

SURVIVE & THRIVE

# Crisis Communications TOOLKIT

*Strategies for communicating with employees during the COVID-19 crisis*



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## Crisis Communications

In this age of fake news and information overload, research has shown that people trust their employers more than governments or the news media when it comes to communicating during a crisis. It is therefore critical that employers get their crisis communications right.

As the COVID-19 crisis evolves, internal communication will remain essential, but the focus will need to change. To keep employees informed and engaged, make sure that you are meeting their needs and expectations.

This toolkit provides you with the key principles of crisis communication and takes you through the stages of crisis management. It also showcases the 'Aspirational Communication Model' to help you inspire a vision for the future.

“

*In a crisis, employee communication is often the thin thread that holds everyone and everything together.*

”

# The 6 principles of crisis communication

*We can have a real and measurable effect on the wellbeing of our employees by what we say, when we say it, and how we say it.*

1.

**BE QUICK**

Crises are time sensitive. Communicating information quickly is crucial. The first source of information often becomes the preferred source.

2.

**BE ACCURATE**

Accuracy establishes credibility. Information can include what is known, what is not known, and what is being done to fill in the gaps.

3.

**BE CREDIBLE**

Honesty and truthfulness should not be compromised during crises.

4.

**EXPRESS EMPATHY**

Addressing what people are feeling, and the challenges they face, builds trust and rapport.

5.

**PROMOTE ACTION**

Giving people meaningful things to do calms anxiety, helps to restore order, and promotes some sense of control.

6.

**SHOW RESPECT**

Respectful communication is particularly important when people feel vulnerable and helps to promote cooperation and rapport.

Source: U.S Department of Health and Human Services: Centres for Disease Control and Prevention

## Responding to Covid-19 phases

*It is important to understand how the situation changes during each phase of this crisis and what communication actions can be applied.*

PHASE	REACTING TO THE CRISIS	HELPING EVERYONE ADJUST	RETURNING TO THE 'NEW NORMAL'
<b>Feelings</b> 	<p>"I'm scared about what is happening."</p> <p>"I'm uncertain about the future."</p> <p>"I'm confused about what to do."</p>	<p>"I'm feeling anxious about whether or not my job is secure."</p> <p>"I'm trying to adjust to this new way of working."</p> <p>"I'm eager to get back into a regular routine."</p>	<p>"I'm so thankful that I have a job and a company that cares about me."</p> <p>"I'm excited about the new direction of the organisation."</p> <p>"I'm still unsure about how things will work now."</p>
<b>Objectives</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Keep employees informed about how the organisation is responding</li> <li>● Acknowledge emotions</li> <li>● Provide reassurance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Keep employees informed about the crisis</li> <li>● Reinforce company strategy, reprioritise as needed</li> <li>● Foster connections / community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ensure employees understand the company strategy and how they contribute</li> <li>● Help employees feel connected to each other</li> <li>● Prepare for the next crisis</li> </ul>
<b>Ideas</b> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Create a crisis hub</li> <li>✓ Address operational issues</li> <li>✓ Ensure leaders provide frequent updates</li> <li>✓ Host manager check-ins with teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Ensure leaders communicate priorities</li> <li>✓ Equip managers to lay out expectations</li> <li>✓ Update crisis hub</li> <li>✓ Leverage collaboration tools</li> <li>✓ Conduct a pulse-check survey to understand what employees need</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Help leaders re-emphasise strategy, focus on what is new</li> <li>✓ Equip managers to help teams understand how they will operate differently</li> <li>✓ Maintain collaboration tools and tactics</li> <li>✓ Focus on key initiatives and wellness</li> <li>✓ Leverage lessons learned</li> </ul>

Source: Davis & Company

## 4 Ways people process information during a crisis

*By understanding how people process information during a crisis, we can improve how we communicate with them.*

### DURING A CRISIS ...

#### We simplify messages

Under intense stress and possible information overload, we tend to miss the nuances of health and safety messages due to:

- Our inability to juggle multiple facts during a crisis,
- Not remembering as much of the information as we normally could,
- Misinterpreting confusing action messages.

#### We hold onto current beliefs

Faced with new risks in an emergency, we may have to rely on experts with whom we have little or no experience. Often, reputable experts disagree regarding the level of threat, risks, and appropriate advice. The tendency of experts to offer opposing views leaves many of us with increased uncertainty and fear. We may be more likely to take advice from a trusted source with which we are familiar, even if this source does not have emergency-related expertise and provides inaccurate information.

#### We look for additional information and opinions

During crises, we want messages confirmed before taking action. You may find that you or other individuals are likely to do the following:

- Call friends and family to see if others have heard the same messages,
- Turn to a known and credible local leader for advice,
- Check multiple social media channels to see what our contacts are saying.

#### We believe the first message

During a crisis, the speed of a response can be an important factor in reducing harm. In the absence of information, we may begin to speculate and fill in the blanks. The first message to reach us may be the accepted message, even though more accurate information may follow. Because of the ways we process information while under stress, when communicating with someone facing a crisis or disaster, messages should be simple, credible and consistent.

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR COMMUNICATORS?

Use simple messages

Provide clear instructions/  
action points

Messages should come  
from a credible source

Acknowledge existing beliefs  
but provide reasons why they  
should change

Repeat critical information

Use consistent messaging  
across all your  
comms channels

Provide examples of what other  
reputable companies are doing  
to cope with the crisis

Release accurate messages  
as soon as possible

Use holding messages (i.e. we  
are working on this and will get  
back to you) rather than not  
communicating at all

An effective crisis message must do the following:

- ✓ Be repeated
- ✓ Come from multiple, credible sources
- ✓ Be specific to the crisis being experienced
- ✓ Offer a positive course of action that can be executed

*During a crisis, people may experience a wide range of emotions. Psychological barriers can interfere with our ability to cooperate and respond. Crisis communicators should anticipate certain patterns, as described below.*



### MENTAL STATES



#### Uncertainty

Unfortunately, there are more questions than answers during a crisis, especially at the outset. The full magnitude of the crisis, the cause of the disaster and the actions that people can take to protect themselves may be unclear. This uncertainty will challenge even the greatest communicator.



#### Fear, anxiety and dread

In a crisis, people may feel fear, anxiety, confusion and intense dread. As communicators, our job is not to make these feelings go away. Instead, you could acknowledge these feelings in a statement of empathy. You can use a statement like “We’ve never faced anything like this before in our community and it can be frightening.”

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR COMMUNICATORS?

#### ACKNOWLEDGE UNCERTAINTY

Acknowledge and express empathy for your audience’s uncertainty and share the process you are using to get more information about the evolving situation.

#### TELL THEM

- What you know
- What you don’t know
- What processes you are using to get answers

Never make a promise, no matter how heartfelt, unless it is in your absolute power to deliver.

#### PROVIDE ACTION MESSAGES

Fear can be debilitating. Communicators can help by portraying an accurate assessment of the level of danger and provide action messages, so that affected people do not feel helpless.

## MENTAL STATES

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR COMMUNICATORS?



## Hopelessness and helplessness

Avoiding hopelessness and helplessness is a vital communication objective during a crisis. According to psychological research, if people let their feelings of fear, anxiety, confusion, and dread grow unchecked during a crisis, they will most likely begin to feel hopeless or helpless. If this happens, people will be less motivated and less able to take actions that could improve their circumstances.

## SET A COURSE OF ACTION

Instead of trying to eliminate people's emotional response to the crisis, help them manage their negative feelings by providing a course of action. Taking action during a crisis can help to restore a sense of control and feelings of empowerment. Actions should be constructive, for example, making home-made facemasks, preparing food parcels for vulnerable people, or creating a family/colleagues' 'check-in plan'.



## Denial

Denial refers to the act of refusing to acknowledge either imminent harm or harm that has already occurred. Denial occurs for a variety of reasons.

## CONSISTENT MESSAGING FROM TRUSTED SOURCES

Denial can, at least in part, be prevented or addressed with clear, consistent communication from a trusted source. If your audience receives and understands a consistent message from multiple trusted sources, they will be more likely to believe that message and act on it.

In the organisational context, consider using leaders, line managers and respected colleagues to communicate key messages.



## Panic

Contrary to what you may see in the movies, people seldom act completely irrationally during a crisis. Reactions to a crisis, particularly when at the extreme ends of fight-or-flight, are often described erroneously as "panic" by the media but are viewed as perfectly rational by the individual.

## REDIRECT ACTIONS

Acknowledge people's desire to take protective steps, redirect them to actions they can take, and explain why the unwanted behaviour is potentially harmful to them or the organisation. Appeal to people's sense of community to help them resist unwanted actions focused on individual protection.

## Structuring your crisis messages

*Communicating during a crisis is different from routine communication. Under stress, it's harder to understand and remember messages. Consider the following factors when creating your messages.*

**CREDIBILITY**  
(Speed of release and accuracy of information)



**TRUST**  
(Empathy and openness)



**SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION**



**Present a concise message:** Only include relevant information and avoid jargon and technical terms.



**Repeat the main message:** Repetition helps people remember the message, especially during a crisis.



**Give action steps in positives (when feasible):** Whenever possible, use positive messages such as “drink boiled water” instead of negatives like “do not drink the water”. Simply telling someone not to do something can leave them looking for/unsure of acceptable action steps.



**Create action steps in threes:** In an emergency, people only remember three simple directions. A good example of this is “stop, drop and roll” when responding to a fire. Be very clear about what you want people to do.



**Use personal pronouns:** Use phrases such as, “We are committed to”, or “We understand the need for ...”. Pronouns personalise the message and help with credibility and cohesion.



**Respect people's fears and perceptions:** Do not judge or use condescending phrases. Instead say things like: “It is normal to feel anxious in times like this.”



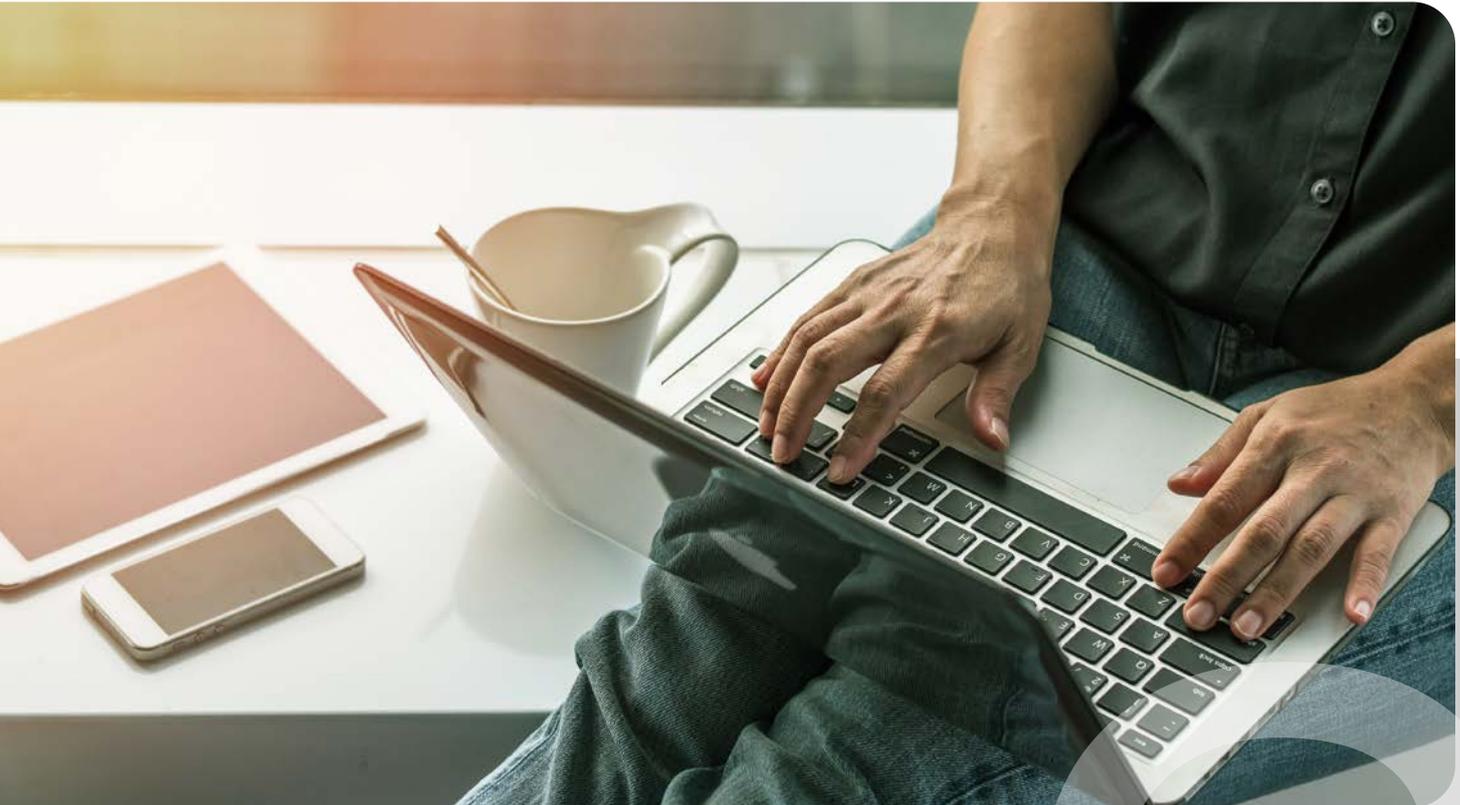
**Inform their decisions:** Avoid being paternalistic. Instead of just telling people what to do, inform their decisions. And explain the ‘why’.



**Avoid humour:** Humour is never a good idea in crisis communication. Be cautious not to offend others. That does not mean you cannot show your human side – always be empathetic.

## Selecting channels

*During a crisis, use as many channels as possible. It is important to ensure the widest distribution of messages. Always ensure close coordination and overall consistency of messages between channels. Whilst messages will need to be adapted to the selected communication channel, consistency is key. Remember to take frontline and blue-collar workers into account – they do not always have access to email. Also consider language and cultural diversity across your workforce.*



Questions to ask:

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- **Which channels are most likely to reach your target audience?**
- **Which channels are most appropriate for your message?**
- **Which channels will be the most accessible given the specific event?**
- **Which channels will the target audience find credible?**
- **Which channels will deliver the message in the appropriate time frame?**

## Emphasising the positive: the aspirational communication model

As we move through the stages of crisis management, and start thinking about the ‘new normal’, it is important to remember that crises often result in changing the way the future is viewed.

According to the CDC (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention), a crisis can lead to “a new sense of strength and empowerment, a renewed sense of community, and opportunities for growth and renewal.” Tapping into positive emotions like these – and appealing to people’s aspirations for themselves and their communities – can power up persuasion and motivation.

The Aspirational Communication Model shown below provides a systematic, science-based approach to communicating with maximum motivating power. Drawing from motivational, cognitive, and social psychology, the model suggests that you achieve greater levels of interest and engagement when you connect with people on multiple levels.



**ASPIRATIONAL: Appeal to people’s hopes and values.** This crisis offers an opportunity to call on people’s aspirations, offering them language, ideas, and actions that encourage them to be the best version of themselves.



**SOCIAL: Put people in the picture.** We look to others like us—and to those we respect and admire—for cues as to how we should think and behave. And we tend to take actions that we see others taking. It is crucial to put people in the picture that appeal to your audience.



**EMOTIONAL: Speak to both the heart and the head.** Emotions run high in times of crisis, and they can motivate productive action—or counter-productive action. To motivate people to take productive action, communications must speak to both the heart and head. Remind people that there is a future after COVID-19, and whilst it will certainly look different, we all have a role to play.



**FUNCTIONAL: Offer benefits that people understand and value.** To take productive action, people must know what to do. The key is to keep things super simple. Eradicate all expert jargon from crisis communications, and only use language that is familiar to your audience. Outline the key steps that the company and your employees can take to create a ‘new normal’.

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**ABOUT**

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**We make internal communications more engaging, helping employees work with clarity and a sense of purpose.**

