

Communication & Leadership

DURING

Times of Crisis

On Sunday, I took my son to the playground, and we climbed the jungle gym. By Wednesday, that same playground was blocked off by police tape to prevent crowds from gathering. When my son asked why we could go Sunday and not Wednesday, my response was, "Because that was three days ago." Three days. That's the speed at which everything is changing. The speed with which what was once normal has become untouchable. This is the speed at which even the most basic of activities becomes an imminent threat.

While some have been monitoring the threat of COVID-19 for a while, for many, the gravity of the situation seemed to spike incredibly quickly, turning our world upside down. Leaders in government, healthcare, and business are scrambling to deal with an unprecedented situation. They are being pressed to make decisions and communicate with speed in the absence of complete information and against a backdrop of chaos and anxiety. Employees are looking to their leaders to be a steady presence during a time of chaos. How can leaders communicate competence while maintaining the human element of connection?

COMPETENCE

Be a steady force during times that feel chaotic.

This can be hard for leaders who are also dealing with their own emotions and personal challenges. But part of the job of a leader is to be the steady hand that helps guide others.

Demonstrating competence in your messaging means communicating with:



CLARITY

Be as transparent as possible. If there is information that you don't have, state that simply and plainly. Individuals will be able to discern when you are not being forthcoming, and that inconsistency will erode their trust in you more than a fancy lie will soothe them. Be clear on what you need your people to do – articulating what you want them to focus on and what they might need to reprioritize will help them feel secure that you know what needs to get done.



URGENCY

Get messages to your employees, your partners, and your clients quickly. You may not have all the information you want. You may not have made every necessary decision. But communicating early and often about what you know and what actions you *have* taken helps people avoid catastrophizing while you are silent. Share as much as you can, as soon as you can. Long gaps of silence and information dressed up as something other than the truth are more harmful than beneficial.



CONFIDENCE

Communicate with confidence by being clear and decisive. Use language that is direct and specific. Share the most critical information and not more than you need to. This is not to say you should be untruthful about a situation, but take a measured approach to how you share information, and do so in way that doesn't stoke fear or anxiety. Pay attention to the details of your communications. Now is not the time to stumble over a poorly timed metaphor about the *Titanic*.



CONSISTENCY

Everyone is watching you and your leadership peers. Be intentional about your tone and word choice, making sure they align with the essence of your message. Get coaching before you communicate, or ask a trusted colleague to give you feedback on how you are coming across. Before you make a commitment, be certain you can follow through on it. Now is not the time to promise things you might not be able to deliver. If your communications and follow-up actions are in sync and consistent, you will be perceived as a strong, trusted leader.

CONNECTION

Communicating for connection involves relationships and inspiration, not just having the answers.

Remember you are a human being first; your role as a leader came much later in life – communicate from a place of shared humanity and with humility.

Create connection by communicating with or for:



EMPATHY

Put yourself in the shoes of the people you are talking to. What might they be feeling right now? How can you acknowledge those emotions? Ask people how they are feeling, and then listen actively. Give them the space to express their personal situation, fears, or concerns.



AUTHENTICITY

Communicating authentically is about being true to who you are and sharing that with others. In difficult times, people will follow you if they believe your message is authentic. They need to trust you not because of your title, but because of who you are as a person. Let them see your strengths, and your flaws, and they will be more willing to believe you and rally around you. Be consistent in how you express yourself both in your prepared remarks and in responding to questions. If people see a different version of you when you are not scripted, they will question the “real you.”



COMMUNITY

Being a leader doesn't mean you are a solitary hero or heroine. Teamwork is needed now more than ever. It's unrealistic to think that you alone can get your people through the crisis. Your team will trust you more if you acknowledge that you need them. Be clear on how you'd like to see them come together. Remind them of the values of your organization and the power of teamwork. For inspiration, share specific examples and stories of how communities are rallying during this crisis.



SHARED PURPOSE

While you might not be able to soothe all concerns, being able to remind people of your shared purpose can help keep them motivated. Focus on the mission of the organization and the impact you have on your customers and on each other. Remind your staff of the value of their contributions and the opportunity to accomplish goals despite obstacles. Express gratitude for their input and insight.

As leaders, we're going to continue to make decisions for functioning in an altered workplace, just as I struggle to find alternatives to the shuttered playground for my children. Like most leaders, I like to fix things, and it feels like there's a lot that we can't fix. That cannot stop us from communicating with our people. In fact, in times of crisis, effective leadership communication is even more important than during business-as-usual. Communicating with competence will give your teams confidence that you know what needs to get done; communicating for connection helps them care enough to take action and lets them know that we are all in this together.

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Checklist for Communication During Crisis

Are you clear on what you need people to do?

Are you clear on what you want to say?

Do you understand the emotions and concerns your employees have, and are you prepared to acknowledge, even if you can't address, those concerns?

Are you communicating often enough?

Is your level of transparency appropriate? Is your communication engendering trust?

Is there consistency between your words and your actions?

Are your values – and who you are as a person behind your title – coming through in how you communicate?

Are you expressing gratitude for the contributions of your team employees?

Are you acknowledging the situations of clients, partners, suppliers, and other stakeholders?

Are you listening actively to what is being said and helping people feel heard?



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