

## Tips for Employers to Connect with Young Employees About COVID-19

The following tips came out of a [Whatcom COVID-19 Employer Support Task Force Forum](#) on July 30, 2020 called "How do we connect with young employees about COVID-19?" This was the fourth in a series of forums created to support businesses and organizations in Whatcom County. WWU Professor of Public Health, Steve Bennett, and business leaders Danielle Rosellison (Trail Blazin'), Bob Solomon (Nooksack Market Center), Trevor Smith (Laborers Local 292), and Janet Lightner (Boundary Bay Brewery) presented their strategies for talking with young employees about safety practices on the job, and the potential impacts of their social behavior on the workplace. For a recording of this forum and to learn about upcoming forums, visit [whatcomtogether.org/events](http://whatcomtogether.org/events).

This forum topic was chosen in response to a spike in COVID-19 cases among people ages 20-39. Young people would go to social gatherings and then go to work, not aware they had been exposed to the virus, thereby putting co-workers and their families at risk. The forum addressed ways to encourage young employees to take safety practices seriously at work and outside of work.

Trying to change people's behavior requires 3 things:

1. Opportunity – The environment allows the person to engage in the desired behaviors (e.g., face covering) without high costs (e.g., discomfort, stigma, embarrassment).
2. Ability – Person has the economic and psychological resources to behave in the desired ways.
3. Motivation – Person has the impetus to change behavior.

*Health is rarely an effective motivator for behavior change.*  
- Steve Bennett

### How to increase motivation to behave safely

Motivation is a big challenge for young people who believe they are not at risk for COVID-19 transmission and serious illness.

Presenters suggested emotional appeals to increase opportunity, ability, and motivation for young employees to change behavior:

- Aim for harm reduction. It is not realistic to expect 100% compliance with all safety practices all the time.
  - There are ways to socialize and be safe – pick your "COVID family" of friends wisely, be outside, wear a mask.
- Focus on the consequences in a person's life if they are exposed or infected with COVID-19:
  - Being out of work for at least two weeks, losing the normal routines that are psychologically helpful at this time, missing the social connections with co-workers, loss of income, creating stress for co-workers, etc.
  - Bringing the virus home to a pregnant partner or new baby.
  - "Nobody wants to kill grandma."
- Identify what is important in the young employee's life and show how helping to contain COVID-19 will benefit them.
  - Youth are bored and can't do the activities they want to do. Changing their behavior will help to slow the spread of the virus so they can do more of the activities they enjoy.

*We're not asking you to go to war.  
We are asking you to binge-watch Netflix and stay home.*  
- Danielle Rosellison

### The style of communication matters

- Leverage the unique employer-employee relationship to communicate information and expectations.
- Be authentic and honest in acknowledging that none of us really know what is going to happen with the pandemic. You are doing your best given the available information.
- Avoid shame and blame to encourage open communication about health, symptoms, and behaviors. Address stigma – anyone can be exposed to the virus at any time.
- Show compassion and empathy with how hard it is to wear a face covering, be distant from friends, miss social activities, etc.
- Communicate consistent, clear expectations and repeat them very frequently.
- Avoid political debates about COVID-19 and safety practices. Employees may choose to do what is required or choose to leave.

### Take safety practices seriously

- Convey that everyone's health is the #1 priority and emphasize the importance of safety practices.
- Build on the existing safety culture and practices.
- Provide training on basic COVID-19 safety practices – supply adequate personal protective equipment, display signage, require physical distancing, reduce in-person meetings, clean equipment after use, create small cohorts of employees for each shift to minimize the number of people interacting.
- Help employees distinguish between not working when sick and using COVID-19 as an excuse when they don't want to work.
  - Have employees complete a symptom screening questionnaire before each shift, including taking their temperature.
  - Have them identify potentially risky situations they have been in (e.g., travelling, being in large groups).
  - Encourage testing for COVID-19 if they have any symptoms or chance of exposure.
- Recognize that people get tired of doing all the safety practices and need reinforcement. "Complacency is a killer."