



## LEADERSHIP TIPS:

# PREGNANCY+ TRANSITIONS

In the spring issue of VICDOC, I wrote about how leaders can support the transition to parenthood. In this edition, we focus on the specific skills leaders can develop to support doctors who are planning a pregnancy or juggling a pregnancy at work.

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of VICDOC*





Phases of pregnancy are physically, physiologically, & emotionally demanding. They are also short. Supporting people in these times is an investment in our workforce.

## WHAT DO WE KNOW?

We know that pregnancy and planning for pregnancy is a personal time, meaning that we can't necessarily have open and transparent conversations about what's going on. Many people can be guarded about their pregnancy early on.

We also know there can be stigma around pregnancy in a professional environment. For example, assumptions can be made that the pregnant person no longer prioritises their work or career, that they are uncommitted and less competent, compounding the problem of talking openly about pregnancy at work.

Phases of pregnancy are physically, physiologically, and emotionally demanding, and this takes a toll on our energy levels and resources. Time and rest can therefore be required suddenly by the pregnant person, without the ability to share the reasons why.

Further, planning a pregnancy and the pregnancy itself has uncertain timelines. There is uncertainty about when a pregnancy will begin, if it runs to term, and the exact nature of how parents will take parental leave and manage caring for their baby.

## HOW CAN LEADERS SUPPORT PREGNANCY AT WORK?

Strong leaders understand the importance of building strong and sustainable workforces, and retaining talent and experience, and they plan to accommodate the changing needs of their staff.

Leaders can use their knowledge of possible and likely challenges pregnancies face in the work environment and use workforce design skills and interpersonal communication skills to support change, flexibility, and sensitivity.





*Leaders need to view their team members as people – with lives beyond work.*

## LEADERS CAN:

### 1/ REFLECT ON HOW WE WORK WITH UNCERTAINTY & CHANGE

In a robust and healthy workforce, employees feel that their workplace can accommodate short term changes and modifications to support employee needs. For example, if someone needed to suddenly attend early medical appointments, or was for a time unable to work on the COVID ward, that this could be talked about without fear of negative consequences.

#### *Leadership skill*

Practice a change-ready mindset; talk about how 'we' (as a team) can adapt to new situations and be flexible and agile to meet change and uncertainty. COVID has been a great teacher in this area – we can learn from recent experiences of adaptation to meet changing scenarios and predictions. This will help with workforce engagement – earning commitment and dedication, and support learning and growth. When employees feel valued and feel that leaders are looking out for them and their future, they too can also plan for the medium and long term and feel that it's worthwhile to invest in growth and development. While parents-to-be may not be willing to talk openly about the challenges of pregnancy, they can see that their workplace can handle additional demands, and that needing changes is not a major risk to their job.

### 2/ BUILD SOLID AND COMPETENT TEAMS WITH CLEAR ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Clear team structure and roles support workforce planning. It helps with selection and recruitment, with professional development, and creates muscle for team-level flexibility to accommodate changes in responsibilities and duties. Workplaces have many types of flexibility and need for short-term leave (e.g., study leave, conference leave, long service, carer's leave for partners, families, aging parents, sick leave, family holidays). Sometimes there may be also a need to accommodate leave for pregnancy requirements.

#### *Leadership skill*

Ensure you have an accurate map or plan of your team, department, or area. Who is working in your area? What is their role? What responsibilities are attached to this role? Are there duties or roles that aren't covered or accounted for? Who is showing talent and engagement in particular roles or tasks? When and if people leave or move into another role – who is in the pipeline or succession plan? Many senior leaders are working on the strategic planning that supports well designed collaborative teams that can deliver a robust and sustainable service. This strategic thinking and planning means leaders have strong knowledge of their workforce and can organise cover for roles in a productive way.



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### **3/ IMPROVE YOUR ABILITY TO HAVE PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS AROUND PERSONAL & PRIVATE MATTERS**

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Leaders need to view their team members as people – with lives beyond work. In early career, cementing technical expertise and training requirements likely coincides with forming intimate relationships, friendships, and professional networks. The mid-career phase often includes starting and raising a family. Later it's aging parents and perhaps one's own changing health and lifestyle needs. When leaders can hold all of this in mind and include it in their planning for the present and future, workforces can grow and thrive, as long term investment in good people make the short term 'work arounds' more than worth it.

#### ***Leadership skills***

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Develop a holistic perspective your own career and have the self-knowledge and awareness to reflect on your own experience of juggling the personal and professional. While not every leader has been pregnant or raised a family, everyone has times in their lives, and personal or private challenges, that go better when their workplace can support them. This awareness also helps us manage any assumptions or bias that could influence our thinking and judgement, supporting us to be open to listening and understanding what a team member might need to support their current role or career progression.

### **SUMMARY**

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Leaders need to nurture and develop healthy and sustainable workforces. Many of the skills leaders bring to this task are their interpersonal and team communication skills. Remember that the conversations you have to support pregnancies are not about pregnancy per se – they are about work, and how we organise ourselves and our resources to work the best we can together and deliver the best healthcare service we can.

Personal life events and transitions – like a pregnancy – can bring challenges to this; challenges because they can arrive suddenly and involve an individual who may need their responsibility or time commitments changed. But this is life. The work of leadership is to support healthy and sustainable workforces around this.



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