

Leading Your People and Organization Through COVID-19 (Part 1)



Leadership Communication During a Crisis

BY STEENA CHANDLER AND RYAN QUIGLEY

Consider the following scenario: The executives of a midsized GC on the East Coast have more questions than answers in these unprecedented times. This scenario should be familiar to all of us. This applies to executives trying to find better ways of attracting and retaining talent, of delivering projects on tighter and tighter schedules, and of dealing with an unprecedented health crisis that is sweeping the globe. In such uncertain times, executives must wrestle with questions like:

- How do we demonstrate hope and confidence without overpromising our people?
- With an environment that changes by the day, and often by the hour, how do we stay on top of it all?
- What is our communication strategy to the rest of the organization?

The challenge of making quick, tough decisions with limited information should not be foreign to any leader, but the stakes are raised in times of great uncertainty. In addition to simply disseminating critical information throughout your organization, the right communication builds employee confidence and trust in leadership. This article explores five key components of strong communication that will help leadership navigate the uncertainty and ensure a more well-positioned organization on the other side of the crisis.

1. Lead With the Company's Core Values

During times of crisis, leaders need to communicate quickly. This desire for speed often pushes them to think in the short term—the what we will do and how we will do things. In times like these, the company why becomes more important than ever. Organizations have vision and core values for this very reason: to serve as a guiding beacon when faced with tough decisions (see our recent study, [Leading Through Business Cycles: Lessons Learned From E&C Executives](#)).

It is not enough to talk about core values; you must use them to lead. In “The Infinite Game,” Simon Sinek states, “It is a strange quirk of human nature. The order in which a person presents information more often than not reveals their actual priorities and the focus of their strategies.”^[1]

Sinek’s quote raises a great point about the order of your message. Begin your message by reinforcing your core values and set the tone for why you have decided to pursue your course of action. If you begin with a tactical response to a crisis or what you are doing to preserve revenue for the company, you are showing where your priorities lie and where you put the most emphasis. When decisions and communication are values-led, leaders are more apt to demonstrate long-term thinking and create a sense of community by using a collective set of values.

Instead of this message:

“We would like all employees to work from home and check in daily with their supervisor. We do this because we value your safety and want you to stay connected.”

Use this message:

“As you know, our company lives our core values every day, two of which are safety and connection. We use our values to guide our decisions, and, as a result, we would like all employees to work from home to uphold our value of safety and check in with your supervisor daily to ensure connectedness.”

2. Form a Task Force for Crisis Communication

During times of crisis, it can be difficult for executive teams to gather information and respond quickly enough to react to rapidly changing situations in real time. Driving decisions and communication through a more focused, nimble leadership team can be a more effective way of staying agile as new information presents itself. The best leaders will pay close attention as new information develops, analyze that information, and then adjust their plans and strategies accordingly.

As with any high-performing team, this “crisis team” should be aligned around a common purpose with clearly defined guidelines, expectations and team roles. It should be comprised of calm, thoughtful leaders who can pause and assess the situation quickly before acting emotionally, and who are adept at anticipating situations before they unfold. This task force team must also be representative of diverse groups within the organization. Diversity will ensure the messaging speaks to the masses and that most views are considered.^[2]

From a succession perspective, the crisis team can also be an opportunity for young, high-potential leaders (paired with more senior executives) to gain experience leading and making decisions in a dynamic environment. The team will be empowered to act and communicate to the organization as needed to avoid bureaucracy when strategies need to change quickly.

Crisis Communication Task Force should:

1. Be comprised of a diverse group of individuals who are seen as current or emerging leaders and include at least one executive member.
2. Stay small and nimble enough to make decisions quickly. We recommend six to seven team members max.
3. Include leaders who are calm, adaptable to change, gifted at assessing situations quickly and adept at anticipating outcomes.

3. Confront the Facts and Encourage Dialogue

Per Jim Collins’ “Good to Great,” great organizations “confront the brutal facts” in times of adversity. He writes, “Yes, leadership is about vision. But leadership is equally about creating a climate where the truth is heard and the brutal facts confronted.”^[3]

Competence, a key component of building trust, involves being good at what you do while also acknowledging that you don’t have all the answers.

Plan on addressing short-term challenges openly and honestly while simultaneously offering an open line of communication for employees to submit their concerns and feedback. This will help the crisis task force keep its finger on the pulse of the organization, while giving employees assurance that their voice is being heard.

Leaders must walk a delicate balance by confronting the brutal facts to demonstrate they have an accurate understanding of the current reality, and also being careful not to allow this to descend into unhelpful negativity and pessimism. The key is to acknowledge the current reality while refocusing people on the more positive outcomes. No matter how bad the current situation feels, we will get through this. That message is challenging to deliver, but critical for employees to hear. They need to know that their leaders are aware of the current challenges and are actively working to move the organization through the crisis.

In addition, employees need to feel comfortable coming to their leaders with questions, concerns or feedback. This is a source of information too few leaders tap into during a crisis.

Examples of establishing open dialogue for employees:

- *Set up a new email address or chat channel for questions related to the crisis.*
- *Hold virtual “town hall” sessions with Q&A from key leaders or members of the crisis team.*
- *Set up crisis team “office hours” where employees can voice their concerns and ask questions from members of the crisis team or key leaders.*

4. Practice Clear and Frequent Communication

In times of crisis, communication must happen early and often. The longer you wait to connect with your workforce, the more anxiety it will feel. Establish a proper meeting cadence for your teams and commit to a frequency for sending communication to your employees. Even though you may not have much to update at times, or if the new information you received seems trivial, regular communication with your team is essential to keeping everyone calm and aligned. When crafting your message, use concise language and an easily digestible format such as bullet points. Structure with the most critical information first. Long-drawn-out messages will not be as easily understood, and important information may be accidentally missed or dismissed by the reader or listener. Keep your messages short and to the point, and make sure everyone understands “the why” behind any actions you are announcing.

When developing your clear messaging, ask yourself these questions:

- Does the message provide clarity on the audience’s key questions?
- Does it clearly address their concerns?

Demonstrating great empathy and walking in the shoes of your employees will show you are putting your people, not the business, first.

Transition communication...

From Monthly communication

To Daily or weekly communication

From Heavy context

To Critical information first

From Paragraph-style writing

To Bullet points

From Focused on the tactics

To Purpose- and values-driven

From Business-focused

To People-focused

5. Avoid Timelines and Instill Confidence

Leaders will feel compelled to answer the question, “When will this be over?” In times of uncertainty, it is human nature to ask for a timeline of when we can expect the worst to pass and things can return to normal. As leaders, falling into this trap can be more detrimental than we realize.

The “Stockdale Paradox” gives guidance to leaders facing an uncertain future.^[4] The paradox goes like this: In the face of adversity, we must be grounded in reality *and* optimistic for the future. Applied to the crisis today, leaders must embrace the uncertainty and avoid offering timelines while also maintaining unwavering confidence that the organization will prevail. Confidence and hopeful messaging will only strengthen your employees’ trust in your leadership when the crisis eventually passes.

Instead of this:

“We will be working from home until April 30 and return to work as normal in May.”

Try this:

“We will be working from home for the next several weeks and will be reevaluating work-from-home status on a weekly basis. Amid these times of great uncertainty, we aim to keep our organization well-informed and commit to keeping you updated every Tuesday and Friday.”

We all wish we weren't confronted with this current crisis. It's easy to get pulled into the uncertainty, which can lead to fear and pessimism. An often quoted expression states, "Never waste a crisis." It's always easier to lead during good times. True leadership, though, emerges during hard times. The steps outlined in this article will build a sense of community and encourage a feeling within your organization that "we are all in this together." People need that during times of great uncertainty. They need leaders who will confront the realities before them while never losing sight of the end goal. As leaders, we must lean on our company purpose and values, leverage our teams, and approach the uncertain future with great resolve. Our people need strong leadership now more than ever. No list of recommendations will ever be comprehensive, but the steps in this article will help point leaders in the right direction, focus them on what truly matters, and reassure their people that—just like every other crisis we've faced—we will make it through.

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1. Sinek, Simon. "Infinite Game." Portfolio Penguin, 2020. Page 63
 2. Curphy, Gordon J., Nilsen, Dianne L., Hogan, Robert, "Ignition: A Guide to Building High-Performing Teams." Page 20. Print
 3. Collins, Jim C. "Good to Great." Random House Business, 2001. Page 74.
 4. Collins, Jim C. "Good to Great." Random House Business, 2001. Page 83.

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