

**Communicating Through the Coronavirus Crisis and Leadership Requirements**

These are unquestionably extraordinary times requiring extraordinary thinking. In these type of fast-moving and uncertain situations, many leaders will face questions they don’t have answers for. History would suggest that in these times leaders need to communicate early and often with employees, customers, shareholders, vendors and the community throughout an event such as this pandemic. Transparency and frequency of communications is key. In the absence of this… fear, speculation and false information can quickly take hold and spread at lightning speed and cause considerable damage. Even if you’re still trying to understand the extent of the problem, be honest and open in telling people this to maintain credibility. As a leader you are not expected to have every single answer to every question. Approach the situation with empathy. Put yourself in other’s shoes to understand their anxiety. You will hopefully get it right, and you will also sometimes get it wrong, but it is still better to be [as transparent as you can](https://hbr.org/2020/03/dont-hide-bad-news-in-times-of-crisis). This is not the time for off hand speculation, blame or second guessing.

**Step 1: Create a Team for Centralized Communication**

Decentralized communication often is the norm in large, complex organizations. However, in our current pandemic situation, a crisis-response team is required.

These teams should be small, four to six/seven people. In larger organizations, ideally, you need to include a member of the leadership team, someone from corporate communications, an HR executive, and an expert in the area of concern. Smaller organizations may have the owner, a few managers and also a shop floor employee and an HR representative if there is one. This team should:

1. Meet regularly to monitor the situation closely as it continues to evolve.
2. Be the main source of information about the crisis.
3. Give regular updates to all parties concerned.
4. Be as transparent as possible. Explain what you know, what you don’t know, and your sources of information. Try not to speculate or even worse unknowingly create more anxiety.
5. Be clear in your communications and to the point. Long legal type or corporate sounding messages will not work in these times. People don’t want that. Understand people see their livelihood and their survival at stake. Under stress, remember people will behave quite differently.

**Step 2: Communicate with Employees**

Employees are your most important asset here and function as representatives to the community. If they aren’t informed and don’t understand what is going on, communications outside of the organization will also suffer. The company needs to clarify as much as possible the situation for employees, and hopefully put everyone’s mind at ease in terms of hope for the future. Many employees will be looking for some sign of assurance that things are being managed the best they can and that there is some hope for the future.

Leaders have a special very meaningful role in reducing employee anxiety. Employees want to hear the voice of the leader, whether live or by email, phone messages, or social media. A good example if the new power political leaders often have in these times by being the conduit of very important information.

To communicate with employees, organizations should:

1. Post information regularly in a highly visible location. This can be a physical location or virtual — email, the company intranet, or social media.
2. Describe how decisions were made about issues such as paid time off, travel, [working from home](https://hbr.org/2020/02/whats-your-companys-emergency-remote-work-plan), etc.
3. **Be proactive.** Anticipate needs and questions that might come up and make a plan. Communicate that plan clearly and consistently.
4. Communicate no less than every other day.
5. It is better to provide timely information rather than waiting until you have all of the answers.

**Step 3: Communicate Regularly with Customers**

Customers require a different approach than employees because companies do not have the same access or frequency of communications with customers. You should:

1. Focus on what is important to the customer. For example,  [a note from the business leader or CEO](https://corporate.target.com/article/2020/03/target-coronavirus-update) to customers, describing new cleaning procedures and other actions that are in relation to customers health and safety in continuing to purchase are being implemented.
2. Provide relief when possible. Offer some type of financial relief if you can in the form of waived fees, extended terms, etc. for pandemic related issues.
3. Focus on empathy rather than trying to create selling opportunities. Companies should rethink advertising and promotion strategies to be more in line with the current environment. Failure to do this is often seen in a very negative light.

**Step 4: Reassure Shareholders**

The pandemic has created intense volatility in the financial markets. Publicly listed companies have a special responsibility to communicate the impact of the COVID-19 on their operations.

1. Be very transparent in communicating near-term challenges.
2. Use the crisis as an opportunity to reinforce the corporation’s long-term fundamentals and mission/vision/values.
3. Communicate clearly what you are doing about the problem.

**Step 5: Be Proactive with Communities**

What happens within organizations around the coronavirus affects everyone in the communities around them. At the very least organizations should do their best to make sure their actions do not negatively affect members of the community, but you can also think about a crisis as a time to enhance relationships with the local communities in which you operate by:

1. Providing resources such as cleaning supplies or food for those in quarantine.
2. Providing information to the local media to help to calm the communities down and while also enhancing your organization’s credibility.
3. Providing transparency about what is happening within the company.

When dealing with uncertainty, leaders need to look at communication from the perspective of your audience and have empathy for them rather than fear of doing the wrong thing. This requires companies to communicate when they don’t have all of the information, to reveal as much as they can about sensitive information, and to be vigilant about correcting mistakes without worrying about the repercussions.

In summary, be empathetic, transparent and communicate to employees at least every other day.

New documents are posted to the website to help employers with this COVID-19 pandemic and are provided at no cost to everyoneone and can be found on the home page clearly marked COVID-19 Information.