

# Employee communications during Covid-19

## OUR EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATIONS FRAMEWORK



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These are unprecedented times, so this calls for an unprecedented response. But with no experience of anything on this scale, it can be hard to know what to do. Here is what we are telling our clients:

## COMMUNICATIONS NEED TO BE

### Continuous

Even in stable times, messages often do not 'land' as intended. In times of crisis, our brains are even less able to process information. We recommend sending important messages several times through different channels.

Employees used to daily office contact with colleagues should hear from you every day. Even if there is nothing to 'announce' or nothing new, find a way to help maintain a sense of culture and team through virtual camaraderie.

### Conversational

Your communications plan needs to include the ability to 1) ask questions and 2) engage in conversation. A global all-staff call led by the CEO will be important in demonstrating leadership – discussed further below – but we all need time and space to air our thoughts, share stories, ask questions and seek advice.

Tech solutions to two-way conversation play a role, but in-person conversation trumps everything. With many offices now closed, and colleagues working from home or otherwise socially distancing, team leaders need support to host team meetings where possible, ideally using video. Support packs with briefing notes and FAQs will help them to run the sessions confidently. Line managers should be asked to feed back what they're hearing to improve messaging.

## LEADERS NEED TO BE

### Listening

Demonstrate that you've heard what colleagues in the business are thinking and respond to their questions, concerns and ideas.

### In control

This is difficult with official guidance in flux, but if a leader looks panicked, then hope can be quickly lost. We saw this after the Referendum result: employees in the UK without permanent residency looked to their employers in the absence of Government answers.

### Visible

There is crisis work to be done: leaders could easily sit in a war room for weeks. Get out there and challenge yourself to be a visible leader. This could be short video clips, daily Q&A sessions on your intranet. Do not restrict yourself to email. As a leadership group, you can create a sense of community and calm.

### Empathetic

People are worried about their jobs, their families, their health and many are feeling anxious about a situation out of their control. Some of the panic may seem irrational, but your response to how people are feeling can help them to control it. Check your communication for jargon, formality, loftiness, distance and correct it with warmth and humanity. Kindness and empathy can make a bitter pill a little easier swallow.

## **Compassionate**

Unlike previous global financial crises, this one is personal because it affects physical and emotional health, how we live and our ability to connect with family, friends and colleagues.

Many businesses are already looking at mass redundancy. The external circumstances cannot be controlled, but how you treat you people is entirely in your control. And what's more, the outside world is watching. Cruel, self-serving or unnecessary action will leave lasting negative impressions, not just on employees but also customers and investors.

Beyond facts, empathy, kindness and emotional intelligence are the attributes that will make the most difference. Arming your line managers with simple things such as 'conversation starters', Q&A documents and well-presented information, delivered via webinar or in written form, will help them engage meaningfully and with impact.

## **Clear**

With Government advice changing every day and sometimes perceived as ambiguous, companies need to be crystal clear. Keep the language and vocabulary absolutely basic. Test messages with a team before they go out: if you read this, what would take from it? It is amazing how we can all read things differently.

Most 'middle managers' have not been trained to be great communicators. Providing tips on communication and a toolkit that includes topics to talk about as a team, updated news and key facts, top tips on home working, stories from around the business to share and more will be valued by managers and teams.

## **Candid**

We're in this for the long-haul and how companies talk with employees now sets the tone for the longer term. There is a difficult balance to achieve between showing leadership and being transparent, but companies that hide issues from employees, or give false hope, will not be thanked. If redundancies are likely, do not say the opposite. Fear and uncertainty drive down productivity and trust, so being honest and open to questions is important.

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