

Viewpoint: What to Do If Your Team Doesn't Want to Return to the Office

By Liz Kislik
January 27, 2021

Editor's Note: SHRM has partnered with Harvard Business Review (<https://hbr.org/>) to bring you relevant articles on key HR topics and strategies.

As the pandemic continues, there are growing tensions at organizations where employees who have been working from home are now expected to come into reopened offices. Many knowledge workers—who have happily shed their commutes, decreased their interaction with difficult colleagues and let go of other frustrations of the office—relish the freedom, flexibility, and the increased productivity of working from home. But some senior leaders, who may not have confidence in their own ability to manage remote workers (<https://hbr.org/2020/07/remote-managers-are-having-trust-issues>), aren't necessarily on the same page.

These leaders may be informed by anecdotal evidence that working from home is too distracting or doesn't support group creativity. And they may share the view of Reed Hastings, the co-CEO of Netflix, who described the inability to get together in person as a "pure negative."

As a manager, you may now be in a tough situation, especially if senior leaders at your company have started floating requirements for employees to return to the office ASAP, despite the rise in Covid-19 cases over the past few months. How can you support your team if your senior leadership team remains skeptical of work-from-home arrangements? Here are seven approaches to help you make an effective case and come to a reasonable set of accommodations that everyone can get behind.

Focus on what your leaders care about.

As long as the organization is following all government mandates for safety, whether or not employees have to come back to the office may be determined by your leaders' preferences. This may seem unfair to employees, especially those who are balancing family commitments or who have concerns about their health and safety. If your boss tends to lack sympathy for these individual needs and motivations (<https://hbr.org/2020/09/when-your-boss-doesnt-respect-your-family-commitments>), discussing personal issues, such as a team member's concern over exposing an elderly parent to the virus, may only trigger their defensiveness and dismissiveness. Instead, focus on what your leaders care about and find ways to show that remote work is beneficial to the company, such as retaining skilled employees who might otherwise have to leave to provide childcare, or because of their own health risks. You might also point out that virtual work has been a boon to recruiting talent that has been locally unavailable or hard to relocate.

Determine if their concerns are personal.

Sometimes leaders' negative feelings about one or two employees can cloud their judgment of the entire group. Ask if they have the same concerns about employees they like and approve of (<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/316931/build-trust-boost-productivity-within-remote-teams.aspx>). I used this technique successfully with a leader who believed that employees were "getting away with" the equivalent of playing hooky. Once I got her to articulate the specifics of which people she believed were taking advantage and which were not, we were able to focus on what we could do to improve the unsatisfactory performance of individuals rather than having her blame and disapprove of the entire team. And if there are employees who actually *are* taking advantage in some way, it's your responsibility as their manager, perhaps in conjunction with HR, to specify expectations and help them come back into line

Given the harsh realities of the pandemic, it may feel like it shouldn't be necessary for you or your team to make these accommodations to leaders' idiosyncrasies. And, in an ideal world, you wouldn't have to. Yet keeping senior leaders calm and happy is definitely part of managing up and maintaining good relationships. If your leadership is applying pressure for employees to come back to the office prematurely, and you believe there's a balance that could work better for everyone, applying some of these approaches may help ease the tension and bridge the gap.

Liz Kislik (https://hbr.org/search?term=liz%20kislik&search_type=search-all) is president of *Liz Kislik Associates* in Rockville Centre, N.Y., which helps organizations from the Fortune 500 to national nonprofits and family-run businesses solve their thorniest problems. She has taught at NYU and Hofstra University, and recently spoke at *TEDxBaylorSchool* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2I-AOBz69KU>).

This article is reprinted from Harvard Business Review with permission. ©2021. All rights reserved.

HR DAILY NEWSLETTER

News, trends and analysis, as well as breaking news alerts, to help HR professionals do their jobs better each business day.

Email Address

**CONTACT US (WWW.SHRM.ORG/ABOUT-SHRM/PAGES/CONTACT-US.ASPX) | 800.283.SHRM
(7476)**

© 2021 SHRM. All Rights Reserved

SHRM provides content as a service to its readers and members. It does not offer legal advice, and cannot guarantee the accuracy or suitability of its content for a particular purpose.

[Disclaimer \(www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/Terms-of-Use.aspx#Disclaimer\)](http://www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/Terms-of-Use.aspx#Disclaimer)