

# Five Essentials For Communicating With Employees During Tough Times

There's a lot going on to make people nervous about the economy, their jobs and their futures. During difficult times, employers need to remember to communicate with their employees. The absolute worst thing employers can do at a time like this is to remain quiet. Uncertain times are just when companies should be communicating more-and putting their executives and leadership in visible positions, talking openly with employees.

The following five are essential strategies for communicating with employees during tough times:

## Communicate Early & Often

Act as quickly as possible and communicate with employees, even when you don't have all the answers; especially when external events are having an impact on your company. Too often management-not yet confident they know all there is to know-is too slow to respond. Employees know when external factors are having a direct impact on the company and, you can bet, they have at least an inkling of knowledge about any internal changes and are already in reaction mode. It is always better to communicate something-and openly acknowledge what you don't know-than to remain mum.

## Make Leaders Visible and Give Employees an Opportunity to Respond

This is when executive leaders should visibly demonstrate their leadership. This is an opportunity to build trust with frequent and authentic communication, and test drive social media tools-such as blogs, podcasts, and videocasts. Social media is a great tool for quickly and easily disseminating information that simultaneously provides those on the receiving end with an opportunity to respond.

## Communicate In-Person

The most powerful forms of communication during difficult times are in-person and one-on-one. While it is often too difficult or expensive to orchestrate all-employee meetings (even virtually), you can keep your communications with employees upfront and personal by communicating via managers who have the proximity and ability to speak with your employees as frequently as needed.

Give managers a preview-ahead of distribution to employees-of communications and request their in-person engagement. Empowering your managers in this way makes them more connected to the company and goes a long way to keeping employees engaged too.

## Coordinate with Existing Communication Efforts

Always keep the end goal of your company-wide communications top of mind. It can be especially difficult to coordinate communications activities when you're acting quickly, but disconnected communication efforts can add to, rather than decrease, employee stress. Every employee communication effort - in whatever form it takes-needs to be carefully reviewed in its relationship to the whole of your company's communications strategy and within the context of the current situation or conditions. A "routine" performance review can seem insensitive following a notice that all salary increases are on hold. "Normal" benefits changes can seem like a mixed message in the midst of major internal adjustments. Neglecting to connect and integrate all communication messages and channels, could result in the unintentional discrediting of your message and/or your messenger.

## Prepare

When times are tough - whether for an extended period or in a crisis - it's difficult to thoroughly think things through and act strategically. Yet, many of these types of events may be planned for from a hypothetical perspective, which means you can prepare a plan of attack, which you'll then have in place for when something triggers an urgent need to communicate with and calm anxious employees.

In addition to being more effective, planned communications will also save time and energy. Consider the following:

- Six months from now, how do you want employees to remember this period?

- What's the fundamental goal of your company's communication efforts? (Being open, quick to respond, focused on the customer?)

- What are the most effective means of reaching employees? (in order of effectiveness)

• Who needs to participate in the review process? Who bears responsibility for final sign off?

• How will employee questions, feedback, and response be handled?

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