



ADDRESSING VACCINE HESITANCY

TIPS ON FRAMING EFFECTIVE RESPONSES

People may be hesitant about getting Covid-19 vaccines for a variety of reasons. These include personal experience, misunderstanding, and misinformation. Confusion is also common. We've seen an overwhelming amount of information that sometimes conflicts and changes. What people say they worry about may not even be the real source of their concern.

Responding effectively first requires listening closely. And it's not always a matter of what you say in terms of "the facts," but how you say it that can make a difference.

Here are some tips that may help you frame your responses to ease concerns, create trust and build confidence in vaccination. These are based on real-life conversations that supervisors have had with employees and insights from social science research.

WHAT
YOU
MIGHT
HEAR



"The vaccines were rushed through approval and might not be safe."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You can reassure people that no steps were skipped in testing. All three vaccines approved for emergency use were tested in rigorous clinical trials on tens of thousands of volunteers. In August 2021, the FDA granted full approval to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine based on further data; the others are expected to be fully approved shortly. The trials also included the largest proportion of people of color to date. People who are Black, Latinx/Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, and other/mixed race accounted for between one-quarter and one-third of participants in the U.S. clinical trials. People over 65, and people with pre-existing conditions and disabilities were also included in large numbers. All the vaccines were tested on at least three continents. Highlighting the diversity of people involved in clinical testing could help calm fears that "people like me" might react badly to the vaccine.

People with these concerns may respond better to hearing about safety from a medical professional than from an employer. Consider bringing in medical professionals to speak with your employees and answer their questions. If that isn't possible, share information on vaccine safety from reliable sources. Don't feel like you need to become an expert in vaccine approval processes and safety data.

WHAT
YOU
MIGHT
HEAR



“I’ve heard the side effects are really bad.”

WHAT YOU CAN SAY/DO

Speak honestly from your own experience, and ask others in your organization to do the same. Personal stories carry heavy weight. Use words like “sore,” “crummy,” or “tired,” rather than “really bad” or “just awful.” Consider adding the reminder that sore arms, mild fevers and body aches are signs that the vaccine is working to activate your immune system.

As an organization, you can consider offering additional paid time off for vaccination. You could also arrange flexible shifts and hours for people getting vaccinated. Many states and organizations have set aside extra Covid-19-related sick leave time for employees. They may use 1-2 days of paid leave after vaccination without tapping into their existing pool of sick or PTO time. You can also extend paid leave time to hourly workers. When announcing this policy, be sure to frame your reasoning appropriately. You might say, “Since some people experience mild side effects after getting vaccinated, any employee...

WHAT
YOU
MIGHT
HEAR



“I don’t have half a day to spend driving and waiting for a vaccine.”

WHAT YOU CAN SAY/DO

Help employees who are open to vaccination overcome barriers to access. This is a low-risk, high-reward way to help increase vaccination rates at your workplace. You could dedicate an employee to tracking open vaccination appointments, helping people sign up, sending reminders, and arranging free transportation. You might also consider making free vaccination available on site during work hours. Keep in mind the implications for your workforce if many people call in sick 1-2 days after vaccination.

WHAT
YOU
MIGHT
HEAR

**“I had Covid-19 last year, so I’m immune. I don’t need the vaccine.” OR
“I haven’t gotten Covid yet. I have a super-immune system,
so I don’t think I need the vaccine.”**

WHAT YOU CAN SAY/DO

The real issue here might be that people don’t want to get vaccinated and are justifying why. Alternatively, they may not understand that having had Covid-19 doesn’t give you continuing immunity. They may not recognize that people of all ages are vulnerable and there is no way to predict whether you will get a mild or a severe case. You might compare the vaccination to an insurance policy; it can protect you from risks that could be serious.

WHAT
YOU
MIGHT
HEAR

**“People like me are always last in line, and we’ll probably get a
vaccine that doesn’t work that well.”**

WHAT YOU CAN SAY/DO

That is probably a sign that someone has experienced difficult access to or inequities in health care. Acknowledge that there is a lot of inequality in our health-care system. The good news is that all the vaccines have been proven to work well across people of different ages, races, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds. Every vaccine tested has been 100% effective at preventing death from Covid-19 infection. The U.S. is committed to getting everyone vaccinated as quickly as possible, and has made vaccines free to ensure that no one is left out.

WHAT
YOU
MIGHT
HEAR

“I don’t need the government telling me what to put in my body.”

WHAT YOU CAN SAY/DO

There is probably little you can say to change their mind, whether they are questioning the role of government or the safety of chemicals or both. Acknowledge their concern and reinforce that the decision is their own. At most, you can try to help them understand the risk of not being vaccinated: “Even people who are young and healthy have died and others continue to experience long-term effects.” You could also be transparent about your own decision: “For me, I decided that getting Covid-19 could be far worse than any side effects...”

WHAT
YOU
MIGHT
HEAR



If I get Covid-19, it was meant to be.

WHAT YOU CAN SAY/DO

Acknowledge that in the early days of the Covid pandemic, it often felt like we had little control or clear information. Gradually, we began to learn more about things we could do to keep ourselves and our families safe. Point out that we now have vaccines that are safe, effective and free so we can take control of our choices.

WHAT
YOU
MIGHT
HEAR



I was told that I shouldn't have a vaccine because I have a sensitive immune system.

WHAT YOU CAN SAY/DO

Vague statements like this are unlikely to have come from a medical professional familiar with their situation. They may also reflect personal health information that you don't have access to (and should not ask about). Don't question their medical history or understanding of facts. Explain that "The national vaccine experts have updated a lot of their recommendations in the last few months so it's very wise to talk to your doctor again."

WHAT
YOU
MIGHT
HEAR



I don't like putting non-natural things in my body. I don't even take painkillers.

WHAT YOU CAN SAY/DO

A statement like this probably reflects a deeply held worldview – one that you are unlikely to change. What you can say is, "My understanding is that the vaccine just helps your body do what it would do naturally if you were actually infected. The vaccine trains your immune system to do what it does best without you having to go through an actual infection."

WHAT
YOU
MIGHT
NOT
HEAR



You may not hear the real reasons that people are reluctant to get vaccinated, and the reasons they offer you may seem easily dismissed with data. But don't be too fast to dismiss them.

Many people have deep-seated emotional reactions to the idea of vaccination. These can be hard to put into words. Sometimes people feel embarrassed to say that they don't have a good reason for not getting vaccinated. Perhaps they just feel icky or scared about it. These feelings are real and valid, and will not go away in the face of data.

WHAT
YOU
CAN
ALWAYS
SAY



The experience of simply being heard and treated with respect can help open minds and possibilities. This is especially true if the source of concern is emotional. You can use phrases like, "I hear you. Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me," or "I think I understand where you're coming from."

Then pivot to shared experience: "Covid has been hard for all of us to figure out."

Then shift to optimism as a way to open the door to new ideas and information. This allows the person to "save face" by confirming that we haven't always had all the information we need: "Luckily, so much is becoming clearer now about the Covid vaccines and just how safe and effective they are."

State your values, note your shared responsibility, and emphasize personal choice: "We really care about the health and safety of our employees and the people we serve. Part of my job in keeping our people safe is making sure you have all the information you need to make the right decision for you."

End with an action plan: "I will follow up with the latest information on [person's concern or question]. I'll let you know when our next information session with a doctor will take place."