



The Return-to-Work Discussion

This is not a script. It is a guideline to help you think about how to begin the discussion about return-to-work in a positive and constructive way. It is in addition to whatever accommodation directives you receive about your employee from medical professionals. It is intended to involve asking open-ended questions, following the lead of the employee, and working with them to anticipate what can assist in creating a successful return to work. By engaging the employee in creating solutions that allow them to be productive and well at work, you are much more likely to have their commitment to the process.

You may want to begin with something like this at least one day before your face-to-face meeting:

Our discussion will be about how we can make your return-to-work both healthy and successful. We will talk about what you need to be successful in your job. This can include anything in terms of work-related issues such as hours, tasks, environment, interactions with others, and equipment. We will look at a gradual return to full time duties over the next couple of months to allow you to get back up to speed in a good way. Next we will discuss what you will do for yourself to make this successful. This can include things that will help you be well at work. Finally, we will discuss how you would prefer to interact with others in the workplace in the future. This can include how your supervisor assigns work, how you interact with co-workers, how you prefer to receive feedback, etc. We can discuss any options at all. I will let you know if I do not have the authority or ability to do something, but even if you think it might be unreasonable, let's at least discuss it.

Your questions during the meeting will be based on your employee's lead, but might include questions such as:

(What is in parentheses are notes to you, the supervisor, not part of the question to the employee.)

How are you feeling about the return-to-work?

What are you looking forward to? *(Try to incorporate these things early in the return and try to maximize them where possible.)*

What do you think will present a challenge? *(What can you do about these to make them easier rather than just avoid them.)*

What was a challenge before you were off? *(Try to avoid any discussion, opinion, or judgment about this. Simply ask about what can be done to make these easier.)*

In what areas would you want further training? *(Consider what has changed or is new since they have been off as well as necessary upgrading. Do not assume and make sure they know retraining is common after absences.)*

How do you think others might perceive you here? *(Be careful with this question. Put it in when the employee has brought up the issue of co-workers. The purpose is for the employee to identify any issues and then you are to ask: "What would you like to do about that?" to get at solutions. It may be helpful here to ask "If others are willing to start fresh, are you able to do this as well?". You do not want to rehash who said or did what to whom. You want a way to move forward and leave it behind. This may involve a change in communication, an acknowledgement of*

hurt or a recognition that the behaviours were due to being unwell. Do not provide the answer. Ask the employee for it.)

How would you like to be reintroduced to the group? *(This could involve individual meetings, a group reintegration meeting or something less formal. Find out what the employee wants.)*

Have you thought about what you will say about your absence? *(This is where the employee has expressed anxiety about people asking why they have been off. You can help them come up with a response such as, "I had some medical problems, but I am doing much better now thanks." If pressed, they can say, "I would rather just get back to work and not have you feeling sorry for me, so I would prefer not to talk about it." or whatever the employee feels is appropriate.)*

What do you think will be the most stressful part of your work day? *(Again you are looking at working in solutions before the problem actually arises.)*

Where do you feel your strengths lie? *(It is important to help the employee remember their own value to the organization and to play up that as much as possible in the early days of the return. Sometimes, it is even possible to have the employee spend more time at what they are good at and less at those they feel are more of a challenge.)*

Which tasks give you energy? *(Just an alternate way to get at the same information about strengths.)*

Which tasks zap your energy? *(Just an alternate way to get at the same information about challenges.)*

Is there anything your supervisor can do differently in terms of how they communicate, give feedback or instructions? *(This can be tough if the employee does not really trust the supervisor. Try to assure them that the supervisor will be better able to manage if they have an understanding of how to do this in a helpful way.)*

Can you give me some direction about how to approach you if we become concerned that you are unwell again? *(Again, this can be tricky, but the information can be so valuable. Some employees will actually share the early signs of their illness with you. Others will provide you with the language or specific instructions on who to call or what to do. Clarify everything and make sure that the entire plan is written as the employee agrees it should be.)*

So much of this will depend on your comfort level and relationship with the employee.

The point is to open up a conversation that gets at the day-to-day interaction between the employee and yourself and the co-workers.

Understand what will allow them to stay well and be productive.

Make sure you leave the door open to come back and discuss this again later if need be.

Mental Health Works can help you by providing training in the process or providing a consultant to facilitate.