



Managing COVID-19 Communication Directions & Guidelines

One of the main contributors to the stress and anxiety employees are feeling from COVID-19 is overload and uncertainty due to their company's lack of appropriate filters and frameworks for prioritizing, organizing and disseminating information.

Most organizations also lack an effective mechanism for responding promptly to employee questions and comments. This is the time more than ever to think of employee communication as a "fountain" rather than a "cascade" so you have a truly dynamic, interactive mechanism for both talking with and listening to people.

As a basic foundation for maintaining employee performance and wellbeing under the current conditions, communication must be designed to help maintain employee equilibrium, engagement and productivity based on the following 4-part framework:

- **Health and safety** ... Containing the disease and reducing risk of infection
- **Connectedness** ... Keeping people informed, aligned and supported during social distancing
- **Compassion and appreciation** ... Recognizing the difficulties people are facing and the special contributions they are making
- **Hope and optimism** ... Sharing information that can ease concerns about what's happening now and show promise for future

Health and Safety

- Regularly remind people of the basic practices for maintaining their own health and avoiding spreading the virus to others.
- Give people a link to one or two reputable sources for ongoing updates that they can check – and discourage people from scouring the internet to find something new from another source that may not be highly reliable. Recommend the CDC Situation Summary page.
- Update people regularly on actions that are being taken by the company to ensure employee health and to keep the business operating as well as possible.
- Set up a rapid, responsive mechanism for people to raise any health-related questions and concerns they may have.

Connectedness

- Find ways to alleviate the loss of close working relationships that can take a toll on people.
- Since travel is being curtailed, people are being encouraged to conduct meetings virtually. Numerous tools are available to do that, but companies may need to expand the number of people who have access to them, and then train them on how to use it.
- Conducting meetings virtually is not the same as doing them live, especially with larger groups of 10 or more people. So, meeting facilitators should be given instructions and guidelines on how to ensure that virtual meetings are conducted effectively.
- Tell people to feel free to call their work friends and colleagues for occasional social interaction in ways they typically would at work – cautioning them to talk about matters other than the virus.
- Consider setting up a “live document” online with “time stamped best current information” that people can access as desired. Frequency matters, so update it at least once daily.

Appreciation and Compassion

- Encourage people to acknowledge one another for acts of kindness, courage and devotion to what you are committed to delivering for everyone who counts on you.
- Celebrate team members when their actions embody your mission and values.
- Show appreciation; thanking people reminds them to appreciate others, too.
- When it comes to talking about co-workers who have been laid off, talk about things like:
 - Regret for needing to take severe measures
 - Unavoidable decision needed to stabilize the company and stay in business so people have jobs when the emergency passes
 - Compassion and caring for everyone’s wellbeing
 - Actions that are being taken to ease the impact on people
 - Appreciation for what the team is doing to keep business going

Hope and Optimism

- Share information that can help soothe people’s anxiety.
- Send stories, poetry, even use humor if it’s done appropriately – there’s considerable truth to the old maxim that laughter is the best medicine.
- Share uplifting stories and insights – both from within the company and others happening elsewhere; some acts of kindness being shown around the country are almost heroic and wonderfully uplifting.
- Send updates on wins, gains, breakthroughs, turn-arounds, etc. that come along.
- Relax restrictive policies and practices to help reduce tension and provide relief.
- During your regular team meetings, consider the following process:
 - Have everyone on the team describe one positive thing that’s happened personally and one that’s happened professionally
 - Another option is to have them talk about something they are looking forward to in the upcoming week personally and professionally
- Here’s a link to a blog that put a positive, promising tone on the situation:
<https://livingroi.com/2020/03/15/not-normal>

Additional Ways to Support Employee Performance and Wellbeing

During extraordinary times like these, it's important to be flexible and adjust management methods to the realities of the situation. Here are some tips for special measures managers can take:

- Reminding people of basic things to ensure their safety and health – washing hands, social distancing, wearing face coverings in public, staying at home if they are sick, etc.
- Checking in regularly and asking people how they're doing, individually and as a group
- Using communication channels like Zoom and Microsoft Teams to keep people connected – for both business and socializing to alleviate the isolation that can come from social distancing
- Scheduling regular calls with your team to discuss ongoing projects and how to work together
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities that may need to be adjusted
- Showing appreciation for people's special efforts, and inviting the rest of the team to acknowledge one another
- Sharing upbeat news about positive developments in the business
- Encouraging people to take breaks, go for walks, etc. to refresh mentally and physically
- Listening and being responsive to people's requests for information
- Urging people to come to you right away with difficult issues or concerns they may have
- Being patient and showing empathy in dealing with difficult situations
- Showing confidence that we will get through this, and come out stronger in the end

Managing COVID-Related Effects

As we continue to navigate the choppy COVID waters, team leaders will need to respond to potential employee fears about being in the workplace. Here are some guidelines to follow:

- Listen to understand, then reflect and respond, don't react.
- Be sensitive and recognize that this situation can cause good people to perform poorly. Adjust performance expectations in light of how people react when they are under stress.
- Help people understand the broader context and why specific decisions are made so they feel a greater sense of control over the situation.
- Explain the rationale for people being on site because we are an essential business, and much of our work requires being in close proximity with one another.
- Consider getting individuals and teams involved in coming up with ideas and solutions in dealing with difficult situations and making decisions about them.
- Inform people that they are welcome to make requests for and take action on any special additional safeguards they would like, e.g. face coverings, distancing, etc.
- If you are faced with a complex situation that requires additional guidance, reach out to Human Resources or department heads for support.
- Be sure to alert Human Resources about issues and questions coming from employees that have broader implications for the entire company.
- Recommend use of Employee Assistance Program for people who are struggling and stressed.
- Try to create fun, uplifting activities to blow off steam, reduce tension and lighten the mood.

Periodic Pulse Checks

Take occasional pulse of how people are feeling – individually or collectively – and listen to thoughts and suggestions they may have for improving work conditions.

1. Questions for senior and middle managers to ask managers and supervisors who report to them:
 - How are you doing personally?
 - What are you hearing from your staff?
 - What else can we be doing to support you and your team?

2. Questions for all employees:
 - What are you doing to keep yourself grounded?
 - What is one particular challenge you're trying to overcome?
 - What actions or adjustments do you feel we should make?

3. Conduct pulse survey that address specific issues, for example:
 - Ask employees to respond with – *Yes, No, or Not Sure* to a series of statements, followed by input they would like to provide on the topic
 - Sample statements:
 - The adjustments in the benefits plan have been helpful
 - I'm getting the information and support I need to perform effectively in the new work environment
 - I feel safe with protective safeguards being implemented in the workplace