Effective Communication for Leaders and Organizations through COVID-19

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Overview

• Examples from recent research: employee perspectives on communication from employers during the COVID-19 pandemic

• Risk communication guidance (CDC and WHO frameworks)

• Considerations for leaders and employers
  ➢ barriers to working/returning to work during the COVID-19 pandemic
  ➢ factors that may interfere with compliance with public health advice, including guidance from leaders and employers

Goal: begin to design communication strategies that support employees during this crisis
A word about this heterogeneous audience

- Health Links network (HR professionals, health and safety personnel, leadership members in organizations throughout Colorado, including many small businesses)
- Public Health/Anschutz Medical Campus professionals
- (other) Team leaders/supervisors
- (other) Employees

----- Working from home; those beginning to return to work; essential workers, still working, but potentially at personal risk; healthcare workers and more

- Those who have lost a job and are experiencing financial strain
- Those who are worried about job loss
- Those caring for others (children, older parents, those with special needs)
- Those considered in high risk groups for COVID-19 (older, medically fragile, others)
- Those who have lost a loved one to COVID-19
- Those struggling with personal health concerns
- Many others

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From the Guide: Uncertain times elevate the importance of clear, credible communication from leaders. Organizations most likely to survive and emerge with reputations intact will be those that:

- Communicate proactively at every stage of the crisis while constantly looking ahead
- Balance reassurance and realism
- Anticipate stakeholder concerns and address them clearly and forthrightly
- Put calm, authentic leaders forward

Colorado Chamber has partnered with Linhart PR to provide a free white paper on effective crisis communications for the business community.

Leaders have risen to the challenge of communicating with employees during the pandemic.

However, leaders were more likely than employees to rate communications as effective across domains.

Less than half of employees said they believe their organization is extremely or very interested in hearing employee feedback during this pandemic.

In future communications, respondents want –

• more transparency about what the organization knows and doesn’t know,

• more resources for emotional and mental health, including dealing with stress and anxiety, and

• stronger acknowledgement of the difficulty of the situation.
In addition, they wanted

• to understand clear plans for the organization’s future
• the impact of the disruption on their role, work and job security
• more consistent, frequent and direct communications from top leaders
• more direct acknowledgement of misinformation and/or rumors
• More information about sick days, personal days and other benefits to deal with sick family members, children at home, etc.

“Being transparent, being as clear as possible, staying calm and showing empathy are critical. These steps, along with demonstrating openness to feedback and clarifying what the future looks like, are top priorities for building greater employee satisfaction and trust.”

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Crisis life cycle, needs vary with the cycle’s stages.

- 1-Early stages, **instructive** information to encourage calm; how to stay safe is fundamental.
- 2-As people begin to follow safety instructions, shift to a focus on **adjusting** to change & uncertainty.
- 3-Finally, as the end comes into view, ramp up information to help people make sense of the crisis and its impact (**internalizing**).

Based on Crisis Stage Models, reviewed here

See McKinsey & Company for crisis communication life cycle

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Public health communication guidelines during crises

- CDC: Crisis Emergency Risk Communications (CERC)
- World Health Organization: Risk Communication in Health Emergencies

7 Things to Consider When Communicating About Health

1. Trust: Will people trust the information? Who is the best source to put the information out?
2. Information: What information is necessary, and how will people find it? How much is enough, or too much?
3. Motivation: How relevant is the information to the people we’re trying to reach?
4. Environment: What are the conditions that surround and affect the audience?
5. Capacity: What is people’s ability to act on the information? Are there barriers?
6. Perception: What will the audience think about the information? What will inspire them to act on it?
7. Response: How will people respond? What can we do to stay engaged with them and give them support as they take action?
By understanding how people take in information during a crisis state, we can better plan to 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 by doing the following:

- Not fully hearing information because of our inability to juggle multiple facts during a crisis.
- Not remembering as much of the information as we normally could.

- Misinterpreting confusing action messages.

To cope, many of us may not attempt a logical and reasoned approach to decision making. Instead, we may rely on habits and long-held practices. We might follow bad examples set by others.

Use simple messages.

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Give people clear instructions about actions that are easy to perform, especially when introducing threatening information (such as health risks). Threatening communication: a critical re-analysis and a revised meta-analytic test of fear appeal theory.

Build Trust and Credibility by Expressing:
- Empathy and caring.
- Competence and expertise.
- Honesty and openness.
- Commitment and dedication.

Top Tips:
- Consistent messages are vital.
- Don’t over-reassure.
- Acknowledge uncertainty.
- Express wishes. (“I wish I had answers.”)
- Explain the process in place to find answers.
- Acknowledge people’s fear.
- Give people things to do.
- Ask more of people (share risk).

As a Spokesperson:
- Know your organization’s policies.
- Stay within the scope of responsibilities.
- Tell the truth. Be transparent.
- Embody your agency’s identity.

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Trust and credibility of the message (messenger)

Key elements to building trust:
- Empathy and caring
- Competence and expertise
- Honesty
-Commitment
- Accountability

Communicate…

What is known
What is not known

What you are doing to find out what is not known

People seem to be able to tolerate you being wrong if you’re honest about why you were wrong and what you were wrong about and what you’re doing to correct it. But if you are ever perceived as being a dishonest broker of information, I think it’s just about impossible to recover from it.”

- Julie Gerberding, M.D., Director, CDC, SARS, 2003

There were a lot of times during SARS where we were trying to balance you know being first, being credible and being right. And we at CDC made the conscious decision that our credibility was the most important thing. And so that honesty of ‘we don’t know, we’re sorry we don’t know, we feel terrible we don’t know and that we’re all in this predicament,’ it’s a much better message than trying to pretend that you know something when you don’t or try to reassure people when there really is no foundation for the reassurance.

- Julie Gerberding, M.D., Director, CDC, SARS, 2003

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A.3.: Community engagement

**Recommendation**

Identify people that the community trusts and build relationships with them. Involve them in decision-making to ensure interventions are collaborative, contextually appropriate and that communication is community-owned.

Strong recommendation
Moderate quality evidence
What we are learning from our research with domestic violence (intimate partner abuse) public service messaging campaigns among refugee groups.

Community designed messaging campaigns can be a powerful way to change attitudes and behaviors. This capitalizes on social norms-based approaches to behavioral change (messages from “in-group” members = more credible).

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Main points, global perspectives –

- Lots of misinformation and as a result, there are credibility concerns associated with specific sources of information.
- Messaging must be tailored to the needs of the specific population (including at risk or otherwise vulnerable sub-groups).
- Mental health and psychosocial support is a critical component that should be incorporated in messaging campaigns/communications.
- How to reach groups that may be less accessible (e.g., not online, limited access to technology).

Courtesy: Dr. Courtney Welton-Mitchell, Colorado School of Public Health © 2020
Consider barriers to return to work that may be unique to your (diverse) employees.

- High risk groups
- Caring for others at home (children, others)
Public health guidance (or guidance from an employer)

Social Science research relevant to understanding factors that can influence compliance with public health guidance

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Recommended books

- Risk perception
- Social Norms
- Cognitive bias

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Why do some reject accepted health guidance?

- Charismatic leader
- **Confirmation** bias and the internet
- Nature of **risk perception**
- **Myopia** – focus on the short-term
- **Optimism** – underestimate negative outcomes
- **Inertia** – maintain the status quo, especially in the face of uncertainty about benefits of protective measures
- **Simplification** – tendency to selectively attend to only a subset of the relevant facts.
- **Herding** (social norms) – tendency to base choices on the observed or perceived actions of others.

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Additional Forms of Cognitive Bias

False Consensus Effect: tendency to overestimate how much other people agree with you (misperception of social norms).

The Dunning-Kruger Effect: when people believe that they are smarter and more capable than they actually are, can't recognize the limits of their knowledge.

Anecdotal Bias: people are more likely to base decisions on anecdotal information (e.g., personal stories) instead of facts, especially when anxious.

Experts suggest that when evaluating information you find online, confirm that it comes from a trusted source such as the CDC or WHO before sharing it.

Confusion about changing messages may make people more susceptible to misinformation.
Other barriers to compliance with public health messaging that need to be considered: Racism, stigma, xenophobia...
Employees want resources for emotional and mental health, including for dealing with stress and anxiety.
Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Many people are experiencing mental health difficulties associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Feelings of grief, fear and anxiety are common, along with sleep disturbances, difficulty concentrating and more.

**COVID-19's Psychological Toll: Mental Distress Among Americans Has Tripled During the Pandemic Compared to 2018**

*The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use* (Panchal et al, April 21, 2020)

*Factors Associated With Mental Health Outcomes Among Health CareWorkers Exposed to Coronavirus Disease 2019* (Lai et al., 2020)

*Immediate Psychological Responses and Associated Factors during the Initial Stage of the 2019 Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Epidemic among the General Population in China* (Wang et al., 2020)
Detrimental effects of chronic stress

**SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS**

**BEHAVIOR SIGNS**
- Worrying about things you didn’t worry about before
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy (hobbies)
- Wanting to withdraw from people and activities
- Poor concentration, confusion; forgetfulness
- Uncertainty or trouble making decisions
- Relationship problems
- Sad mood
- Feeling anxious
- Change in personality, irritability
- Negative thinking
- Increased smoking/drinking

**PHYSICAL SIGNS**
- Weight loss or gain, changes in appetite
- Stomach or gastrointestinal problems
- Poor or disturbed sleep
- Clenching or grinding teeth
- Chest pain
- Poor hygiene

**Stress can impact job performance**

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COVID-19 Webinar: Practical Strategies for Supporting Mental Health During COVID-19

Courtney Welton-Mitchell, PhD

Includes resources for individuals at the local and nationwide level, including self-help, hotlines and telemental health.
**For Leaders: COVID-19 Talking Points, Briefing Cards, Briefing Templates, Graphics, Videos and more to tailor**

**Information for Leaders** *(CAC-enabled milSuite page)*

Information for leaders is available on APHC’s CAC-enabled milSuite page and includes talking points, briefing cards, and briefing templates that Leaders can use to tailor COVID-19 information for their populations.

**Army Information:**

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Understanding Health Protection Condition (HPCON) Levels

Support a Healthy Immune System with Proper Sleep, Activity, & Nutrition (P3)

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People need timely, accurate, credible information.
Top 10 Tips to Protect Employees’ Health

Healthy employees are crucial to your business. Here are 10 ways to help them stay healthy.

1. Actively encourage sick employees to stay home. Develop policies that encourage sick employees to stay at home without fear of reprisals, and ensure employees are aware of these policies.

2. Develop other flexible policies for scheduling and telework (if feasible) and create leave policies to allow employees to stay home to care for sick family members or care for children if schools and childcare close.

3. Promote etiquette for coughing and sneezing and handwashing. Provide tissues, no-touch trash cans, soap and water, and hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol.

4. Have conversations with employees about their concerns. Some employees may be at higher risk for severe illness, such as older adults and those with chronic medical conditions.

5. Talk with companies that provide your business with contract or temporary employees about their plans. Discuss the importance of sick employees staying home and encourage them to develop non-punitive “emergency sick leave” policies.

6. Plan to implement practices to minimize face-to-face contact between employees if social distancing is recommended by your state or local health department. Actively encourage flexible work arrangements such as teleworking or staggered shifts.

Resources related to employee performance and well-being (meta analysis, 2017)

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“In this crisis leaders can draw on a wealth of research, precedent, and experience to build organizational resilience through an extended period of uncertainty, and even turn a crisis into a catalyst for positive change.”

-McKinsey & Company, management consulting

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