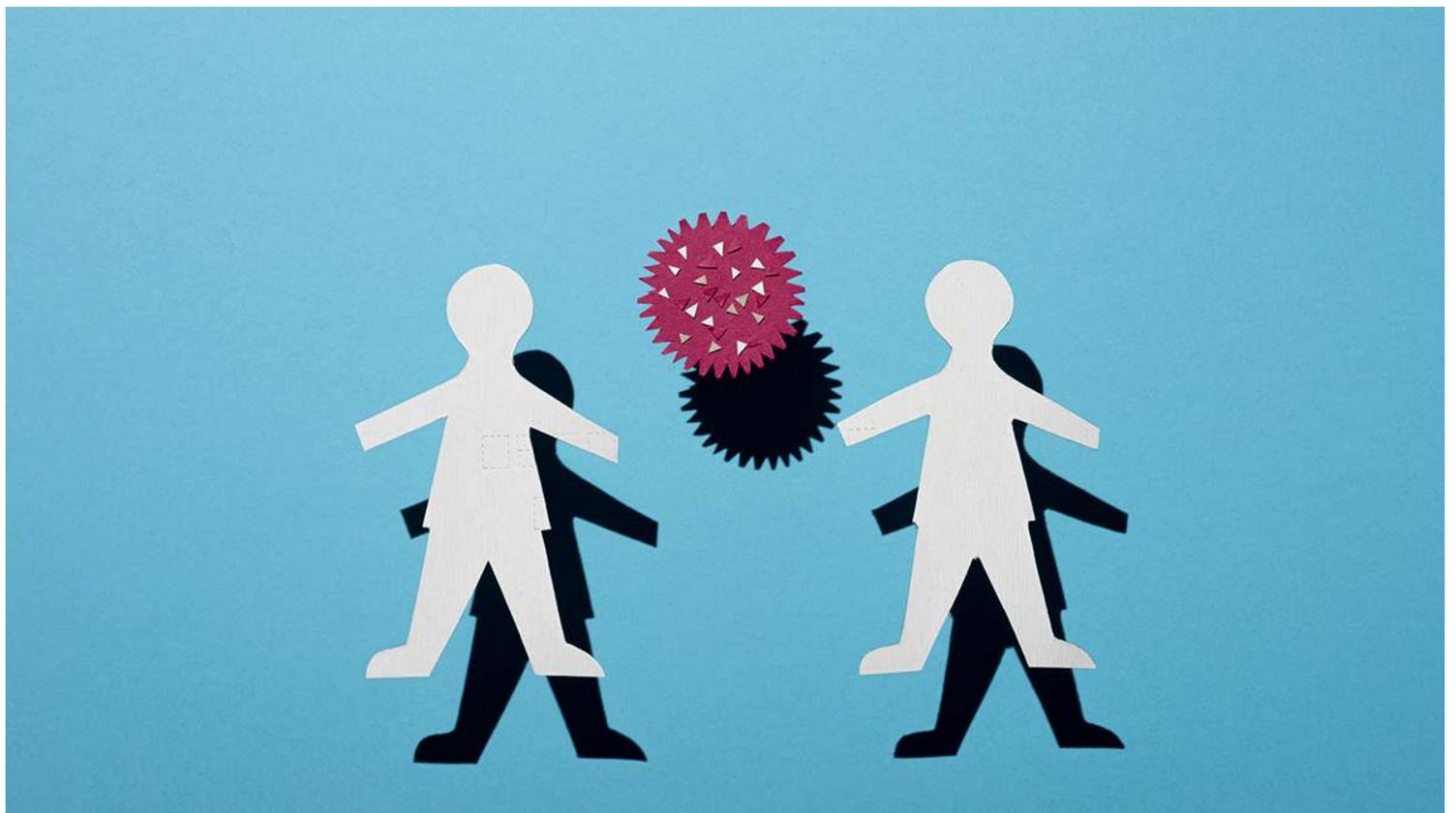


MANAGING PEOPLE

Your Employee Tested Positive for Covid-19. What Do You Do?

by [Alisa Cohn](#)

March 30, 2020



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All leaders are trying to find their footing right now. You are probably shoring up your business plan, situating your team, and juggling your own constellation of remote working arrangements — possibly alongside your spouse and children. On top of that, you will face a test you probably couldn't have imagined a few weeks ago: When one of your employees tells you they have tested positive for Covid-19. If you haven't dealt with that already, you almost certainly will.

This is a particularly complex challenge. Not only does the moment call for sensitivity and humanity, but it also requires you to act quickly as a manager. As an executive coach, I have coached many senior leaders on high-stakes topics that, like this, require both decisive action and emotional intelligence. Here are my recommendations for how to approach this situation, whether your employees are currently working from home or continuing to go into a workplace:

First, when the employee brings you the news, **express sympathy**. Even if the person's symptoms are mild, they are likely to be anxious about what might happen or whether they might have spread the virus to their family or coworkers. Let the employee share their feelings. As you talk with them, clearly communicate that they can count on you and the team to be supportive. You could say, for example: "I know that this is a scary thing to deal with. I am here for you if you need to talk, and certainly I understand that you may not be able to work for a little while or that your productivity may go down. Don't worry about that, I understand what you're dealing with."

Next, connect with your HR partner. **You need to act quickly to minimize the risk of the disease spreading**. At this point, most HR departments should have some protocols in place, and you will want to utilize their support and guidance.

Minimally, you will need to **ask the employee which coworkers they have been in “close contact” with** within the prior two weeks. (The CDC defines “close contact” as “a person that has been within six feet of the infected employee for a prolonged period of time.”) If everyone in your company has been working from home during the last two weeks, this may be unlikely, but you should still ask if the infected person had contact with any coworkers. You should alert those who have been in close contact with the employee as soon as possible, repeat the advice given on the CDC site for their situation and, of course, direct them to their own doctors. The law is clear about confidentiality here: You should tell everyone who was possibly exposed at work to the positive employee without revealing that employee’s identity.

Then, decide whether you or the HR partner should connect with any close contacts the employee has had. Since this is a sensitive topic, **it’s ideal to alert the coworkers by video or phone**. But time matters here — if you can’t reach them personally, email them with “important action required” in the subject heading.

Either way, **your message is the same**: “Someone in our workplace has tested positive for Covid-19, and they have identified you as a close contact according to the CDC definition. We are here to support you. If you are at work, please prepare to leave as quickly as you can. Once you get home — or if you are already working from there — find a place to self-isolate, monitor yourself for any symptoms, and talk to your doctors. How can I support you in doing all this?”

You can expect people in the close contact group to be nervous and ask a lot of questions, especially if it’s the first time they are receiving such news. Since several days have passed between their exposure to the Covid-positive colleague, they may

ask you if their family is at risk. Don't speculate. You are not a doctor, Instead, refer them to their own physician and to the CDC website. What you *can* do is reassure them that the company, and you, will be supportive.

Follow up this conversation by email. It's likely that the person you were talking to was feeling overwhelmed and did not catch everything you said. A written follow-up is always good practice, if only to help keep track of this process inside of your company.

Once you have spoken with both the employee who tested positive and their close contacts, consider alerting others in the workplace. The message you send here will showcase how your company treats people, so it's important to be transparent and calming.

The ways you communicate this can vary. If the company is a startup with a few hundred employees, it may be appropriate to communicate the news to everyone in an all-hands meeting. If your company is much larger, it's most important to communicate to the affected department or division. **Respect the confidentiality of both the positive-tested employee and anyone in the close-contact group.** Then simply give them the facts: "The person tested positive on a certain date and is now self-isolating. The close contacts have been told and were asked to leave the workplace and self-isolate. If you were not already told you were a close contact, then you are not one. If you have questions about Covid-19 or your situation please call your doctor and look at the CDC website. The company is here to support everyone during this difficult time, and we all send our best wishes to the people affected."

Finally, **it is helpful for a senior leader, including the CEO, to check in on an employee affected by the coronavirus.** In the past week, a CEO I coach has called every one of their employees who tested positive and their close contacts — even if they were showing no symptoms — just to check in, a gesture they universally appreciated. If the cases at your company start to increase dramatically, it will not be realistic for the CEO to call all these people. However senior leaders can and should step in to make as many calls as possible so employees who are affected feel cared for during a difficult time.

These are not easy times for anyone, and it is a crucial job of leaders to reassure their employees and keep up their spirits. An employee who reports a positive Covid-19 test requires a sensitive and rapid response. That will help everyone who works for you feel more secure and be more able to focus on the important work at your company right now.

Alisa Cohn is an executive coach who specializes in work with Fortune 500 companies and prominent startups, including Google, Microsoft, Foursquare, Venmo, and Etsy. Learn more at alisacohn.com.

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