

How are you?

3 small words, 9 letters - even less with the 'how r u' version.

A throw away greeting – How are you? How you doing? How's it going? – that, prior to the covid-19 pandemic, we never expected people to respond to.

In fact, if someone had started to tell us about how dreadful their day was, we would have been somewhat surprised!

Covid-19 hits and it all changes, 'How are you?' suddenly takes on a new meaning. We ARE concerned about our friends and colleagues, about how they are doing, how they are feeling, how they are coping in these unbelievably unusual times.

Managers who themselves are feeling anxious - as you would expect in a crisis, who are feeling isolated and who are worried about their families and their future, are recognising that their people could well be feeling the same. They start to genuinely show their concern, asking their people how they are coping and demonstrating that they really do want to know the answer.

Mental health and well-being hit the organisational agenda – it is seen to be acceptable to struggle during an pandemic, when anxiety levels are high and people are coming to terms with a very different way of working, or worse, no work at all. But, of course, people don't just struggle in pandemics, we struggle for a myriad of reasons, and will continue to do so after Covid-19 has stopped holding our world to ransom.

And... we still need to keep asking, which can be tough when we, ourselves, might be finding that our emotional reserves are waning and our own resilience is low. So, it's good to remind ourselves of the positive impact that it had at the outset of lockdown, how appreciated it was and the significant effect it had on motivation and human connection.... and keep it going.

Three additional ways to demonstrate the care and concern that these 3 words can convey

1. Think about introducing a WFH buddy system. It doesn't always have to be the manager who asks the question. People may be more open when talking to peers on their level. Encourage people to choose rather than be assigned a buddy and get them to contract with each other what a 'how are you buddy' means in practice - once a week, once a day? Five or ten minutes each way of sharing of how they are feeling with a listening ear at the other end? Or a coffee break each day that replaces the water cooler conversations that we miss?
2. In team meetings, introduce empathetic enquiry rounds at least once a week. Note of warning though - do let people know it will be happening in advance, people who are not used to talking about their feelings need some warning! One person starts answering the question 'what 2 feelings are you experiencing right now?'



How are you?
Comment allez-vous?
Muli bwanji?
Como você está?
Jak się masz?
Hoe gaat het met je?
Sut wyt ti?
Habari gani?
Come stai?

The team member is given 2 minutes uninterrupted time to share their feelings. The next team member then responds, 'What I have heard you say is....' and briefly summarises back what they have heard. This continues until each team member has shared how they are feeling. The aim is to promote a sense of genuine understanding, support and acceptance and to make each person feel heard, without judgement. And it normalises the discussion of feelings, always a good thing in organisations.

3. Resolve to ask someone the question each day, making sure that your tone of voice and pace convey that this is a genuine enquiry. Then just hold the silence and listen. Avoid the temptation to suggest solutions. Only if it seems appropriate, ask 'And what needs to happen for you to feel better?'