

Viewpoint: How to Encourage Employees to Get Vaccinated

By Paul Falcone

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Ever since I wrote *101 Tough Conversations to Have with Employees* (HarperCollins Leadership, 2nd ed., 2019), I've been challenged at work to come up with verbal solutions to particularly thorny workplace issues.

I have to admit that the COVID-19 pandemic left me somewhat speechless on occasion over the past 18 months. But this newest challenge posed by the delta variant warrants addressing, for the sake of your employees and the safety of your workplace.

A Nation Divided

History will look back on the world's handling of this pandemic with a healthy dose of skepticism. In the U.S., it's no secret that, rather than uniting us around a common enemy, the pandemic has divided us and brought out the uglier side of society. Whether you feel the government, the media, our laws concerning privacy and anti-discrimination, or the scientific and medical community failed at any significant level, the truth is that the stakes are high and we're building this airplane as we're flying it.

With very few humans alive to recall the lessons from the last pandemic at the end of World War I, we're at a point of pure creation because we have so little precedent to fall back on. If you feel stuck or shy for words when staff members come to you to discuss the benefits of or their concerns about vaccinations, remember that it will take a combination of what you say and how you say it to keep your people focused on their health as well as the well-being of their families and co-workers.

The Empathetic Ear Approach

Regardless of where you stand relative to the soundness of medically recommended vaccines, personal freedoms or "fake news," the reality is, as a leader within your organization, others are listening to you.

"As such, you have a moral obligation to share wisdom and provide guidance that will lead to healthy outcomes," said Nina Fleiss, deputy director of human resources at The Simons Foundation in New York City. "As any good executive coach will tell you, your best bet will lie in listening with your eyes and heart in addition to your ears, truly hearing where your team members are coming from, and gently suggesting some alternative considerations for those who remain afraid to get the vaccine."

FEATURED RESOURCE HUB PAGE



COVID-19 Vaccination Resources

(www.shrm.org/hr-today/news/hr-news/Pages/COVID-19-Vaccination-Resources.aspx)

Feedback

People are frustrated for feeling guilty or shamed into getting a vaccination that they're truly afraid of or don't understand. Those who did get the vaccine may be angry at unvaccinated people for not doing their part to get the virus under control, blaming them for the newest round of variants that are wreaking havoc on our hospitals. Acknowledge the anger. Recognize the fear. Come from observation rather than judgment, and quiet the room.

"It's best to make space for people to share their concerns with you privately, and you'll ultimately have to respect their decision," Fleiss said. "See yourself as a mentor and coach helping people come to their own realization, even if it differs from yours."

As a general rule, the phenomenon in psychology called the "backfire effect" demonstrates that the more people are confronted with facts that compete with their personal opinions, the stronger they will cling to their opinions. So, overwhelming people with facts or insulting the news channel they watch likely won't get you far in making a compelling case for rethinking their vaccine hesitancy.

Criticizing others by blaming, shaming or guiltning them into doing something will only strengthen their resistance. Instead, make the following messages part of your one-on-one dialogue:

"I recognize how difficult this decision can be. There's so much conflicting news, from the subtle to the absurd, and it's fair to say that this whole pandemic emergency has been politicized beyond recognition. It's so disappointing that this massive virus didn't bring us all together rather than tear us apart, but we're reaching a point where we just want to make sure that everyone's making as informed a decision as possible, for themselves, their families and their co-workers.

"The delta variant, along with stiff resistance to the vaccine itself, is spreading more aggressively at this point. We don't know what future variants will threaten us, and we're all angry and tired of masking, social distancing and being told what to do. I don't want you to think that I'm trying to convince you to get vaccinated. I respect that it's a decision you alone can make. But my motivations are good: I want to ensure that our employees are making fully informed decisions because the risks are so high. Are you comfortable sharing your biggest concerns with me?"

At that point, expect to hear a full gamut of responses, from fear of government intrusion and control, to fear of foreign chemical injections, to the perceived "rush job" of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to get this vaccine to market, to distrust of pharmaceutical companies, to shadow websites showing tens of thousands of Americans dead from the vaccine itself, to insistence on personal freedoms.

According to Bill McClelland, human resource consultant and former senior vice president of human resources for Qualcomm in San Diego, "Now here's the important part: Go with it. Now is not the time to resist or counter unsubstantiated claims with 'facts.' A wise coach and mentor will lead an employee to a newfound realization, not force anything upon them. And then respect where they land after considering all the information."

Having empathy is always about validating the other person's perspective without resisting it or attempting to influence or overwhelm it. Make sure they feel heard and understood by countering their objections with statements like "I hear your initial concerns and can understand them. I get that you may sense that this feels like overreach on the government's part. It's not unreasonable that you might feel distrust toward pharma companies." But the story doesn't end there. McClelland recommends that you continue with:

"I care about how you feel and, at times like these, there can be strength in numbers as we come together to support one another and have each other's backs. Basically, you and I want the same thing—we just have to figure out how to get there. Obviously, I come more from the medical community side. I'm not only listening to the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, but I discussed this with my doctor, and she's 100 percent in favor of the vaccine. Right now, you may be feeling a bit more inclined to remain with your principles on this, and I get that. But I'd ask you to step away from the various media news streams and think about this more reflectively, speak with your family members about their concerns and fears, ask them about the sudden tidal wave of new cases and, most important, call your physician, especially if it's someone you trust. That will always be your best resource."

Consult a Trusted Doctor

When all is said and done, the vaccine will become the antidote to a pandemic that's limiting our freedom and threatening our future. But we're only going to get there collectively if we share wisdom, raise awareness and gently point employees to their best resource on the matter: the primary care physician.

Care and respect can melt cold hearts and all but heal the deepest scars. The momentum is changing quickly in favor of vaccinations, even on media channels that once fiercely resisted them. A gentle, respectful nudge of guidance may be all that is needed to move the national dialogue in a whole new direction—and it can happen one person at a time, starting with your own team members on your shop floor or in your office.

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