

# Tenets of Communication During a Crisis

THOUGHT PAPER

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History is full of lessons about how leaders should communicate during a crisis and what people expect from those in leadership positions to alleviate their troubles. Talking about the inability of those in authority to tell the truth about the severity of Spanish Influenza in 1918, historian John M Barry writes in his [New York Times column](#) that *“Trust in authority disintegrated, and at its core, society is based on trust. Not knowing whom or what to believe, people also lost trust in one another. They became alienated, isolated. Intimacy was destroyed.”*

A socio-political lexicon - the “rally effect”, is well documented and explains people’s need to turn towards a leader for assurance when they feel deeply threatened.

Put together, the two tenets for communication in a crisis are:

- a) Leaders have a vital role in reducing anxiety
- b) Transparency and honesty are strongholds of communication during a crisis.

This was true then and it holds still. Accomplishing both of these tasks, however, is no easy feat. Here are recommendations for organizations and their leaders to communicate when their employees are faced with a crisis that undermines their composure, confidence, and concentration:

### Be Their Go-to Person for All the Information

At the beginning of a crisis, a plethora of unanswered questions like *“What does this mean for my company?”* or *“Do I still have my job?”* or *“How long will this last?”*, plus a heightened level of perceived threat can impact people’s ability to process information pouring in from everywhere. During such times **leaders need to emerge as a credible source of information for employees to depend upon. They need to convey crucial information in language that is clear, concise, and actionable.**

It’s understandable that while fighting a fire raging in all directions, senior leaders cannot be available and accessible all the time. Employers can continue to effectively communicate through a **crisis-response team** consisting of key leaders from across the organization who are in charge of making sure that communication is proactive and transparent and are **empowered to make quick decisions outside hierarchy and bureaucratic structures.**

### During a Crisis, Even Too Much Is Too Little

Leaders often underestimate how often they should communicate with their staff in times of crisis. In our opinion, it is better to err on the side of too much than too little. There is [research](#) to prove that perceived risk about a situation decreases at a high frequency of repetition. **Frequent communication reduces fear and reinforces the fact that employee well-being is a priority for the organization.** While leaders and managers might experience fatigue from repeating the same message, remember that employees need to hear the message multiple times. So, maintain a steady stream and repeat messages to increase their stickiness.

### Make Intelligent Use of Various Communication Platforms

**The realization that employees need to hear their leader’s voice (written or oral) frequently needs to be coupled with a conscious allocation of different modes of communication.** With a higher level of urgency when a crisis strikes you need to implement a notification system that quickly reaches employees with accurate information and instructions. Text messages work well here. When the need is to restore trust, provide reassurance, or to convey a dire message, face-to-face communication is a suitable choice. In current times with social distancing norms in place, personal touch to messages can be added over video calls. When people have had time to adjust and accept the crisis and the need is to provide regular updates email messages are an appropriate choice of channel.

### Communication (Crisis Notwithstanding ) Is a Two-Way Street

**Communication, under any circumstances, should be a two-way street, where employees feel free and safe to share their opinions.** In the context of the current crisis, employees can be encouraged to send in emails with their feedbacks and comments, which can be then addressed during the course of virtual town hall while preserving the anonymity of the sender. A dedicated virtual meeting site to put up their concerns and queries can be offered as a safe channel for employees to provide feedback. Timely sharing of agendas and minutes of meetings with employees will ensure that all are in know about company happenings and have the requisite time to gather their thoughts, enabling meaningful feedback. Leaders also need to be mindful that fatigue during interactions in a virtual environment sets in faster than during physical interactions and limit the time of virtual communications (30 minutes is ideal). Communicating often over several meetings with short intervals is more

feasible than holding a long running virtual meeting and run the risk of employee burnout.

### Dark Hours of Communication Failure

Regardless of my counsel against it, I have seen the best of leaders failing to communicate with employees due to a lack of complete information or for the fear of delivering bad news. I have also seen the repercussions of that (and they were not pretty). So this is what I advise - **maintain the cadence of communication with employees even if you do not have all the answers.** Employees appreciate an honest and humble acknowledgment of a lack of information more than being kept in the dark. It is ok to say that *“This is the best information I have right now”* or *“I wish I could tell you more, but we will update you as soon as we know more”*.

**If you cannot share information for some reason (company policy for example), don’t be silent and block people out.** You can still express empathy and compassion in your communication by saying *“I am sorry I am not supposed to say anything at this point but please know that we are all in this situation together and must do our best amidst this crisis”*

### Truth Will Out

A [2005 research paper](#) quotes the city public health commissioner of Chicago as saying “Worry kills more people than the pandemic” - continuing to underplay the severity of the Spanish Influenza. The attempt of officials to gloss over the situation cost them their credibility and added to the panic. **No matter how high your urge to reduce your employee’s stress, do not sugar-coat or lie.** If for instance, besides your best attempt you need to cut employee pay but do not have the precise numbers, do not pretend it is not happening. The truth will find a way to leak through the gaps and find a way to come out. If people have been laid off or furloughed outline what’s being done to bring them back or what’s the timeline for the same. **By communicating timely factual information you can shape what the employees talk about or run the risk of employees filling the communication gaps with their speculation.**

The way leaders choose to communicate during times of crisis can make or break the spirit of those who work for them. Therefore, they need to:

- **Offset negativity** by reminding people of past times when you have faced and survived challenges together.
- **Bring back a semblance of control** by sharing specific steps about plans and strategy.

- **Support employees** with words that show your appreciation for their continued services in tough times and **uplift emotions** by appreciating those who have gone above and beyond the call of duty in ensuring business continuity.
- **Inspire action and project confidence by using rousing language** that gives people a sense of belonging and purpose. Phrases like *“We are in this together”* or *“I believe in our strength to get past this together”*, show that you empathize with worries and believe in their capabilities.
- In times of virtual communications **pay special attention to non-verbal cues.** Small details like maintaining eye contact, positioning the camera so that people can see your complete gestures, and leaning in to show interest towards what others are saying can help you engage employees meaningfully.

### Excuse Me for Overcommunicating

The number one expectation employees have during difficult times is that their employers communicate effectively with them. Yet on a [survey](#), only 39% of employees agree their employer has communicated a clear action plan in response to Covid-19 and less than half agree that they were informed about what's going on in the organization concerning the pandemic. All we can say is that no leader in history has been faulted for overcommunicating during a crisis. With people rallying around you for guidance and support, **what** you say to your employees and **how** you say it will determine their trust (and hence organizational performance) in you now and in times ahead.

## About the Author



**Mainak** brings over 24 years of experience spanning business and HR roles across geographies. This has given him a unique understanding of the link between HR and business strategy. He also holds a patent for HR capability development.

Mainak's experience includes human capital strategy, culture, talent development (performance, leadership development, career pathing, competency, learning, engagement, diversity) and talent acquisition (including on-boarding and background check). He has also implemented HRIS platform and HR metrics to improve performance.

Recently he has been helping start-ups set up efficient and effective HR teams and processes. In addition, Mainak is a recognized Executive Coach and Leadership Development expert.

Mainak's previous work experience includes stints/projects with Accenture (Consulting and HR), Hewitt Associates, AbsolutData, Heidrick & Struggles, Evalueserve, Sterlite Technologies and Upstox.

Mainak holds a MBA from the Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta, and is a certified executive coach.

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