

Developing a Workplace Plan

Source: [Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#)

SUMMARY: A workplace plan includes specific solutions to past, current and potential work-related issues. The employee's involvement in the creation of a workplace plan can be the determining factor for the employee's commitment to the plan's success.

Engage the employee in developing solutions

Workplace plans can be used to address performance issues, develop an accommodation, support a return to work, or to help an employee stay at work. Creating a sustainable and successful workplace plan can begin with a conversation framed by 3 key questions:

- [How can I help you be successful at work?](#)
- [What will you do to ensure this workplace plan is successful for you?](#)
- [How will we deal with future issues in a way that is healthy for you?](#)

You can view a video simulation of this approach in [Managing Return to Work](#).

HOW CAN I HELP YOU BE SUCCESSFUL AT WORK?

Focus on getting at all of the issues that will affect the employee's ability to be productive, including:

- start time
- break times
- retraining needs
- reorientation and reintegration into the workplace, if appropriate
- gradual increase in hours and/or days worked if stamina is an issue
- tasks the employee is most confident about completing successfully
- changes or modifications to tasks
- changes or modifications to communication including instructions, directions and feedback
- attendance at meetings, offsite events or social events

WHAT WILL YOU DO TO ENSURE THIS WORKPLACE PLAN IS SUCCESSFUL FOR YOU?

Support the employee to take both control and responsibility for their own well-being at work. Encourage the employee to come up with ideas. Some employees have answered this question in the following ways:

- *I commit to taking my lunch rather than staying at my desk because I know it allows me to be more productive in the afternoon.*
- *I will not cry at my desk. I will briefly leave and compose myself and come back.*
- *I will write down instructions rather than ask for them several times.*
- *I will not speak in anger. I will wait until I feel calm before responding.*

HOW WILL WE DEAL WITH FUTURE ISSUES IN A WAY THAT IS HEALTHY FOR YOU?

This question is intended to identify how others can best interact with the employee in the following situations:

- **When they believe the employee may be unwell.**
Many supervisors or others may be uncomfortable approaching an employee when they feel the employee may be experiencing a mental health issue. The employee may just be having a bad day. Using an approach that the employee has provided in advance, can make it easier for both parties.

Example: An employee suggested the supervisor say, "*You do not seem yourself today. Are you okay?*"

The actual words are less important than the shared understanding that you are using them as directed by the employee to show your concern.

- **When the plan is not being implemented in the way it was agreed.**
There is usually a honeymoon period following the development of a workplace plan where everyone is trying their best for success. There will probably come a time when a challenge arises and having an agreed-upon process in writing on how to address this with the employee will make it much easier to deal with when or if it happens.

Example: A workplace plan included a bi-weekly 10-minute check-in with the supervisor to discuss how work was going. It was agreed in advance that either party could request a longer discussion if an item (work task or behaviour) was not being implemented as agreed. This helped to ensure that the 10-minute check-ins would not become hour-long sessions on a regular basis. It also provided an opportunity for both parties to review each section of the workplace plan to determine if everything was being carried out as agreed.

- **When there are performance management issues.**
Discussing how to give critical or corrective feedback with the employee before a problem or challenge arises, sets up a dynamic for a more positive outcome.

Example: An employee asked that all critical feedback be done in a private setting and

be accompanied by positive reinforcement. For more examples and information, see [Supportive Performance Management](#).

Set specific and measurable goals

- **Consider periodic reviews with employees to help create an objective measure of performance, assess workload, and set priorities.**

The [Productivity Review](#) form is a resource that you can use to address and follow up on a specific task where performance may be a concern.

[Supporting Employee Success](#) is a resource that you can use to discuss job expectations.

- **Ensure that goals are specific, measurable, time specific, and workplace-related.** Make the earliest goals attainable given the employee's current well-being. Add increments to allow for small victories, which are preferable to larger defeats.

Example: If the worker is in sales and falling far below standard targets, consider establishing targets that are reasonably higher than what the employee is currently achieving without immediately going to the standard.

- **Use these principles even when the goals are not task-related.**

Example: If an employee has had difficulty in managing their emotions in team meetings and has now offered to be more positive, you can help them make this goal more specific and measurable. This may include an agreement that any critical feedback is shared in private and that only positive feedback is shared in group settings.

- **Ensure you are able to assess the employee's success** against the established goals without room for misinterpretation.

- **Give positive reinforcement** or constructive feedback where warranted.

The importance of follow up when mental health is a factor

Addressing issues in the workplace can be challenging and emotionally draining. When you have a difficult conversation and believe that you have reached a resolution, the relief can be remarkable. At this point you may want to consider the matter closed. The reality, however, is that in most circumstances, things can slip again.

- **New problems can arise and old problems can resurface.** We no longer avoid speaking about relapse in treatment of addiction or many mental illnesses. Instead, we plan for the healthiest approach if relapse happens. This improves the chance that a relapse is only a temporary event rather than a roadblock to recovery. In the same way,

you should consider that the stressors of the workplace might still have an impact on the employee.

The communication problems that might have contributed to the problems may be made again, coping strategies may not be well developed, or skills may have gotten rusty. If you turn a blind eye until the situation once again reaches the crisis point, you risk making the original issue worse and reducing trust in the process.

- **Put it in writing.** One approach to reducing future problems is to have all communication in writing and agreed upon by the employee. In some cases, you may even want to engage the employee in helping to formulate the wording that will be used. This means that when reviewing the documentation at a later date, the employee is more likely to recognize the intent, as well as the plan.
- **Set regular times for follow up.** Another critical approach to reducing and resolving future problems is to set a time to follow up after any tough conversation, workplace plan, return-to-work plan, conflict resolution or accommodation. This allows you to monitor and adjust as necessary to help ensure sustainable success. The more complex the situation, the shorter the timeframe for follow-up should be. You should follow up within two weeks after implementation of the plan.
- **Regularly review agreed upon measurements for success.** Helping an employee develop these specific measurements during your original conversation means that when you do follow up, the outcome will be more easily evaluated. You may even want to consider asking, in the original conversation, what approach will be taken if success is not achieved. E.g. Will the strategy be reconsidered, will adjustments be made, or will it mean that the individual may require further help or treatment?
- **Prepare for challenges before they arise.** By having these conversations before challenges arise you are able to have a clear plan of action that can significantly reduce stress when it's time to act.

Adapted with permission from Resolving Workplace Issues (Baynton, 2011).

Sample workplace plan

The following workplace plan is provided courtesy of [Mindful Employer Canada](#).

To be most effective, the workplace plan should have everything in writing in the words of the employee. This is especially important so that at a later date or during follow-up the employee is better able to recognize the full intent of the plan they have agreed to.

Issue: This employee was intimidating other employees, and their volatile nature, combined with rumours of mental health concerns, were causing real fear among co-workers. The employee was quite surprised when told about the effect they were having on others. By being able to talk it through without any blame, the employee was able to develop a plan that addressed these issues. Note that this plan would not have worked if it was developed without the employee's direct input and commitment.

Sample Workplace Plan for John Doe*

Note to reader: It is important to understand that the employee came up with the language and the ideas in this plan. Some parts were discussed and refined if John's request was not practical, but his commitment to this process came, in large part, from his involvement in the development.

"Without Prejudice"

Request for Workplace Plan for John Doe*

To be shared with all managers, human resources personnel and supervisors in relevant work locations within The Organization. *[Note: This is to be transparent about who will see this document.]*

This document was developed in consultation with John Doe* on November 12 and is his request for a plan that he believes will contribute to his success at work. Also present was union representative, Joe Smith*.

This plan does not supersede any employee rights, including existing company policies, collective bargaining agreements or applicable legislation. It is developed in good faith that all parties will conform to the spirit and intent of finding a way to ensure well-being and productivity at work.

John has stated that he is aware of the need to "prove himself" to those who felt he were aggressive or intimidating in the workplace. He is committed to doing what is necessary to build trust.

To contribute to his success at work, John has requested the following:

- An understanding that while returning to fulltime work (7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.) beginning on Monday, November 21, there is a medically-advised request to reduce distractions and multi-tasking wherever possible.

- Also, where possible, to restrict work to one project at a time and allow for completion of one project before assigning another.
- To receive a project plan schedule for the next three months that provides a relatively stable agenda. There is an understanding that circumstances may require this to change, but that there will be an effort to stick to it for this time frame.
- Where possible, to limit travel to Monday through Friday for the first month.
- To have a weekly 15-minute "check-in" call with the supervisor so that John can go over the following:
 - current work
 - upcoming work
 - stressors, if any
- The supervisor will make the above call every Friday unless rescheduling is necessary. This call will not be performance management, but rather a way for John and the supervisor to stay connected and for the supervisor to be able to support John's success at work and clarify instructions for any work tasks. If there is another issue to address, a separate call or meeting can be set up.
- To show good faith towards this process, John withdraws all existing grievances and complaints.
- Constructive criticism should be offered in a timely manner (close to the time of the incident) and include the following:
 - Reference to a specific example rather than hearsay or vague comments.
 - A clear recommendation for alternative action.
 - Whenever relevant, positive feedback about work or behaviour that was positive.
- In order to assist with maintaining well-being, to take an extra hour at lunchtime, once or twice a week as needed to attend appointments.
 - This would happen only if it would not have a significant negative effect on any current work. In cases where it may, John will contact the manager at least 2 hours in advance of leaving on the days when he requires the time away for specific appointments.
 - The time used will be appointment leave and if or when that is used up, will be applied to personal leave.
 - Where work requires it, coming in early and leaving later on these days can also be arranged.
 - This will not apply when working away from the main work site.

- To be accommodated to leave early every other Friday at 3 p.m. in order to attend a standing appointment.
 - This will not apply when working away from the main work site.
- To attend Code of Conduct training as soon as possible to share in the understanding of the intent of the document and how it should affect John's work behaviour.
- In order to avoid confrontational or adversarial interactions with management, the human resources director is requested to assist if a situation arises where there is a significant disagreement, such as performance appraisal or harassment.

John will do the following to contribute to his success and well-being at work:

- When feeling frustrated or stressed out, John will step back and avoid confrontation by taking 5 to 10 minutes away or possibly leaving the area and applying the stress-reduction techniques he has learned.
 - The supervisor has requested from John a phone call rather than an email when this type of situation arises, in order to avoid misinterpretation of tone or intent.
- Will continue to live the healthy lifestyle he has begun and take steps to maintain and improve well-being.
- Taking breaks and lunch off rather than working through, and where it is helpful to recharge, to go out for a walk during break time.
- To strive to ensure that work is neat and tidy and always in compliance with the organization's standards. Where this is not the case, to accept constructive criticism and use this feedback as positive energy to improve for the next job.
- John has said: "I would like the opportunity to make amends to any manager or employee who has felt that I was being aggressive." He proposes the following:
 - In the boardroom with the supervisor or another manager present, but without union representation, to have a chance to speak one-on-one to those people who may have felt that he had been aggressive.
 - The individuals would be invited with the understanding that John has asked if he could share with them a way to move forward.
 - The individuals would be told that they are not required to say anything—it is only to listen. They are also invited to speak to the manager about it after the fact if they feel it would be helpful.
 - John will be saying something like: "I understand that my behaviours caused people to feel uncomfortable or attacked, and I apologize. I am working hard to change the way I interact with people, and I want to share with you a process if you ever feel that way with me. If I say or do something that you think is going too far, I ask that you:
 1. Point out to me what I am doing;

2. Tell me how it is affecting you or how you are feeling about it;
3. Tell me what you would prefer. I am committing to adjust what I am doing.
 - Even if I disagree with you, I will do what I need to do to not react emotionally. That might mean taking a few minutes or asking if we can talk about it again later.
 - If you still feel I am being too aggressive after you have asked me to change, then you should go to the supervisor and let him or her know.
 - I don't expect you to put up with bad behaviour from me. I am just asking you to give me an opportunity to prove that I have changed.

It is important that this process not become mediation, or even the other person telling John that he forgives or welcomes him back. It should only be a one-way communication, with the supervisor managing the process, to avoid getting into rehashing old wounds

To assist management in addressing future issues, John has shared that:

- Where there is a need to discuss something with John, he prefers to be approached one-on-one unless the issue is related to a disciplinary issue.
- In the case of disciplinary issues, a union steward should be present, but having more than one manager present can be overwhelming and intimidating.
- Where there is a need to speak about an issue the manager is encouraged to say, "Hey John, let's have a casual conversation about (a work task or a behaviour)."
- It is human nature to be defensive about criticism or judgment, but John is committed to respectfully listening to the feedback without becoming confrontational, aggressive, or verbally abusive and requests the same from management.
- John is aware that sometimes his voice or size may come across as confrontational when it is not his intention. If you feel that his behaviour is coming across this way, he has asked that you say, "Hey John, your (voice or stance, etc.) feels (intimidating or hostile). Could you do (describe a change in behaviour that would be perceived differently) instead?"
- John has asked that he not be treated with velvet gloves, but rather that open and honest communication about his work and his behaviours be part of a respectful and ongoing relationship with management.

The above document accurately describes my request for an effective work plan:

Dated:

John Doe
Employee of The Organization