

Communication Is More Important Now Than Ever Before:

9 Ways To Reassure And Re-Engage Your Team



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Communication during the coronavirus is more important than ever. GETTY

The situation we face based on the coronavirus and COVID-19 is changing so fast and is so uncertain, there is perhaps nothing more important than the way a leader communicates. People always tend over-value leader communication above that of other employees. They focus on it, interpret it and seek to read between the lines. Uncertainty causes people to pay even greater attention to what leaders say, how they say it and what they (really) mean.

As a leader, how should you communicate during times of heightened sensitivity related to the coronavirus and COVID-19? Transparency is key to build trust, but how much is too much and what should you know about the nature of the communication that works best? Here are nine tips for your consideration.

Be clear and focus on the facts. Anytime times are uncertain, and emotions are high, misinformation can take hold. So, ensure you focus on facts rather than conjecture. There are plenty of places people can go to obtain information about what might be true, be sure you are a source that is factual. If you need credible information, [the CDC](#) and [the WHO](#) are regularly publishing updates on the status of the coronavirus and COVID-19. In addition to being accurate, also be clear. When people are upset, they may be less able to grasp nuance. Ensure your communication is precise and does not include any mixed messages. People don't trust what they don't understand, so the more clear and unambiguous you can be, the better.

Be relevant and be redundant. Be relevant about what you share and when you share it. People with whom you communicate regularly will appreciate messages relevant to what they're concerned with at the moment. If you have information that won't be relevant to them for a while, you may want to share only what is most germane now. In addition, check in regularly. Just because you've said something once, doesn't mean people saw it or heard it, especially since there is so much communication everywhere people look or listen. I worked with a brilliant leader who used to say, "If I'm not tired of hearing myself say it by the end of the day, I haven't said it enough." By this,

he meant be intentionally redundant. Different people will hear messages differently and they will only be able to attend to them based on where they are in their own process. Your consistency will be a beacon in times of distress.

Be understanding and empathetic. Let people know you're listening and you care. While you may not be able to change things, you can express knowledge of their challenges as well as compassion for their struggles. Acknowledge these, allowing for people's discomfort. You don't have to spend a large portion of your messaging here, but at least let people know you understand. This will go a long way toward the trustworthiness of your message.

Be human. Especially in times of stress or unease, people want to know messages are from people, not robots. While you may not focus here—after all, your challenges will be different than those of others and the focus shouldn't be on you—it's okay to acknowledge you too have questions and are working through things. In terms of the content of your message, it's also okay to say you're processing some issues and don't yet have the answers. Perhaps there is a key policy or benefit that is changing. You can let people know it will be changing without giving details yet—this kind of transparency will also breed trust.

Unite people. In the same way you communicate you're on the journey with people, also reinforce the company, the group or the team is in it together. People are significantly motivated by their connections with others, and work is fundamentally

social. Be sure your messaging unites people rather than divides and reinforces a message of “we”—“we will get through together,” “we are facing this as a team” or “our connections with each other will help us weather this storm.”

Provide the big picture. During times of uncertainty, people’s perspectives can narrow, and they can become very focused on themselves or their immediate needs. Remind them of context and the bigger picture. This isn’t just about them, their group or even your company. There is a broader context in which your message fits and there are others who are also going through this with them. People cope best when they focus less on themselves and are also concerned with the welfare of those around them.

Be pragmatic. When they are in a challenging period, people thrive when they have direction. Let people know what you need from them and how they can help. You may ask people to stay focused on customers during this time, or suggest they support their colleagues and look for opportunities to contribute to their well-being. You may request they ask questions rather than spread rumors. These kinds of pragmatic, action-oriented suggestions will help people focus and will clarify your message.

Be inspirational. While this may feel like a tall order, it is critical for engagement and motivation. Reinforce your mission and the direction of your organization. Let people know where you’re going and that you will get there together. You may not know exactly what the journey holds, but people want to know you’ll come out on the other side. Let people know you’re committed to finding creative solutions, leveraging new approaches

and surviving together for a tomorrow that will return to normal someday. Of course, you must be honest—this should go without saying—and this isn’t about sugar-coating. Things may be tough in the short term and it’s important to acknowledge this (see “be understanding and be empathetic” above), but also focus on the future to ensure people stay engaged.

Be selective. Overall, choose your words carefully. Words have power and leaders have an outsized impact on how employees survive and thrive through periods of uncertainty. People tend to focus on their every word—even if leaders don’t intend their words to have so much impact. Consider your message from every angle and play devil’s advocate as you develop your communication—thinking about how your words will likely be passed from person-to-person and could potentially be (mis)interpreted. Choose words that are accurate and not inflammatory, supportive but not condescending and accessible but not sentimental.

As a leader, you have a critical voice in helping people stay calm, focused and engaged. Be clear and plan for the intentional redundancy of your message. Focus on the facts, but also be human and demonstrate empathy. Bring people together and help them expand their focus with a broader context. Give concrete suggestions and make pragmatic requests. At the same time you’re clear about the present, also focus on the future and help people find hope in the chaos and calm in the storm. When you’re selective about your words and your message, you’ll be a positive beacon in seas that are choppy and uncertain.