

Lead Your Team through Change: The Importance of Communicating with Employees during the Pandemic

Written by: Sharon Van Auken, CITEC Business Solutions www.citec.org
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Introduction

Businesses and employees are facing an unprecedented time of uncertainty, instability, and stress. Business leaders have a lot to think about and plan for, in addition to possibly having to shift gears completely to stay afloat. And there isn't the luxury of time for reviewing data or strategic planning; leaders must be decisive in the moment about all aspects of their business.

One of the wrenching decisions that leaders have to make is with regard to their employees. Will they be able to retain employees? Will they need to consider layoffs or furloughs of employees? Can they reshuffle work schedules and modify the work to meet requirements to keep employees safe and meet product demand, or lack thereof?

Through the whirlwind of decisions that need to be made, and whatever the decisions are, one of the most important things for organizational leadership to do is to communicate with employees every step of the way. To be most effective, communication should come from the very top of the organization.

The Purpose of Regular Communication: To Inform and Engage

First and foremost, regular communication is necessary to inform employees of what is happening with the business and the market, and then to inform them of what that means for their jobs. It is important for company leaders to be authentic. Authenticity develops trust, and employees will appreciate hearing the truth. Even if you don't know the path forward yet, being honest with employees and demonstrating empathy for them will make them feel more connected to you and the organization. Future regular communication can lay out the path forward, and employees will feel that they are an important part of it. You will bring them along by being authentic and open about the organization's plans and progress, and communicating that regularly.

Communication can also be used to keep employees engaged and focused during the crisis. For those employees who are working, it can help them to feel a part of something that is important in keeping the community and country functioning and responding. For those who have been furloughed, it will keep them connected to your business so that they will be ready to return when that is possible. And for those employees that have to be laid off, clear communications about the layoff will leave them feeling supported and, they too, may return to your business one day.

In the same way that a business continuity plan is developed, it is important to create a communication plan that can be followed in the weeks and months ahead. Once the crisis is behind, this solid communication plan may continue to be a crucial part of your business strategy. As business growth had ramped up in recent years, employees were regularly complaining of a lack of communication from senior management. This is the perfect time to resolve that.

Following are some ideas and considerations for communication to employees during this critical time.

Messaging to all Employees

A crisis provides an opportunity to forge a message of unity among employees and with the company. It is a chance to remind employees what your organization does best, how your organization supports the local community and the larger global community, and what your organization does best when employees work together in that effort.

Start your message by explaining specifically why certain changes are happening. As early as you know, let employees know an approximate timeframe for how long the business, or parts of the business, will be affected. Any details that you can share will help to alleviate the anxiety that employees will surely feel about the changes occurring.

Focus on positive aspects of the changes. Perhaps it is showcasing the agility of the organization by explaining quickly undertaken re-tooling efforts. Perhaps you can cite examples of how your organization will join other organizations to solve new problems. Communications that encourage and inspire employees will generate greater employee engagement.

Messaging to Further Employee Engagement

Larger organizations will benefit from designating “change champions” who carry out much of the communication messaging for their respective divisions or departments. It is still important for employees to hear from top leadership, but change champions enable the messaging to be more personalized and frequent. For this approach to be most effective, top leadership should communicate regularly with the change champions and develop talking points that ensure consistent messaging across the organization. **A big pitfall with this approach can be mixed messaging.** It is very important that all messaging is synchronized as it relates to changes that are occurring or being implemented.

Unfortunately, this might be a time when employee recognition programs are dropped because everyone is too busy working on present-day problems or staffing numbers are depleted. But it is the perfect time to encourage new programs that keep employees engaged. Employees can be encouraged to share positive stories, both from work and from the community. These stories can be collected and shared with all employees once per week. Whenever possible, continue to have successes and creative new ideas celebrated. If in-person gatherings aren't possible, have virtual celebrations or post stories and kudos to internal web sites and bulletin boards. All of these types of messaging will help employees remain positive and feel connected to each other and the organization. This is even more important in these times when part of our crisis involves distancing ourselves from others.

Communicating to Employees who are Furloughed or Laid Off

Clear and thoughtful communication to employees who are being furloughed or laid off is especially important. You hope that these employees will be able to rejoin the organization in the future. Being authentic and empathetic in your communication is critical. Provide them with an explanation of why this is happening. It may seem obvious on the surface, but employees want to know specifically why it is happening to them. They need to know that it is the result of a loss of business, or whatever has occurred, and not because of poor performance on their part. They want reassurance that they might be able to return to work for the organization one day. You don't want to provide false hope, but if your goal is to return these employees to work once the crisis abates, then let them know that.

An important component of communications to employees that are being furloughed or laid off is about their wages and benefits, and resources where they can go for additional information. Provide as much specific or customized information as possible, and supply employees with necessary forms, a list of websites, links, or phone numbers and contacts for additional information. Reassure them that your organization is available to answer any questions that they may have.

Communicating to Current Employees

If business can continue, but some employees, shifts, or product lines need to be reduced, then the details about how this will occur, the timing of changes, benefits available to employees in the interim, and other similar information is critical to communicate as soon as decisions are made.

For employees who are working remotely but don't have specific day-to-day tasks, assign projects they can work on to help the organization be stronger in the future. Is there project clean-up work that no one was able to get to previously? Down time for some employees provides a great opportunity for tying up loose ends. Is there brainstorming that groups of employees can do to inform future projects or solve past problems? Even though current business might be only a fraction of what it is in normal times, regular communication to employees can sow anticipation and help create a future vision that keeps employees engaged and focused.

Communicate, Communicate, and Communicate Some More

There is an old adage in Marketing that you have to say something 7 times in 7 different mediums for the information to stick. The number probably isn't important, but the idea is. People hear different things every time they hear a message. Generally, and ideally, they glean more information each time. And people respond differently to learning and absorbing information through different mediums. One employee might read a sign posted in the breakroom or on the company website and know exactly what to do, while another employee may walk by the sign every day and not even notice it, let alone check the website for updates. It is important to use a variety of messaging mediums, and to communicate frequently with employees for all to be on board.

Change is Hard

Change is hard because it threatens our sense of safety and security. Resistance to change is often about fear of the unknown. And never is that more the reality than in our current public health crisis with its resulting effect on our economy.

The best way that leaders can help employees adapt to the changes that we are all facing is to provide clarity and reassurance about what will be happening to them. Communicating regularly and honestly will go a long way toward helping them over the hurdles that change imposes. Great change leaders must employ their soft skills and emotional intelligence in order to bring employees along, to engage them, and to help them feel secure in this changed time. Communicating the impacts to employees with as much clarity and honesty as possible, and through frequent messaging, will help employees to feel that they are an important part of your organization – both now and in the future.