

Communicating COVID-19

Communication with the public and employees is important right now. Good communication keeps people safe and healthy. It inspires trust, and it keeps your organization functioning well. Here are some principles to keep in mind, whether you are speaking to one person or a whole organization.

Stay focused on the main problem.

For leaders and decision makers, there are two of them. The first problem is the need to keep people safe and healthy. That includes the public and your employees. The second problem is managing the economic challenges that COVID-19 presents. That includes the ability for businesses to survive, and the ability of people to maintain basics like food and shelter. There will be countless discussions about the many aspects of those two challenges. The more you stay focused on how all these different discussions relate to those core challenges, the more successful you will be as a service provider and as a communicator.

Respond quickly.

The World Health Organization's leading Ebola outbreak manager said it best: "Be fast. Have no regrets... Perfection is the enemy of the good when it comes to emergency management." If your communication is getting held up over debates about precise wording, or you're struggling to create infographics, you're wasting precious time. Two rookie communicators used Twitter to evacuate Fort McMurray safely, when everything around their community was on fire. Use the tools you have, and the tools you know. A 60-second video can be shot and posted on social media in minutes. Facebook Live can reach thousands of people from your desk, using a phone. Internally, you may need to look at ways to streamline approvals, to make sure you are providing good information, quickly.

Frame and contain the crisis.

Most communicators have been doing a great job of explaining what needs to be done and why: 'Practice social distancing. Just stay home. Wash your hands. Flatten the curve. We need to help our health care system manage the demand. Grocery stores will be open and stocked.' When people are self-isolating in their homes, the crisis is contained. When they are panic shopping for toilet paper, it is not. Don't let side issues become the story.

Provide clear and reliable information.

Don't re-invent the wheel. Amplify and share messages from credible, official sources. Retweet or share messages from your local health unit, your local municipality or school board, and information from provincial and federal governments. Rumours, news reports, and public debates are unhelpful distractions. When Facebook pages get messy, share the latest quality information, in short, simple posts. Avoid debates.

Demonstrate leadership and compassion.

The cooperation we are seeing across Canada is quite amazing – and it is inspiring public confidence. Help to maintain that sense of teamwork. When you disagree with colleagues or with other service providers, disagree well. Be constructive and communicate in a way that solves problems without offending or embarrassing others. If someone is yelling at you on Facebook, or frustrated in a line-up, ask yourself what they're afraid of. Bad behaviour is often rooted in fear. Listen for it. Be helpful if you can. Find a way to be inspiring when disagreements arise.

Speak to what you know.

Resist the urge to be all-knowing. There is a lot that we do not know. Share the information that you have confidence in. Direct people to the right experts. Make promises that you can keep (or beat).

Actions speak louder than words.

Be consistent, to be credible. If the message is, 'remain calm, follow expert advice, and help your neighbours,' your actions should include remaining calm, endorsing the advice of public health officials, and being good to your colleagues.

Expand your communications team.

Few communications team were made for this level of demand. They will be overwhelmed. Pull other resources to divide the load. If your local library is closed and the librarian is great on Facebook, deputize that person to help you monitor your Facebook account. Someone has to tackle social media, media inquiries, staff messaging, content creation, and questions like 'what do we do next?' Many hands are needed to manage it all.

Depending on the size of your organization, a crisis communications team needs to have about three to ten people – times two or three shifts. Lots of services are shut down. Pull from that pool of available talent. No one will ever regret the communications skills they pick up and refine while helping to manage COVID-19. Good people will be happy to assist at a time like this, and many roles can be performed safely from home offices.

Provide a clear spokesperson.

The old rule that there should be one spokesperson in a crisis does not fit current realities very well. Everything and everyone has been effected. There are many people who have to communicate in many roles. One person should lead within each organization, or for each central role. Those people should be listening carefully to the needs of colleagues, so that their messages hit the right mark. Other communicators should be sharing, repeating and amplifying those clear messages.

Plain language works best.

Complicated, precise or technical language may give decision makers comfort, but comfort usually comes at the expense of speed, clarity and effectiveness. You want messages that will easily ripple through family chats and Facebook groups.

Use positive language.

Instead of, "I get it. You are out of work and you are worried about how to pay rent," say, "Stability is good right now. We want to help you if we can. Home is a good place for you right now and we are working to make staying at home easy for you."

Tend to internal needs and pressures.

Your colleagues and staff may be awesome at their jobs, but they are also human. They have their own things to worry about right now. When organizations tend to the needs of their staff, employees do a better job of looking after others. Communicate with your team on a regular basis. That means talking, listening and taking good care of the team.

Avoid a defensive, "bunker" mentality.

People will lash out at you and be critical. They will expect you to deliver more than you possibly can. You will be second-guessed and challenged. There will be long hours and frayed nerves. You must resist the temptation to be defensive, or to point fingers at others. Hunkering down and squabbling are counterproductive. Positive and productive conversations and actions move people out of crisis.

Think about how you want to be remembered.

Someday COVID-19 and your leadership will be a faint memory. Most people will want to be remembered for being calm, helpful, caring, responsive, effective, decent and well-coordinated. How do you want to be remembered? Write those words down and post them beside your phone. With respect to COVID-19, add 'kept people safe and healthy,' and 'helped our economy recover.' Those words should guide what you say and do today.

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