

Organization Practice

A leader's guide: Communicating with teams, stakeholders, and communities during COVID-19

COVID-19's speed and scale breed uncertainty and emotional disruption. How organizations communicate about it can create clarity, build resilience, and catalyze positive change.

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Crises come in different intensities. As a “land-scape scale” event,¹ the coronavirus has created great uncertainty, elevated stress and anxiety, and prompted tunnel vision, in which people focus only on the present rather than toward the future. During such a crisis, when information is unavailable or inconsistent, and when people feel unsure about what they know (or anyone knows), behavioral science points to an increased human desire for transparency, guidance, and making sense out of what has happened.

At such times, a leader’s words and actions can help keep people safe, help them adjust and cope emotionally, and finally, help them put their experience into context—and draw meaning from it. But as this crisis leaps from life-and-death direction on public health and workplace safety to existential matters of business continuity, job loss, and radically different ways of working, an end point may not be apparent. While some may already be seeking meaning from the crisis and moving into the “next normal,” others, feeling rising uncertainty and worried about the future, may not yet be ready for hope.

COVID-19’s parallel unfolding crises present leaders with infinitely complicated challenges and no easy answers. Tough trade-offs abound, and with them, tough decisions about communicating complex issues to diverse audiences. Never have executives been put under such an intense spotlight by a skeptical public gauging the care, authenticity, and purpose that companies demonstrate. Leaders lack a clear playbook to quickly connect with rattled employees and communities about immediate matters of great importance, much less reassure them as they ponder the future.

Against this frenzied backdrop, it would be easy for leaders to reflexively plunge into the maelstrom of social-media misinformation, copy what others are doing, or seek big, one-off, bold gestures. It is also true that crises can produce great leaders and

communicators, those whose words and actions comfort in the present, restore faith in the long term, and are remembered long after the crisis has been quelled.

So we counsel this: pause, take a breath. The good news is that the fundamental tools of effective communication still work. Define and point to long-term goals, listen to and understand your stakeholders, and create openings for dialogue. Be proactive. But don’t stop there. In this crisis leaders can draw on a wealth of research, precedent, and experience to build organizational resilience through an extended period of uncertainty, and even turn a crisis into a catalyst for positive change. Superior crisis communicators tend to do five things well:

1. **Give people what they need, when they need it.** People’s information needs evolve in a crisis. So should a good communicator’s messaging. Different forms of information can help listeners to stay safe, cope mentally, and connect to a deeper sense of purpose and stability.
2. **Communicate clearly, simply, frequently.** A crisis limits people’s capacity to absorb information in the early days. Focus on keeping listeners safe and healthy. Then repeat, repeat, repeat.
3. **Choose candor over charisma.** Trust is never more important than in a crisis. Be honest about where things stand, don’t be afraid to show vulnerability, and maintain transparency to build loyalty and lead more effectively.
4. **Revitalize resilience.** As the health crisis metastasizes into an economic crisis, accentuate the positive and strengthen communal bonds to restore confidence.
5. **Distill meaning from chaos.** The crisis will end. Help people make sense of all that has happened. Establish a clear vision, or mantra, for how the organization and its people will emerge.

¹ Herman B. Leonard, “Against desperate peril: High performance in emergency preparation and response,” in *Communicable Crises: Prevention, Response, and Recovery in the Global Arena*, Deborah E. Gibbons, ed., Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2007.

Every crisis has a life cycle, and emotional states and needs vary with the cycle's stages.

Give people what they need, when they need it

Every crisis has a life cycle, and emotional states and needs vary with the cycle's stages. In a recent article, our colleagues framed the COVID-19 crisis in five stages: resolve, resilience, return, reimagination, and reform. These stages span the crisis of today to the next normal that will emerge after COVID-19 has been controlled. The duration of each stage may vary based on geographic and industry context, and organizations may find themselves operating in more than one stage simultaneously (exhibit).

With such variation in mind, communicators should be thoughtful about what matters most in the given moment.

- In a crisis's early stages, communicators must provide *instructing* information to encourage calm; how to stay safe is fundamental. In COVID-19, governments and major media outlets first focused on clear, simple instructions about physical distancing and "lockdown" guidelines. Companies focused on new operational rules regarding time off, overtime, and operational changes.
- As people begin to follow safety instructions, communication can shift to a focus on *adjusting* to change and uncertainty. Asia, where

COVID-19 struck early, offers some helpful insights. One survey in China, for example, showed that a marked decline in people's energy during the early stages of the epidemic reversed as they acclimated to increased anxiety and the blurring of work- and home-life boundaries.² Savvy communications directors responded by evolving their messaging from health basics to business recovery.

- Finally, as the crisis's end comes into view, ramp up *internalizing* information to help people make sense of the crisis and its impact. For the current public-health crisis, it's still too early to glean the shape of this broader perspective, although "silver lining" articles about families drawing closer together and other topics have been making their way into the media.

The COVID-19 outbreak is a complex crisis made up of multiple trigger points—health, policy, the economy—and leaders should tailor their communications to the stage of the crisis their stakeholders are experiencing, and to what people need most in the moment (see sidebar, "Want to know what people need? Ask them").³ Scenario planning becomes important to help anticipate where employees and communities may be in dealing with the crisis, and the appropriate messaging that can help them as the crisis unfolds.

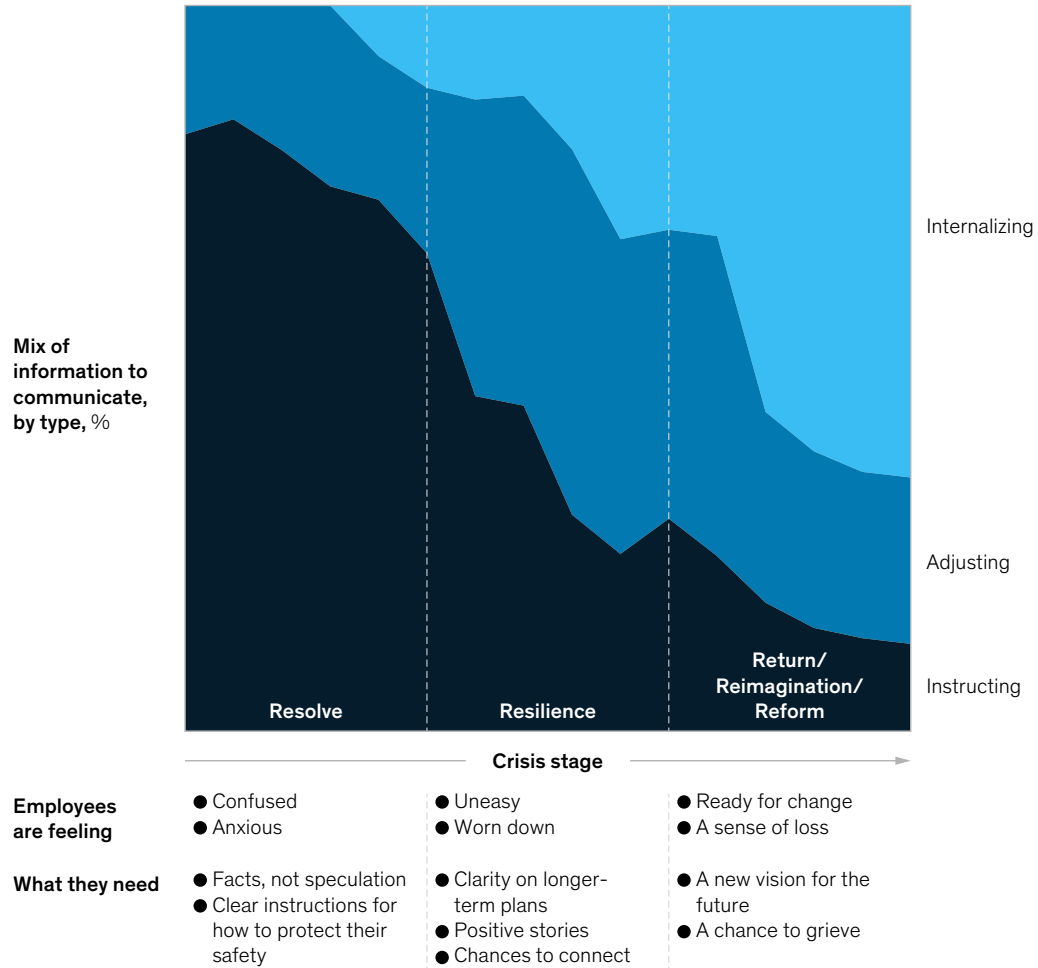
² McKinsey surveyed senior executives of large Chinese companies, along with employees from those organizations, in eight industries, from March 12–18, 2020; 1,300 people responded to the survey.

³ Adapted from David L. Sturges's seminal 1994 work on crisis communication, "Communicating through crisis: A strategy for organizational survival," *Management Communication Quarterly*, February 1, 1994, Volume 7, Issue 3, pp. 297–316.

Exhibit

Adjust your communication mix by your current crisis stage.

Crisis communication life cycle, illustrative



Communicate clearly, simply, frequently

At a crisis's onset, audience attention is finite; new, disruptive inputs overwhelm a person's ability to process information. High levels of uncertainty, perceived threats, and fear can even lead to "cognitive freezing."⁴ Put simply: the more complicated, abstract, or extraneous information is right now, the more difficult it will be for people to process it.

Leaders may be inclined to defer to governments and media outlets for clear and simple safety instructions. Don't. Employers often underestimate how much their employees depend on them as trusted sources. When public-relations firm Edelman asked workers in ten countries what they considered the most credible source of information about the coronavirus, 63 percent of respondents said that they would believe information about the virus from their employer, versus 58 percent that trusted government websites or 51 percent that trusted the traditional media.⁵

⁴ A body of research shows that people generally suffer from information overload; for more, see Martin J. Eppler and Jeanne Mengis, "The concept of information overload: A review of literature from organization science, accounting, marketing, MIS, and related disciplines," *Information Society*, 2004, Volume 20, Number 5.

⁵ *Edelman trust barometer 2020 special report: Trust and the coronavirus*, Daniel J. Edelman Holdings, 2020, edelman.com.

Want to know what people need? Ask them.

Standard tools and serendipitous conversations and moments of connection can help leaders check in on their people:

Schedule unstructured time. Add 15 to 30 minutes at the beginning or end of a meeting to tap into what's on employees' minds.

Run a quick pulse survey. Ask one simple question: How are you feeling? Include a comments box for elaborating.

Invite input on big decisions. When possible, include people in the process

of choosing paths forward. Offer options. Community dialogue can shape the right decision.

Use digital and analytics tools. Two-way listening solutions enable employees to share concerns over email or text. Natural-language software then produces major themes for managers to review, act on, and monitor.

Host "well-being check-ins." Schedule time for people to come together. These sessions can host up to 150 people at a time. Breakout features in some apps

can create smaller groups for more in-depth conversation.

Solicit questions. When preparing town halls, give employees a chance to submit questions in advance (anonymously is ideal). Or offer the community the option to "vote up" the questions they most want answered. Use chat functionality to allow questions.

Engage change agents. If you've identified influencers or change agents, deploy them. Provide forums for them to hear from peers. Adjust your communications to reflect this new input.

To convey crucial information to employees, keep messages simple, to the point, and actionable. Walmart published its 6-20-100 guidance: stand six feet away to maintain a safe physical distance, take 20 seconds for good hand washing, consider a body temperature of 100 degrees Fahrenheit the signal to stay home from public activity. Slack CEO Stewart Butterfield focused on personal care in reassuring employees stressed over work. "We got this," he said. "Take care of yourselves, take care of your families, be a good partner."⁶

When communicating clear, simple messages, framing and frequency matter:

Dos, not don'ts. People tend to pay more attention to positively framed information; negative information can erode trust. Frame instructions as "dos" (best practices and benefits) rather than "don'ts" (what people shouldn't do, or debunking

myths).⁷ In previous epidemic outbreaks, such as Zika, yellow fever, and West Nile virus, research shows that interventions highlighting best practices were more effective than those focused on countering misinformation or conspiracies.

Repeat, repeat, repeat. Communicators regularly underestimate how frequently messages must be repeated and reinforced. In a health crisis, repetition becomes even more critical: one study showed that an audience needs to hear a health-risk-related message nine to 21 times to maximize its perception of that risk.⁸ Fortunately, employee appetite for regular, trusted information from employers during COVID-19 is high. In one study, some 63 percent asked for daily updates and 20 percent wanted communications several times a day.⁹ So, establish a steady cadence, repeat the same messages frequently, and try mantras, rhyming, and alliteration to improve message "stickiness."

⁶ Catherine Clifford, "CEO of multibillion-dollar company Slack to employees amid coronavirus: 'Don't stress about work,'" CNBC, March 26, 2020, cnbc.com.

⁷ Building on Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky's seminal 1979 prospect theory, more recent research has examined the impact of highlighting gains and benefits when communicating health information.

⁸ Lu Liu, Xi Lu, and Xiaofei Xie, "Inverted U-shaped model: How frequent repetition affects perceived risk," *Judgment and Decision Making*, 2015, Volume 10, Number 3.

⁹ *Edelman trust barometer 2020 special report: Trust and the coronavirus*, Daniel J. Edelman Holdings, 2020, edelman.com.

The CEO doesn't have to be the chief delivery officer. During a crisis, it's best if the message comes from the person viewed as an authority on the subject. For business continuity, that person may well be the CEO. But for other topics, people may prefer to hear from a health expert, the leader of the organization's crisis-response team, or even their own manager. Provide common talking points for all leaders and empower communication—via town halls, through email, text messaging or internal social media platforms.

Choose candor over charisma

After establishing baseline safety requirements, leaders must help individuals cope emotionally with the trauma of sudden change and adjustment to a new, postcrisis normal. (COVID-19 threats to health and safety are likely to linger for some time, so new messages should be layered atop regular safety reminders.)

Leaders trying to help employees adjust after trauma need a reservoir of trust. Those who fail to build trust quickly in crises lose their employees' confidence. People expect credible and relevant information; when stakeholders believe they are being misled or that risks are being downplayed, they lose confidence. To build trust, leaders should do the following:

Focus on facts—without sugar coating.

Differentiate clearly between what is known and unknown, and don't minimize or speculate. In crises like the one we're facing now, "the facts" may include bad news about the state of the organization or changes that will be painful for people. Research shows that some leaders, used to feeling highly effective and in control, avoid acknowledging uncertainty and bad news because they find it stressful or guilt inducing, or they fear negative reactions from an audience.¹⁰ But unfounded optimism can backfire. In 1990, during the United Kingdom's mad-cow-disease crisis, a government minister fed his daughter a hamburger in front of TV cameras and declared that British beef had never been safer, despite evidence to the contrary. Rather

than boost morale, this effort only further eroded public trust in the government's response.¹¹

When you are not able to communicate with certainty—for example, about when physical distancing and travel restrictions will be lifted—avoid hard and fast estimates (for example, "There's a 60 percent chance that we'll be back to normal by September."). Instead, be explicit that you're sharing an opinion, acknowledge uncertainty, and give the criteria you will use to determine a course of action ("It's my hope that we are back online in the fall; however, that is far from certain. We will be following government guidance when making decisions for our business.")

Be transparent. Transparency builds trust. Research shows that transparent operations improve perceptions of trust and that communicators perceived to have good intentions are more likely to be trusted, even if their decisions ultimately turn out to be wrong. Give people a behind-the-scenes view of the different options you are considering. For example, many governments, including Canada and the Netherlands, have begun publishing extended timelines during which protective measures will be in place. Whether or not those timelines hold true, such difficult messages to deliver ultimately serve to build greater trust among listeners.

Involve your audience in decision making. When making operational decisions, involve stakeholders. For example, many universities have informed students that commencement this year will not take place as planned. Rather than canceling commencement outright, several universities have instead used short, simple communication to elicit students' ideas for staging commencement differently, preserving some of commencement's positive energy.

Demonstrate vulnerability. Judiciously share your own feelings and acknowledge the personal effects of emotional turmoil. Research shows that demonstrating vulnerability, such as grief over shared losses or authentic feelings about the impact of changes on employees, can help build trust.

¹⁰Research shows that leaders are often uncomfortable giving bad news; for more, see Robert J. Bies, "The delivery of bad news in organizations: A framework for analysis," *Journal of Management*, 2013, Volume 39, Number 1, pp. 136–62.

¹¹David Robson, "Covid-19: What makes a good leader during a crisis?," BBC, March 27, 2020, bbc.com.

Mind what you model. What you do matters as much as what you say in building trust, and scrutiny of leaders' actions is magnified during a crisis. Recently, some leaders have been called out for setting “do as I say, not as I do” examples. Scotland's chief medical officer resigned after public uproar when she was caught visiting her second home during lockdown. Hosting a videoconference from the office might seem like a good way to project normalcy—but won't for those attending who are locked down at home.

Build resilience

As the COVID-19 health crisis turns into a lingering financial and economic crisis, uncertainty and doubt will challenge efforts to restore business confidence. Leaders will face a critical period in which they will need to instill resilience in people and tap sources of hope, trust, and optimism in order to unlock creativity and build momentum for the future. Channeling positive sentiments and encouraging a sense of broader community will be critical elements in building that momentum.¹²

Celebrate the positives. Sharing positive stories and creating uplifting moments are important building blocks in reigniting resilient spirits. It may seem counterintuitive, but often this approach begins by acknowledging loss. Denying or averting loss can make it more likely that people focus on negatives, especially in times of crisis. However, it is possible to counterbalance the negative effects of stress and loss by channeling positive emotions.

Highlight how your organization is responding to the crisis with stories about how people are adapting to new ways of working. Or recount how your organization is contributing to the global COVID-19 response. Show appreciation for the challenges people face. For example, the “Clap for our carers” movement in the United Kingdom is a public display of appreciation for the National Health Service (NHS), which is now being replicated every night at 7 p.m. in New York City. Many companies have posted videos on social media thanking their employees. Especially important is expressing gratitude to those in the organization who are leading frontline responses or who face threats to their safety. In addition to acknowledging them publicly, having one-on-one conversations with them or sending personal thank-you notes can go a long way toward making people feel part of something important and meaningful, which in turn helps build resilience.

Help people to help. Helping others is a great way to improve well-being and reduce stress.¹³ Amid crisis, people look for ways to contribute. For example, following the 9/11 attacks, Dell connected with employees by channeling their desire to offer help. Service and response teams worked around the clock, drawing on Dell's customer purchase records, to offer customers immediate assistance in replacing lost computers and equipment. Such steps helped employees struggling with grief and anger to focus on others, give back, and link the customer's experience to everyday work.

Denying or averting loss can make it more likely that people focus on negatives, especially in times of crisis.

¹² For more on positive psychology in the workplace, see Fred Luthan and Carolyn M. Youssef, “Positive organizational behavior in the workplace: The impact of hope, optimism, and resilience,” *Journal of Management*, 2007, Volume 33, Number 5, pp. 774–800.

¹³ Adam Grant, *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success*, New York: Viking, 2013.

Build community. It's important to rebuild a common social identity and a sense of belonging based on shared values, norms, and habits.¹⁴ Research suggests that social bonds grow stronger during times of great uncertainty. Leaders encourage people to come together under common values of mutual support and achievement. Queen Elizabeth II has called upon all Britons to unify and identify—in discipline, resolve, and fellowship—in the face of COVID-19. “The pride in who we are is not a part of our past, it defines our present and our future,” she said.¹⁵

Any effort to create a shared social identity must be grounded in a sense of support for others. Practical ways to encourage this when people are working remotely include book clubs, pub quizzes, happy hours, exercise classes, chat groups, competitions, and so on. Complement this kind of broad outreach with one-to-one communication via phone, email, or video to individuals or small teams. Arrange a virtual breakfast, an end-of-week celebration, or even video “tours” of each other’s workspaces.

Out of chaos, meaning

As people adapt, effective leaders increasingly focus on helping people to make sense of events.¹⁶ The search for meaning is intrinsic to recovery from trauma and crisis. For many, the workplace is a powerful source of identity and meaning. Research has shown that meaning and associated well-being can explain up to 25 percent of performance.¹⁷ Leaders can shape a meaningful story for the organization and help people build their own stories, invoking common culture and values as touchstones for healing and strength. In their messaging, they underscore a shared sense of purpose, point to how the organization can rally at a generation-defining moment, and indicate new paths to the future.

Leaders can take the following steps to help people move from making sense of events to deriving meaning from them:

Set clear goals and ‘walk the talk.’ Early on, be clear about what your organization will achieve during this crisis. Set a memorable “mantra”—the two or three simple goals around which people should rally. Then take actions to realize those goals, because you communicate by what you *do* as much as by what you *say*. For example, during the COVID-19 crisis, Best Buy has defined a dual goal to protect employees while serving customers who rely on the company for increasingly vital technology. The company has made clear that employees should only work when healthy, and that those who feel sick should stay at home, with pay. US stores have instituted “contactless” curbside service or free doorstep delivery.¹⁸

Connect to a deeper sense of purpose. Explore ways to connect the disruption employees face to something bigger. For some organizations, this may dovetail with the goals of an ongoing transformation, such as serving customers in new ways. For others, meaning can be found in a deeper, more collective sense of purpose or mission. For example, the chief surgeon at one New York hospital closed an all-staff memo by reminding people that “[patients] survive because we don’t give up.”¹⁹ In the United Kingdom, the government appeals to strong national sentiments with the simple message: “Stay home, protect the NHS [National Health Service], save lives.”

Foster organizational dialogue. While it’s important to shape a story of meaning for your organization, it’s equally important to create a space where others can do the same for themselves. Ask people what conclusions they are drawing from this crisis and

¹⁴ For more on leadership and shared identity, see S. Alexander Haslam, Michael J. Platow, and Stephen D. Reicher, *The New Psychology of Leadership: Identity, Influence and Power*, Routledge, 2010.

¹⁵ “The Queen’s coronavirus speech transcript: ‘We will succeed and better days will come,’” *Telegraph*, April 5, 2020, telegraph.co.uk.

¹⁶ For more on sensemaking, including the importance of leadership, see Marlys Christianson and Sally Maitlis, “Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving forward,” *Academy of Management Annals*, 2014, Volume 8, Issue 1, pp. 57–125.

¹⁷ Thomas A. Wright, “More than meets the eye: The role of employee well-being in organizational research,” *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology and Work*, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 143–54, oxfordhandbooks.com.

¹⁸ “Best Buy committed to providing products people need,” *Business Wire*, March 21, 2020, businesswire.com.

¹⁹ Craig Smith, “COVID-19 Update from Dr. Smith,” Columbia University Irving Medical Center, March 27, 2020, columbiasurgery.org.

listen deeply. Some possible questions: Have there been unexpected positive outcomes of this crisis for you? What changes have you made that you would like to keep once the crisis has ended?



The immediacy and uncertainty of the coronavirus crisis tempts leaders to “shoot from the hip” in

communicating with anxious stakeholders or making strategic moves. Effective communicators will take a deep breath and remember the basics while acknowledging what is unique about this moment. Relying on these practices will help team members stay safe and infuse understanding and meaning in communities, helping to carry the organization through the pandemic with a renewed sense of purpose and trust.

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