



drp^c COMMS MASTERCLASS

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The importance of clear communications during the Covid-19 disease outbreak.



With many countries around the world now taking full social-distancing measures including self-isolation, homeworking and closures, both the UK and the rest of the world is facing challenges virtually unseen before.

For businesses, these challenges include a workforce that will suddenly have to be way more flexible than ever, with self-isolation and government advice ruling out the usual 37 hours, give or take, spent in a social office. With today's announcements, we could see vast swathes of the UK's workforce cooped up in their home office, at the dining table or ill in bed as we head into the Spring.

Mix this massive upheaval with the panic and fear that is synonymous with a global pandemic on this scale and the threat of economic turmoil and you get a recipe for lower morale, uncertainty and the niggling worry about job security if the person's organisation is going to be affected (which is a given at this stage).

The UK government has come under a lot of fire recently thanks to a 'mixed' level of communication. Until now, messages and data have been limited, but now it seems Boris Johnson has listened, with cries for much more communication from both his office and the experts appointed by it. With daily television broadcasts and more information, including modelling, on the gov.uk website, we're now at a point where things seem more concerning, but with a little more reassurance that our government is finally taking things seriously.

This lesson could come at a cost for the Johnson government further down the line, especially if the current countermeasures aren't as effective as others seen around the world. The big learn for organisations is not to fall into the same trap.

One of the biggest social problems that comes with a health crisis on this level is the panic caused by rumour and speculation. In the periods between big decisions, humans love to fill in the gaps. Whether it's commenting on hearsay to friends or colleagues or heading to the supermarket to stock up on toilet paper even though there hasn't been any official guidance on processes or timescales, a strong desire for certainty can leave us making odd decisions. And this is probably the most uncertain any of us have ever been, even in the age of Brexit, the North Korea nuclear crisis and Donald Trump moving into The White House.

This speculation and, while we're talking about President Trump, 'fake news' can spread quickly in workforces too. Idle remarks about working from home can soon embed themselves as a certainty whilst suppressed internal emails or financial figures can see employees getting riled up to the point of revolt, even if there isn't really a lot to be worried about. Just as this panic has seen people fighting over goods in the supermarkets of the world, it can easily turn a happy, healthy workforce into one that is distanced or even mistrusting of its employers. To help organisations mitigate this natural worry, here are some basic internal communication tactics that could be the difference between a deeply concerned workforce and one that is ready to roll with the punches.

1. Create a plan

The first thing that should be at the heart of any change in communications is a plan. Dumping lots of information too quickly or keeping key details too far from the farthest reaches of your organisation can have the opposite effect you may need right now. Build an outlook for the coming weeks that addresses the updates and changes that may only be discussed currently at a senior level. Once this plan is in place, stick to it, with new developments added in as time progresses.

2. Be transparent

Finding out good and bad news second hand is never a good thing, so if there are going to be expected disruptions, planned changes in working styles or even redundancies or cost-cutting, let everyone know in a controlled manner. In many cases, even those who have been told that there may no longer be a position for them might offer to stay on a reduced salary or take a sabbatical until the situation changes. After September 11th 2001, DRPG had to make difficult financial decisions, but with transparency and cooperation, the expected workforce losses weren't seen, with the team pulling together to make things happen.



3. Speak regularly

For many organisations, internal communications can be as basic as a monthly newsletter or update email, mostly with good news. If this is the case, then things need to change, right now. With such a new and rapidly spreading health problem, many employees will want to know exactly what's happening on a daily, if not hourly basis. With so much of their time and effort invested, it's only fair that employees aren't kept in the dark, so figure out a schedule that is realistic, but also one that only contains key updates.

4. Watch out for doom and gloom

Thanks to the global and deadly nature of the Covid-19 outbreak, the media has not held back on heavy reporting, with every statistic and outcome pored over and analysed, often by people who are less optimistic than others. Yes, the disease needs to be taken extremely seriously, but consider the effect that consistent bad news is having on your workforce. Look at ways of sharing good news stories at every opportunity and encourage employees to get involved with communications. Consider creating additional content, a bit like this article, or even something as simple as a top ten list of films to watch if you're confined to bed, or how to work at home more efficiently.

5. Be visible

Let's face it – even in the age of FaceTime, Microsoft Teams, Skype and WhatsApp, many of us still send an email rather than take the time to speak by phone or screen. But, as you'll likely have experienced at some point, meaning, gravitas and mood can be lost completely in the written word. Instead of relying on a quickly typed email, try recording a video or organising a whole-workforce virtual meeting. The benefit here is that you'll be able to relay vital information, but also potentially reassure or motivate your workers, with a little personality added in for good measure.

This tip also extends to your employees. Encourage team members to use the internet to its full potential, by holding video meetings over phone calls and freeing up resources like Microsoft Teams or Slack for personal calls to work friends.

6. Carry on as normal – where possible

This one is easily the toughest piece of advice on this list but aiming for some semblance of normality is paramount at this difficult time, and not just for the organisation's balance sheet. Extended isolation is a big demotivator (ask anyone who works at home for long periods of time), so ensure that everyone has access to the support they need from a mental health perspective. This, mixed with a regular schedule of communications and an emphasis on doing everything you can to keep the organisation's wheels turning, will deliver a critical feature yet unseen with Covid-19 – targets and deadlines.

If you're one of the many organisations planning summer events, trade shows, exhibitions or award ceremonies, then these may have been put on the backburner while we figure out how to ride out this storm. However, there is an easy way to keep these in the diary and give everyone something to look forward to, even if it's done via screen rather than at a venue. Speak to us if you feel that a virtual event could replace one that has recently been cancelled or looks unlikely.

With many weeks of uncertainty ahead and an almost certain chance of remote working and high instances of sickness, we can't stress enough how important it is not just to have a solid communications strategy, but also how important it is to implement it quickly. If you need help and advice on your communications strategy or would like to explore supporting content that can be used within your communications, then don't hesitate to get in touch with us – we're taking these measures internally, so we're happy to share our expertise.

