



An Empathetic Ear: Strategies for Employer Health and Wellness Negotiations

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By Stacey Lee, Jacobo Guzman, and Gladys Johnson

Amid federal and state vaccine mandates, labor shortages, and increased requests for remote work flexibility, employers find themselves in an evolving landscape with less latitude over their organization's workplace. As a result, employers and employees find themselves in conversations about crafting a "new normal" in which worker well-being is featured more prominently than before.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), well-being (<https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/initiatives/resource-center/case-studies/engage-employees-health-wellness.html>) is the ability of individuals to handle everyday stresses, work productively and realize their maximum potential. While advantageous to employees, the CDC



acknowledges (<https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/model/index.html>) that incorporating these features also benefits organizations by potentially lowering health care costs and absenteeism. The CDC suggests this can increase productivity, retention and improve workplace culture. The CDC stresses the shared model for the employer-employee benefit. There are benefits for both parties.

Despite the CDC's definition, there is not always a shared vision between employers and employees on applying wellness in the workplace. As a result, aligning these perspectives can be challenging.

Negotiations offer a tool to find common ground. However, unlike typical employer-employee negotiations over raises and bonuses, wellness negotiations, such as hybrid work arrangements, and increased support for mental and nutritional health, require a different mindset and strategy.

We provide a transformative framework that departs from interest-based negotiation principles and is well-suited for pandemic-era employer-employee negotiations. Our approach is designed around empathy and aligning party perspectives to develop long-lasting solutions that enhance the employee experience and produce quality outcomes through health and wellness protocols. Below we target our framework to prepare employers for these conversations:

Proactive Listening: Proactive Listening: The first stage is essential to perspective sharing. A vital aspect of the transformative negotiation process is for both sides to feel heard and validated. Therefore, employers encourage employees to explain their perspectives and needs through proactive listening techniques. This process will enable employers to ask questions, show empathy, and develop an appreciation for the employee's perspectives, beliefs, and needs.

Enlightened Response: After internalizing the employee's feedback, employers reflect on what they learned to better frame their perspective. Effective perspective sharing requires employers to be mindful of what they are saying and *how* they are saying it. In other words, as employers explain their thought process, which may include health and safety, legal, fiscal, and other considerations, empathy in the tone of delivery is imperative because it is an opportunity to align perspectives and shared feelings.

Aligned Perspective: At this stage of the negotiation, parties explore possible solutions. An employer's perspective of the employee's needs should have evolved because the employer better understands what is important to the employee. Ideally, the employee has internalized the employer's viewpoint and is more likely to understand and find a viable solution. The key components of an aligned perspective are to create a common view of the conversation, informed by a shared vision and empathetic listening.

Create: After the parties have shared their perspectives, employers should invite employees to collaborate on a new perspective. When both sides are engaged in the creation process, employees are inclined to take on an active role in developing a solution. This ownership makes them more invested and can produce a more responsive approach that addresses their unique concerns. In the new normal, employees expect to be heard, and employers are encouraged to lean into these types of conversations with an empathetic ear. ^

Execute: Once reaching an agreement, the parties need to be accountable for implementing and maintaining the new perspective that will shape the foundation of improving the organization's wellness culture. This model requires continuous discussion and constant monitoring to best address evolving needs to be sustainable.


Amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, employers and employees are focused on wellness. However, perspectives may differ on defining it and its role in the workplace. Our framework helps parties find equilibrium and focus on the important and delicate relationship between all parties and their representatives. This relationship and the trust built between groups are vital going forward. Through perspective sharing, conveying messages with an empathetic tone, and co-creating solutions, parties form a shared perspective grounded in mutual appreciation, which can facilitate a motivated and healthier workforce that benefits both the individual and the organization.


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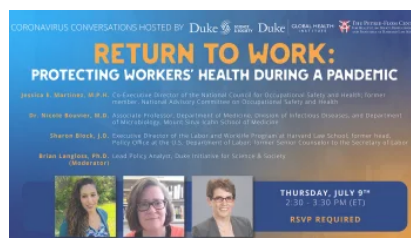
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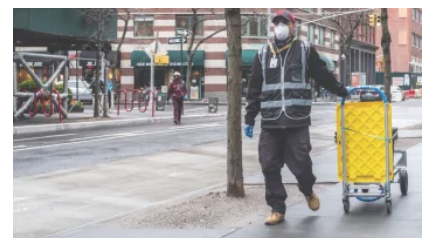
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