

Internal communications in uncertain times

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Effective communication is always important, but in times of upheaval it becomes critical. Two HR experts explain the importance of connecting with employees on a human level.

In one sense, the events of the past few months have dramatically transformed the way organisations manage internal communication. Social distancing has meant that, for a period at least, "we're not always sitting in the same room", says HR expert Karen Gately, founder of [Corporate Dojo](#).

In another sense, the principles of effective communication remain unchanged. Clarity and consistency remain essential, says Mark LeBusque, founder and director of **The Human Manager**. He says employers should make messaging clear, so that employees aren't left confused. "Sometimes we overuse acronyms and jargon, and people can't understand what's being said."

If you are doing daily or weekly employee briefings, stick to the schedule and notify staff if it changes. "If we break the chain of the consistency of communication, human beings will wonder what's happening and why they're not getting kept up-to-date," he says.

In the absence of regular information, LeBusque says humans are programmed to fill the gaps in their knowledge. "If I can't make sense of something, my hardwiring will tell me to try and seek information from others, and if I can't make sense there, I'll start to make stuff up, which is how we end up with gossip."

Timeliness is paramount, even if you don't have all the answers. "Communicate early and often," writes Paul A. Argenti in the article "**Communicating Through the Coronavirus Crisis**", published in *Harvard Business Review*. "Even if you're still trying to understand the extent of the problem, be honest and open to maintain credibility."

Managing strong emotions

For many, 2020 has been "a time of heightened anxiety and emotion", Gately says. It is critical for employers and managers to understand "the landscape of fear that people are working through... so that we can start to put people's minds at ease".

Astute communication can help alleviate this anxiety, and the first step is listening. "Start with empathy," Gately says. Ask the members of your team how they are feeling and what their preferred working approaches are. Focus on **wellbeing and personal connection**, not just updates about logistics.

People returning to work after **social isolation** want to know what the new normal will be and how their employer plans to keep them safe, says Gately. "People need to feel like their opinions have been heard... and that logical, sensible decisions have been made."

“At a fundamental level, effective communication is a dialogue that provides clarity, improves decision-making and fosters consistent progress.” Karen Gately, Corporate Dojo

Gately suggests employers adopt "a tailored approach" to communication that takes into account the individual and their specific circumstances. "Ask, 'What steps can I take to provide the insight, comfort, and support that's needed?'. "

"It is not just about painting a rosy picture for people – sometimes it is also about how and when to give the tough love that is going to be necessary."

It's best to be truthful, advises LeBusque. That might sound strange, he says, but "at times, we water down the message when it's going to be bad news".

When Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky laid off 1900 people in May, he delivered the news with honesty. In a lengthy message to the travel giant's 7500 employees, Chesky explained the how, the what, the why and the when of the decision, finishing with a heartfelt message for those departing the company: "I have a deep feeling of love for all of you," he wrote. "I am truly sorry. Please know this is not your fault."

This is an incredibly "human" response from a CEO at a crucial time, says Le Busque.

Communication toolbox

It is a mistake "to think we can send out emails and people will engage with them", says Gately. Instead, employers should leverage technology such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams to have face-to-face conversations with staff.

That doesn't mean replicating in-office communication. When a team is **working remotely**, instead of the usual weekly hour-long meeting, it may work better being held every second day for 20 minutes via video call.

The criticisms levelled against the bloated meeting culture apply equally to video calls. We don't want to feel like we're stuck on Zoom all the time, observes Gately. "If people don't need to be involved in a call, don't hook them in." Nor do you need to allocate the default hour to each video call. "Spend shorter, sharper periods of time doing more purposeful things."

Seize the chance

As we return to “**business unusual**” after the period of upheaval brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations have an opportunity to hit the refresh button.

Managers face a critical choice, says LeBusque. “You have a one-time pass now to change the way work is done and to change the lives of those in your care.”

The pandemic has exposed a lot of “outdated beliefs” around communication, says Gately.

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“What COVID-19 has shown us is that we don’t have to be in the same room to do that well,” she says. “It’s shown us that we haven’t even begun to use the technology available to us to its full potential.”

Gately hopes that employers will now be more willing to accommodate **employees’ requests for flexibility**. “If we are wise as leaders, we’ll start to redefine the way people need to work to be at their best.”