



Returning to the office:
Leading in the new normal

As our offices begin to re-open around the world, we are likely to see a new hybrid model of working – where some people return to the office and others continue to work from both home and the office (WorkSmart+) or for medical reasons work from home. In this new model of working, it's important that anyone with line management responsibility take the required actions to ensure that a full or partial transition back to the office is as fair, safe and considerate as possible.

This guide, which has been written for anyone with line management responsibility, provides a set of leadership recommendations to aid a full or partial return to the office. The guide has been split into three sections each with a set of suggested actions:

- Section 1 – 'Preparing to Return to the office' provides guidance on the actions you can take as we re-open our offices
- Section 2 – 'Returning to the Office' highlights the actions you can take to make a return to the office fair and safe for those choosing to do so and what you need to consider for those employees who may need to remain at home for health reasons
- Section 3 – 'Reviewing Working Practices' provides practical suggestions you can take to ensure that working in the 'new normal' remains as effective as possible

A list of links to additional resources can also be found at the end of this document.



Section 1:

Preparing to return to the office

During the preparation phase you should continue to connect with each of your team members on a regular basis and review relevant policies and procedures. As such, we would encourage you to:

Connect with your direct reports

Try to ensure that you are having regular one to ones with each member of your team. Encourage your people to speak freely regarding how they feel about a potential return to the office. Remember that each of your team are likely to be experiencing different emotions about returning. Some may be excited while others may be anxious or concerned. Some of our people could also have personal reasons for feeling anxious about returning right away e.g. child care challenges or even underlying health issues. You should focus on listening to concerns and demonstrating empathy throughout these conversations as well as providing reassurance and flexibility. For those that are able to return to the office you should establish when and how often they would like to return and ensure you follow local guidance around re-entry. For those that have to stay at home, you should agree when you'll review their situation together.

Familiarise yourself with the Work Smart + policy

The firm's flexible working policy has been updated ([International WorkSmart+ Guidelines](#)) in response to COVID-19. You should ensure you are fully aware of the updates to the policy and encourage your people to do the same. If someone applies for flexible working it's important that you give full consideration to the request and discuss and provide feedback to the individual as soon as possible. Your local HR representative can also provide support and guidance on this topic.

Ensure you are fully versed on new health & safety protocols and sources of support

It is critical that all leaders understand the safety protocols that have been established locally to keep our people safe. Provide regular updates to your team about the changes that have been made to their local office and what they can expect to see when returning (for instance one way systems or hand sanitiser stations etc.). Again, we would ask that you encourage your team to raise any concerns or questions that they might have and provide additional time for one to one discussion if required. In addition, ensure that you are fully aware of local sources of support (e.g. Employee Assistance Programmes, the firm's SPEAK Ambassadors, the Managing Your Mind series or local alternatives) so that you can point people in the direction of relevant assistance. A list of useful resources and links to relevant policies is provided at the end of this document.

Continuing to focus on your own wellbeing

Finally we would encourage all our leaders to continue to focus on their own wellbeing during this challenging time. Continuing to focus on physical and mental wellbeing as we begin to return to the office is as important as it has been during lockdown. The firm's [Managing Your Mind](#) programme is a useful source of information and can be found by following this link.

Section 2: Returning to the office

It's important to remember that even though our offices are opening up we are likely to be working in a hybrid model we've explained in section 1 so think we can lose this for some time. During this phase it's important that you lead by example and establish new working practices that are fair and inclusive. As such, you should:

Remain visible and act as a role model

During the return to the office it's critical that you act as a role model for new safety protocols. We know that our leaders are incredibly influential and have a significant role to play in helping our people establish new ways of working and new behaviours (e.g. maintaining social distancing etc.). We would ask that you remain both conscious of following new safety measures and vigilant when observing other people. If you observe someone either intentionally or unintentionally not following new safety protocols speak to that person immediately and remind them of the importance of doing so.

Inclusive leadership and reinforcing the values

During the return to the office we would encourage all our leaders to consider ways to demonstrate inclusive and compassionate leadership. Our [recently published guide on inclusive leadership](#) provides ten actionable tips and is highly applicable during the on-going pandemic and as we return to the office. We would also encourage you to actively consider your leadership style and practice compassionate leadership. Compassionate leaders demonstrate behaviours such as empathy, humility, vulnerability, skilful listening, curiosity and are non-judgemental. Demonstrating compassion at a time when many of our people are feeling anxious or have ongoing concerns regarding their loved ones is a fundamental leadership responsibility. While it may be uncomfortable and new to talk about feelings and emotions in the workplace, we would encourage you to invite your people to talk freely about their feelings free from the fear of judgement. In our current context listening and being willing to engage in conversation about emotions are critical facets of effective leadership.

Defining new working practices and the Mindful Business Charter

In the new hybrid model of work, it's vital that you re-establish working practices and norms that are fair irrespective of where people are working. You should ensure that all members of the team are actively included and that no one is disadvantaged or unintentionally made to feel excluded if they are working from home or another location. You may want to bring the whole team together virtually to discuss new ways of working that help everyone in the team stay connected wherever they are located. As a team, you may want to consider things like:

- Start and end times (being mindful not to disadvantage those travelling to the office or those managing childcare or other commitments)
- Continuing to run all meetings via Zoom or Skype irrespective of whether some people are in the office
- How often to catch up as a wider team and how often to run one to one meetings
- What practices people in your team want to establish to ensure they all feel included and supported
- How you can use the values to support new ways of working and interacting
- Whether practices that you introduced during lockdown should continue (e.g. virtual coffee mornings etc).
- How often you will review whether things are working well

As a leader you should also familiarise yourself with the Mindful Business Charter, which began as a collaboration between leading banks and law firms to drive change in the way people worked. As part of the firm's commitment to the health and wellbeing of our people, DLA Piper became a signatory of the charter 2019. The charter provides practical recommendations towards achieving a healthy workplace, and are incredibly useful when creating new ways of working within teams during and post COVID-19.

THE 4 PILLARS OF THE CHARTER INCLUDE:

- **Openness and respect** – Building trust and respectful communication.
- **Smart meetings and mailings** – Adhering to guidance provided in the charter.
- **Respecting rest periods** – Consideration given to the need to switch off.
- **Mindful delegation** – Implementing a best practice approach to collaboration, instruction and delegation.

We encourage you to familiarise yourself with the charter and its recommendations, which can be found [here](#), and use these when creating your teams new ways of working.

Allocating work

When allocating work you should ensure that everyone has equal opportunity and access to work, projects and assignments regardless of whether they are in the office or having to work from home. As a leader it is important to ensure that your teams are given the right opportunities to enable them to grow and develop.

When allocating work in a hybrid working model, it's even more important to always consider:

- Are you allocating work fairly among your team?
- How are you monitoring for equality and equity?
- Are you giving your team equal access to develop their skills and experience?
- How can you avoid giving the same individuals leading roles?
- Are you providing the same level of support irrespective of whether some of your team is in the office or working from another location?

Accessibility and one to one meetings

As our people begin to return to the office you should continue to be accessible to each member of your team irrespective of where they are located. We would

encourage you to consider diarising regular one to one meetings with each of your team as well as regular whole team catch ups. During one to ones, you should continue to check how your people are coping and encourage your team to talk freely about how they're feeling.

If people are willing to talk openly about their feelings then it's important that our leaders focus on creating psychological safety. Psychological safety is a term developed by Dr. Amy Edmonson, a professor at Harvard Business School, and in the workplace context refers to a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. In the current context it has never been more important to provide an environment that enables people to be open, authentic and bold without fear of penalty.

AS A LEADER YOU CAN HELP ESTABLISH PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY BY:

- **Providing the opportunity for everyone to have a voice** – Promote an environment where all ideas are welcomed and appreciated, where people are encouraged to talk about how they feel and where judgement is suspended.
- **Being open and transparent** – In the current environment there are likely to be frequent changes to protocol or expectations around social distancing. You should ensure you provide your team with context and open communication regarding any future changes. Involve the team in decision making that affects them, and provide reasons for decisions that have been made by leadership. Ensure that any changes to ways of working or regarding safety protocols are addressed quickly and openly.
- **Be curious** – Actively seek the opinion of all team members and be open to feedback, different viewpoints and ways of doing things. Seek to understand your team as individuals and promote a culture of learning and inquiry. Use this skill to understand what's working as we return to work and what might need to change.
- **Show care** – As a leader it's important to role model and welcome vulnerability without this being seen as weakness. Actively checking in with your team and openly demonstrating concern will provide an environment where people feel comfortable to share their thoughts, feelings and life circumstances. Leading with empathy and putting yourself in the shoes of others will foster greater cohesion and engagement from your team.

Section 3: Reviewing working practices

Following a return, or partial return to the office, you should regularly review new working practices to strengthen and celebrate those that are working well and to identify areas for improvement. As such, you should:

Invite feedback

Try to regularly seek feedback from the team regarding their experience of returning to the office or continuing to work from home. Inviting your people to discuss the following questions can be useful:

- What's working well?
- What needs to start/stop and continue?
- What has been your most significant personal learning since lockdown/return to the office?

Staying up to date on changes to guidance and communication

As a leader try to take responsibility for staying abreast of any changes to local guidance regarding safety protocols or working practices. You should also take adequate steps to brief your team as quickly as possible following any changes to local guidance.

Flexibility

Try to remain open to changes in your team's personal circumstances and provide flexibility where necessary. Leaders may find that individuals who were willing to come back to the office become anxious at a later date or those that wanted or needed to stay at home want to come back to the office. We would encourage all leaders to remain supportive if someone's personal situation changes and to practice empathy and compassion.

Celebrating success

Motivating people during the pandemic and our return to the office is paramount. As a leader you have a role to play in ensuring our people continue to be connected to the firm's purpose and vision and remain personally engaged. Identifying successes, however small, following our return to the office is one small way of maintaining motivation and a sense of personal belonging.

You may want to ask the team to consider how they might like to celebrate success and how to best do that in a hybrid model of work.



Resources and references

International WorkSmart+ Guidelines

Provides information and guidance on the firm's approach to flexible and remote working.

International Health and Wellbeing Guidelines

The firm's commitment and approach to maintaining the health and wellbeing of our people.

International Inclusion Guidelines

The firm's commitment and guidance for ensuring an inclusive and equitable experience for all of our people.

Managing your mind

Designed in collaboration with the Positive Group this series of short micromodules helps to boost tolerance of uncertainty and navigate some of the psychological challenges that occur throughout our lives. Each of the 5 modules provides insight and practical techniques to help us navigate emotion and build coping strategies.

Mindful Business Charter

As a signatory to the Mindful Business Charter, DLA Piper has committed to implementing the charter's recommendations to ensure a sustainable approach to creating a healthy workplace. The charter document can be found on [Fusion](#).

Taking Care of Others

As a leader, it's important to be able to spot the signs of someone who may need support, and be comfortable to open a conversation. Resources can be found on [Fusion](#) to support you to take care of others.

Taking Care of Yourself

Techniques and resources to help you build and maintain good mental health can be found on these [Fusion](#) pages.

SPEAK Ambassadors

SPEAK Ambassadors are trained volunteers who provide a first point of support and guidance for anyone experiencing mental wellbeing challenges.

MyCARE Programme

The firm's international Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) provides comprehensive expert support for whatever challenge an individual may be facing, 24 hours a day, every day of the year.

10 ways to lead more inclusively

A guide that provides practical tips for leaders to ensure they are providing an inclusive experience for all.
