or does it lead to resentment, anger and bitterness?

Lastly, take time for gratitude. There have been close to 300 studies on the effects of gratitude as a mechanism for stress management and attitude change. Gratitude reminds us of the many good things in our life and work.

A silver lining of the pandemic?

Much has been made of the negative side of the pandemic and rightly so. But I have seen, read about, and experienced many "silver linings" that have shined bright in the midst of the darkness of chaos and tragedy. I would ask you to examine what your silver lining is. This in no way is designed to mitigate or ignore the personal and group devastation experienced by so many.

One such silver lining is the increasing recognition, acceptance, and promotion of the importance of mental health, which has significantly eroded the stigma against taking deliberate actions to promote one's mental health. According to the Harvard Business Review, in 2019 employers were just beginning to recognize the existence of mental health challenges in the workplace and were just beginning to recognize the need to address the stigma. In 2020 and 2021, awareness of mental health issues and encouragement to seek counseling or attend mental health workshops became more common than in years past. Mental health care allows for personal healing and reflection about what we have experienced and learned, how we can grow, who matters in our lives, where we want to go, and when to make our best decisions.

Another silver lining of the pandemic is that video conferencing tools have allowed face-to-face contact. These tools certainly helped mitigate the isolation, especially during the holidays and other milestone events.

I recall the early days of the pandemic when some medical experts suggested that the pandemic could go on for a year or so. My initial reaction was "How would we be able to do that?" The thought of being in lockdown mode for so long, isolated from family, friends, co-workers, and the world at large, was unfathomable. Over the ensuing two years, I have come to truly admire the moms and dads who have stepped up and met the massive challenge of managing work and families of all ages while working at home. They are a testament to the resiliency and resourcefulness of the human spirit.

Well, here we are, hopefully on the verge of settling into a workplace that used to be familiar to us. Stay tuned and aware. In the meantime, I wish all a safe, meaningful, and happy return to campus.

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