

# Leaders, It's Time to Overcommunicate

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April 9, 2020

In troubled, uncertain times, there's often a lack of communication. Leaders don't have all the answers. Instead, they have their own anxieties. As a result, they become cautious about what they say, which translates into less communication.

The problem with this approach is what I call the law of employee speculation. When employees don't know, they speculate. In my experience, their speculation is worse than reality. If you withhold good news, they'll assume the news is at best neutral. If the withheld news is neutral, it will be assumed negative. And if the withheld news is bad, employees will assume the apocalypse.

When dealing with a critical situation such as the coronavirus pandemic, it's important for employers to overcommunicate. They should continue routine employee communications whenever possible, in addition to any communications related to the crisis.

"I have seen situations when employers shifted into a mode of crisis-only communications," said Colleen J. McManus, SHRM-SCP, a senior HR executive with the Arizona state government. "This contributed to a sense among employees that the situation must be disastrous, because other communications had stopped. Employees felt their employer was in a constantly reactive mode rather than in control or building confidence in how the organization would weather the storm. More routine communications help to remind people of the organization's mission, goals and successes, and provide them with some balance to all of the bad news around them."

This is a great opportunity for HR professionals to coach their organization's leaders and encourage them to craft messages of hope and perseverance. It's also a great time for HR to help leaders ensure that they are walking the walk as they express concern for the welfare of the employees. Help your leaders find ways to maintain connections and build a new sense of resilience.

The overwhelming majority of 1-800 Contacts' employees are currently working from home. As a result, the company has dramatically stepped up its employee communications. Company CEO John Graham sends out messages to the workforce at least three times a week.

1-800 Contacts Chief People Officer Dave Walker and staff proactively seek information from employees about what they are experiencing and how the company can best support them. "During this time of high anxiety," Walker said, "one of the best things we can do is communicate with our associates, listen to their questions and concerns, help identify their needs, and respond proactively. Associates have expressed appreciation for these efforts and have said regular communication helps them cope during these challenging times."

Here are some ways leaders can frame their messages:

- Express concern for the well-being of employees and their families, not just the business. A gesture of personal caring will go a long way.
- Acknowledge uncertainty. It doesn't make you look weak—quite the contrary. Share what you know, and be candid about what you don't know.
- Explain that you are making an effort to find out about the important things you don't know, and when you do, you'll share them.

Don't wait for employees to reach out to you; initiate interaction. Due to COVID-19, this probably doesn't mean managing by making the rounds in the office. Fortunately, we have the means to connect electronically. As a leader, you can scale individual interactions.

Companywide messages can include statements such as "Some of you have asked about [topic A]," or "A concern's been expressed about [topic B]." Consider virtual meetings and huddles to help maintain a sense of community and team.

Now is a great time to talk about the future, in which, after you survive, you're confident you'll thrive.

Humility combined with determination is a powerful mixture. It sends the message to your employees that surviving and thriving is not about you or your stock options. It's about them, their families and your customers and letting employees know that, as a leader, you're determined to sail this ship through troubled waters.

Stan Sewitch, vice president of global organization development at WD-40 Company in San Diego, agrees that proactive communication during these times is necessary. He cautions, however, against creating false hope.

"Don't BS," he advised. "People can smell a sales job a mile away. Say what you know, what you don't know and what you are committed to doing. That's as good as it can get to create confidence in leadership."

Scott Parson, president of CRH Americas Materials West Division in Ogden, Utah, added, "Be transparent with employees about what the business is doing, how CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] guidelines are being implemented both internally and with customers, and use as many different communication methods as possible, such as calls, e-mails and videos from different leaders. I have a daily call with my direct reports, as well as a daily call with my boss and peer division presidents."

McManus, the senior HR executive in Arizona, notes that during this pandemic, concrete gestures count, too: Consider "everything from sending care packages of healthy snacks, to approving paid time off for employees with no paid-leave balances, to having virtual lunch meetings to simply gather, check in on one another and share some conversation over a meal together."

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