

Organization Practice

Communications get personal: How leaders can engage employees during a return to work

As organizations embark on the reentry phase of the COVID-19 crisis, four practices can help them build trust and a sense of purpose for the long term.

by David Honigmann, Ana Mendy, and Joe Spratt



When the COVID-19 crisis first erupted, organizations across the world were plunged into such uncertainty it was hard for many to know whether they would emerge intact. Now, though the road ahead remains difficult, leaders are shifting from whether they can return to *how* to do so.

Leaders are also having to manage waves of unforeseen crises, including the recent protests in the United States and elsewhere. These events can take as much of a toll on workers' productivity and mental health as radical, rapid changes in the workplace. Employees will have to confront cycles of disruption and adaptation, driven both by pandemic-related health reasons and new business imperatives, ranging from reorganizations to further reductions in workforces or furloughs.

This reentry and recovery phase of the pandemic crisis provides leaders with a compelling reason to engage and strengthen overall connections with employees. Recognizing and addressing the core human emotions of grief, loss, and anxiety in the workplace is a chance to rebuild organizational health, productivity, and talent retention. It provides a historic opportunity to overcome the stigma of mental and emotional health as taboo topics for workplace

discussion, especially the feelings of isolation and shame that are attached to job losses and other employment casualties.

Companies that have pledged to support their workforces and have delivered on that promise have demonstrated their reliability and bolstered their reputations. Now is the time to continue to maintain and build on that trust, as the focus shifts from public health in general to the specifics of each organization's individual recoveries.

Clear and inspiring communication is central to making this next unsteady phase a success. In addition to moving decisively on strategic changes, leaders need to help rattled workforces believe in the future. For many people, their employer has been a zone of relative stability during a time of chronic uncertainty. Employees have viewed corporate leaders¹ as the most trusted source of information since the frantic early days of the pandemic, especially where state institutions have been less reliable in their responses.

Communication messaging and activity in four overlapping phases will help employees move from loss to renewal. These steps—laying the

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¹ "Edelman trust barometer special report on COVID-19 demonstrates essential role of the private sector," Edelman, edelman.com.

groundwork, honoring the past, marking the transition, and looking to the future—can help leaders design the right approach to communicating that works for their organization’s circumstances, culture, and history.

Because actual experiences of the pandemic will have varied, we segment organizations into “survivors” (struggling to stay in business), “adapters” (having to change their business models radically), and “thrivers” (well-positioned because of extra demand or because they were already working remotely). Some of the ideas below will need to be nuanced differently for each segment.

Lay the groundwork: Be sensitive to employees’ needs

Before thinking about reentry at scale, leaders should understand where people are mentally and prepare accordingly. Some will be enthusiastic about returning to the office, while others will not want to venture back yet. Still others may want to reenter in theory, but worry about risks to their health and the safety of their loved ones.

Teachers from Lombardy to the United Kingdom to New York are a good example of how leaders have to weigh these concerns. Many want to return out of a sense of professionalism and because they miss their students; on the other hand they must think about their own health and that of their families if reopened schools become new vectors of transmission.

In addition to immediate risks to their own health and safety and that of their loved ones, people are facing long-term uncertainty around lockdowns and job insecurity: Will their employer go under? Will their retirement savings be wiped out by a new depression? Based on stress syndromes from previous pandemics and early surveys from Asia during COVID-19, there may be a 25 percent stress syndrome incidence rate.²

Practical steps include:

- Survey employees regularly so you know which camp they fall into. Focus on psychological readiness, and seek to identify practical concerns. Know who wants to come back as soon as possible, and who will need more time to be comfortable—whether because they are in high-risk groups or because they no longer have reliable childcare, or for some other reason. This will depend to some extent on job categories, with some people having less choice about when to return. Here too inequalities will need to be addressed with sensitivity.
- For survivors, show how returning to work will increase the chances of a quick return to viability.
- For adapters, show how the new ways of working will continue to help the organization.
- For thrivers, show how the return is a consolidation of and a reward for everyone’s efforts.
- Make your return planning processes transparent. Indicate who is working on the plan, how they are thinking about it, and when announcements will be made. Make it clear how you will be thinking about phasing and who will fall into which phase. Where possible, put bounds on the uncertainty: What do you know is definitely happening, what is definitely not happening, and when do you expect to have firmer answers?
- Offer information about the practicalities. How hard is it to travel to your site(s)? What has changed in terms of public transport? What will being back at the site look and feel like? This might be a combination of written materials and videos.

² Steven Taylor et al., “Development and initial validation of the COVID stress scales,” *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, May 2020, Volume 27, sciencedirect.com.

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- Solicit feedback from all stakeholders on a recurring basis. Some have put together task forces to simply process feedback; others have set up recurring dialogues with employees.
- Clarify how people can get their questions addressed.

Honor the past: Address emotions directly

Research into post-traumatic growth suggests that companies that move effectively to address trauma, grief, loss, uncertainty, and anxiety can rebound more quickly and experience stronger success.³ Throughout the pandemic, employees have experienced varying degrees of trauma and loss, both in their workplaces and in their personal lives. As grief experts have written, acknowledging and addressing loss helps people build resilience.

Leaders need to invest time in cultivating open, compassionate conversations about what has been lost in the pandemic. They should validate that there is an emotional impact and that it can be a topic of discussion in the workplace. While conversations about the emotional toll of the pandemic may seem uncomfortable or unnecessary,

they help strengthen ties with employees, who appreciate leaders' openness.

Top teams that skip this step risk the appearance of being tone deaf or callous, thereby undermining their authentic concerns about moving the organization forward. Leaders should be sure their efforts are authentic; acting empathetic without showing true compassion can, in some cases, make things worse. Precise messaging will of course depend on the circumstances and the context.

In addition to individual or team conversations, look for ways that companies can honor the past. For instance, companies that have dealt with workplace violence have found ways to mourn the loss of employees through memorials, establishing scholarships, holding fundraisers, or volunteering together for a cause that resonates with the team.

Practical steps include:

- Lead conversations with individuals and teams about emotional impact.
 - The CEO needs to be prominent here; this is not work to be delegated. Our experience is that employees are more eager than ever to hear from their organization's top

³ Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi, "Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence," *Psychological Inquiry*, Volume 15, Number 1, pp. 1-18.

leader. This may well involve attending multiple smaller groups.

- Normalize emotional concerns of employees at all levels. Hold top team conversations about real and perceived losses from the pandemic, how it has affected us and recognize the contributions that the team and all employees have made. Define this as an important and open conversation to have. Ensure that other leaders work with their teams similarly, and cascade the conversation throughout the organization.

- Take time to celebrate and reinforce the values the company stands for, and how they were demonstrated in the company's pandemic response.

For example, a century ago Lysol marketed itself as a weapon against the Spanish Flu. Today, employees are being encouraged to see themselves as frontline workers helping to keep people safe. Several hotel chains in the United States and some universities and hotels in the United Kingdom have offered their properties to medical personnel who needed a place to rest while caring for COVID-19 patients in nearby hospitals.

- For survivors, stress the long history of the organization and how it has weathered storms before.
- For adapters, stress the ways in which the organization has reinvented itself in the past.
- For thrivers, stress the ways in which current success is built on long-standing values.
- Create company-wide recognition efforts to honor employees who:

- died in the pandemic (recognizing those who have passed away is crucial to normalizing loss and grief)
- served on the frontlines during the crisis (medical personnel, volunteers)
- kept the organization moving (the "quiet heroes")

In some cases it will also be appropriate to honor clients, partners, suppliers, and customers who may have died or served on the crisis frontlines. Being explicit about these recognition efforts will stop the losses from becoming a great unmentionable. As grief expert David Kessler says, "What everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed." Leaders are important sources of resilience for their people—and also important factors in post-traumatic growth following crisis.⁴

Showing gratitude (as well as receiving it) is also important for mental health. For example, during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, first responders who reported stronger feelings of gratitude subsequently reported higher levels of resilience and life satisfaction.⁵ During COVID-19, people across the globe have honored hospital workers and first responders by cheering together at an appointed hour. Hospital workers have also gathered to support patients being sent home after recovering from the virus. These examples provide an indelible sense of everyone being in the crisis together.

- Create an ecosystem so employees can maintain relationships with those who have been furloughed or lost their jobs, presumably for economic reasons and not for lack of performance. Isolation from others in the pandemic, coupled with the stigma of job loss, can have a devastating impact on departing employees.

⁴ Lynn K. Harland et al., "Leadership behaviors and subordinate resilience," *Psychology Faculty Publications*, 2005, Volume 62; Marianne Skogbrott Birkeland et al., "Like a bridge over troubled water? A longitudinal study of general social support, colleague support, and leader support as recovery factors after a traumatic event," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 2017, Volume 8, Number 1.

⁵ Erin C McCanlies et al., "The effect of social support, gratitude, resilience and satisfaction with life on depressive symptoms among police officers following Hurricane Katrina," *International Journal of Social Psychology*, February 2018, Volume 64, Number 1, pp. 63–72.

- Let retained employees know that it's OK to have a relationship with former colleagues and reach out to provide support in their job searches.
 - Launch or expand an alumni network to maintain good relationships and foster a future talent network. These networks are a natural connection point to continue relationships.
 - Link these stay-in-touch efforts to company values such as respect and collaboration.
- Survey employees after these activities to assess how well honoring the past has worked. Consider measuring employee health factors such as burnout, job satisfaction, and psychological safety. Some elements may need to be repeated, or integrated as part of the new ways of working.

Mark the transition: Recognize the power of ritual

Rituals create a sense of familiarity and reassurance. They help us navigate loss and celebrate joyful events in our lives: births, graduations, weddings, funerals, and more. People often turn to rituals because the psychological processes underlying them have been shown to have a stress-reducing component.⁶

Likewise, COVID-19 has created unprecedented upheaval in the lives of our organizations. New rituals, along with company values and a renewed sense of purpose, can serve as pillars of psychological safety and normality.⁷ They can help employees process what has happened and rebuild social capital—and hopefully replace some

of what people have lost. And rebuilding old rituals will be just as important. All rituals are a way of communicating to employees that the losses they have experienced are collectively acknowledged and are manageable.

The workplace provides a relevant and powerful source to help people put traumatic situations into a more motivational perspective. As furloughed employees return to employment and people return from remote working to office- or site-based working, rituals will help mark the start of a new phase in the organization's life. In terms of Kübler-Ross's model of the five stages of grief, this is where employees will start to move from depression to acceptance.

We recommend nominating a specific date, or timeframe, that the organization will collectively treat as the start of the "next normal" and around which rituals can be enacted. Of course, not everyone will reenter physically or psychologically at the same time or pace. Things could go awry because of public-health concerns and consequential disruption. Starts are likely to be staggered and involve shifts and cohorts.

For that reason, any date will be in many respects arbitrary—as it is for a wedding—but it is still important to set one. This is the point at which the social ties that bind the organization together are refreshed and reinforced and renewed.

Throughout this phase, focus messaging on discovery as a way simultaneously to look back and ahead. Essentially answer this question: Through the crisis and our response, what have we learned about ourselves, each other, and our organization that can help us in the future?

⁶ Martin Lang et al., "Effects of anxiety on spontaneous ritualized behavior," *Current Biology*, July 2015, Volume 25, Issue 14.

⁷ Nicholas M. Hobson et al., "The psychology of rituals: An integrative review and process-based framework," *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2018, Volume 22, Number 3, pp. 260-284.

Practical steps include:

- Make the focus of communication the well-being of employees, not work.
- Set a specific timeframe of events (exhibit) for the organization to pivot from past to future.
- Provide a “welcome back” kit, consisting of what employees need to navigate the new normal. This might include equipment as well as rules of

the road for meetings, elevator use, and so on; medical experts can offer specific guidance on the most appropriate products to include. The University of Virginia, for example, will offer returning students a welcome-back kit that includes masks, hand sanitizer, and a tool to help open doors and press buttons.

- Be sure people continue to know where to turn for help and continue to communicate the availability of resources, including employee assistance programs (EAPs).

Exhibit

Create a communication calendar with steps that can help make returning employees more comfortable.



On day 1

- Welcome back those who are returning
- Focus on discovery from the crisis, and celebrate values
- Highlight how employees and the company have rallied through the crisis
 - *For survivors*—how have we stayed afloat and who has helped us do that?
 - *For adapters*—how did we pivot to our new model and who drove that?
 - *For thrivers*—how did we rally to help our customers/ users when they needed us most?
- Honor the past

This will ideally be an in-person event for as many people as possible, as well as streamed (and recorded) for those unable to be present



During week 1

- Identify unexpected positive outcomes and cultural changes to retain for when the crisis ends
- Continue activities to honor the past
- Encourage random acts of kindness
- Leaders need to be physically present—perfect the art of the walkaround; communicate in small groups

Ideally the week 1 activities will be in person and typically in working groups



During month 1

- Hold conversations about ways we have worked during the crisis. What do people want to keep, what do they want to adapt, and what do they want never to experience again?
- Showcase “my isolation transformation.” Transformation could be anything—physical, a new skill. Feature folks in various communications vehicles; award swag for coolest transformation
- Prepare to look to the future by moving the focus of messaging to new opportunities and strategic questions rather than the transition itself (by analogy, talk about married life rather than the wedding ceremony)

Monitor the effectiveness of communication through regular pulse surveys, probably weekly; evaluate; adjust

Look to the future: Embrace a new sense of purpose

Leaders may be tempted to withdraw into small, tight decision-making task forces to make key decisions as quickly as possible. Instead, they can use this moment to define and demonstrate a common sense of purpose with employees, who will be looking for leadership and ways to engage themselves. Purposeful leaders will want to share execution plans broadly with staff to solicit input and engage them on the challenges the organization faces.

Taking the time to reflect on purpose can have an array of benefits. At the organizational level, purposeful companies have been shown to outperform competitors on equity returns⁸ and have more engaged employees. At the personal level, reconnecting to purpose has been shown to be a critical factor in coping with crises and trauma.⁹ When decision makers align their decision making and communication messaging with a sense of purpose they may help support their employees' potential at a time when leadership needs it most.

Use this period to create a cultural conversation across the company and a positive outlook about its future. Many of the recommended activities above will be appropriate for small groups, perhaps spread over a few weeks or, where possible, held simultaneously on a single day, with options for people to participate remotely.

Practical steps include:

- Start or renew discussions on corporate purpose, based on discoveries from the crisis.
 - For survivors, how do we retain our purpose in a changed world?

- For adapters, how do we move quickly to new ways of working?
- For thrivers, how do we maintain our current success as the world slowly returns to normal?
- Show how this purpose feeds into strategic direction—the “Where are we going?” Articulate how to strengthen the connection between purpose and business actions, for instance, how we display the value of “customer first” in specific actions, such as offering a comprehensive customer experience, that we have never taken before.
 - Managers and team leaders should speak with their teams about how the work they're doing contributes to recovery; they can ask people what motivates them and gives their work meaning.
- Set the strategic direction in context by developing, articulating, and sharing the organization's new/refreshed change story—the “How do we get there, and why will it be worth it?” This will help people understand what the future looks like:
 - What has changed over the last few months?
 - What has stayed the same? (This includes the enduring values story.)
 - How do we prioritize?
 - What are new expectations of leaders? Of employees?
- Commit/recommit to organizational health. This could include new or updated diagnostics and surveys.

⁸ Claudine Gartenberg, Andrea Prat, and George Serafeim, “Corporate purpose and financial performance,” Harvard Business School Working Paper, Number 17-023, September 2016.

⁹ Crystal L. Park, Kristen E. Riley, and Leslie B. Snyder, “Meaning making coping, making sense, and post-traumatic growth following the 9/11 terrorist attacks,” *Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2012, Volume 7, Number 3, pp. 198-207.

- Showcase stories about “living your purpose,” both personal and organizational, in internal communications: through the company intranet, news stories, and town halls.
 - Continue to monitor the effectiveness of communication over the course of a few months; evaluate and adjust as needed.
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All of the practical steps we recommend above stem from the need for clear, empathetic communication that keeps people optimistic and hopeful, but also resilient and prepared for further disruption. This stage of recovery will challenge organizations' communications functions to become even more agile, as they shift between crisis response mode and normal, more future-oriented strategies. Leaders will not know all the answers, but as long as they communicate openly and candidly, employees will respect being brought into the conversation.

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