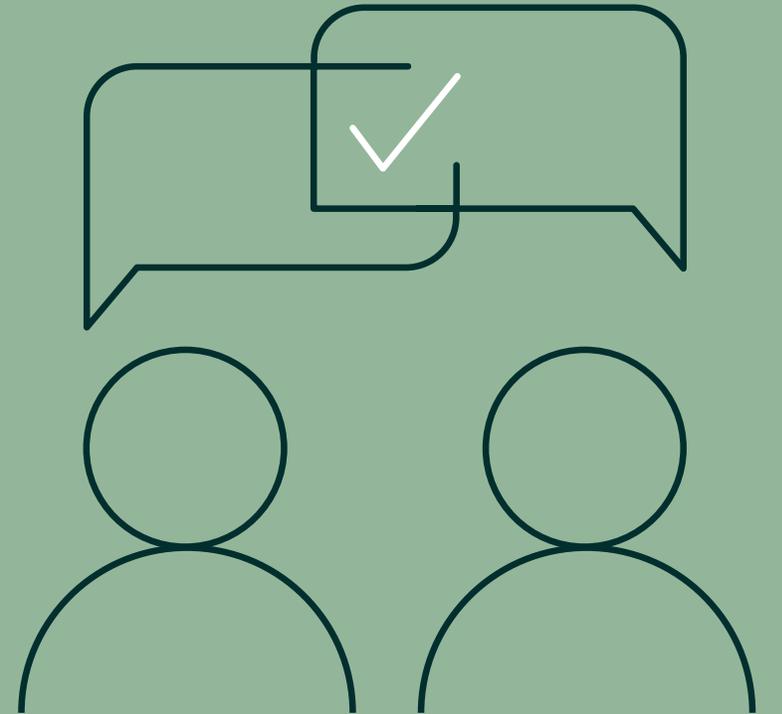# Leadership and resilience in a crisis

A guide to employee communications during the pandemic

radley yeldar.

April 2020

Building resilience through trust, compassion, stability, hope.

For people managers and internal communicators, the initial rush of COVID-19 comms is over. The phrase 'new normal' is being bandied about.

But, unsurprisingly, internal comms might still feel a little bit…awkward.

In times of crisis, human nature can take us one of two ways: toward fear and helplessness, or self-actualisation and engagement. Which direction your employees go relies in large part on how your leaders speak, behave and act.

More than ever, belief in business right now relies on our leaders to display **trust, compassion, stability** and **hope**: four universal leadership 'needs' Gallup recently identified.

While these are constant needs, how leaders express them today (and over the coming weeks and months) needs to shift with the times depending on where their business is in the crisis communications cycle: react; re-establish; rebuild.

## Leadership through the crisis life cycle

REACT   RE-ESTABLISH   RE-BUILD

● The crisis

● A crisis unfolds and the business responds. Employees crave clear information and unity.

● A new normal starts to emerge. Employees need support and empathy.

● Green shoots of recovery. Employees want productivity driven by hope and optimism.

Right now, RY is in the throes of re-establishing new normality. It's where most businesses are. Regardless of where you find yourself in the communications cycle, how can your leaders build the sense of trust, compassion, stability and hope that will be vital to surviving – and thriving?

Your employees will remember how your organisation acted during COVID-19. While no one has all the answers right now, how you make your people feel will come down to resilience of leadership.

Read on to learn how leaders can instil belief in business amongst their people.
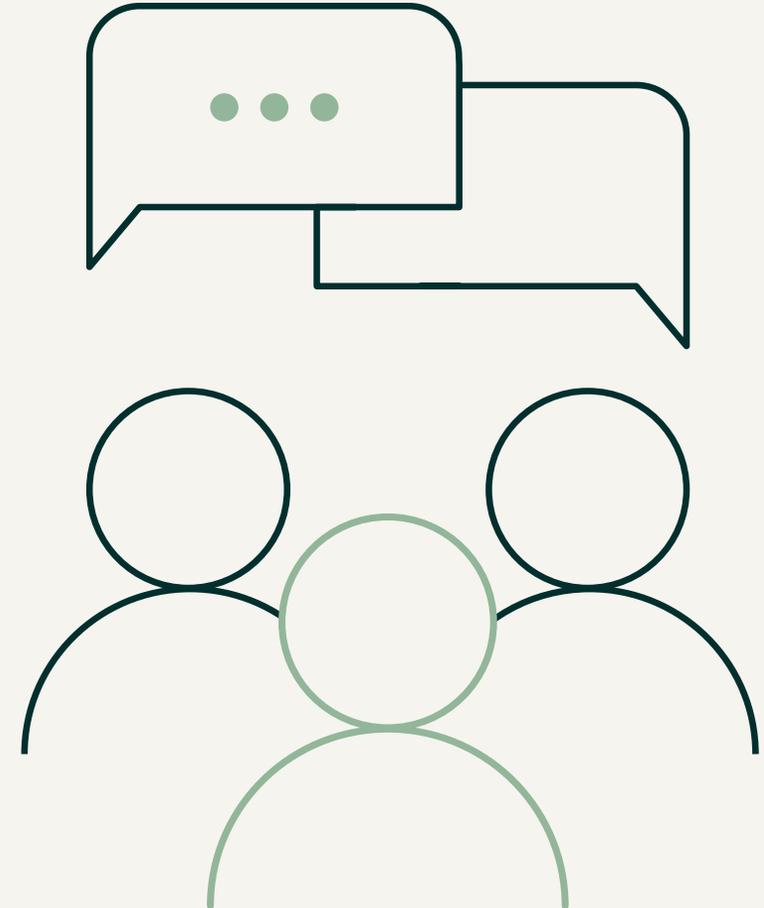
Building trust with new ways of working

Teams new to remote working are more at risk of stress, anxiety, and burnout.

With multiple channels for pings, messages and notifications, the potential to reach overload quickly is high — especially if they're new to using collaboration technology and apps.

To build trust, it's important that leaders draw clear boundaries.

Encourage your people to switch off after their agreed hours – it's not fair to contact them on any channel outside of normal working hours as this could also lead to worry and unnecessary strain.

– Consider the timing of your communications and the channels you use carefully.
  To avoid inducing unnecessary stress, make sure not every piece of communication is instantaneous

– For check-ins and neutral information, use text-only communication

– Experiment with creating a WhatsApp or Facebook group for furloughed employees so they can continue to be plugged-in 'socially' and feel in the loop (check with HR before you do to make sure contact is in line with labour legislation)

– For feedback or bad news, video chats allow for nuance and emotion

---

Setting good boundaries: in practice

Many positive stories are emerging on how businesses and teams have adapted well to lockdown. But some are reporting a very specific downside too: it's all too easy for work/life boundaries to become blurred, with stress rising as a result.

Consider how you can help your people manage their time and separate work from home life in practice. Just East recently launched a so-called 'protected hour'. It received criticism for how it was announced, but in spirit it was a constructive move.

Compassion and psychological safety

Line managers and people leaders are an organisation's most effective comms channel. Perhaps now they're the only channel.

Forming a direct connection between employees and the organisation, managers are best placed to understand employees' individual circumstances and personal needs.

In a remote working scenario, teams may be missing out on belonging and social cues – leading to a lack of the psychological safety needed to make teamwork work. That means the key piece of advice for leaders at the moment is to listen.

Not only will actively listening offer empathy and psychological safety to your people, but it will help flag emerging issues and opportunities, too.

Listening starts with asking the right questions. These could include:

– What's working well?

– How have you found remote working so far?

– What can I help you with?

– What can we learn from working at home or being away from the work environment?

– Have previous barriers to innovation, use of technology and tools, or ways of working been removed during this crisis?

– How can improvements be maintained when we go back to 'normal'?

Don't forget self compassion

Compassion doesn't – and can't - just work one way. As with any hypothetical emergency scenario: put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others. People managers are people too.

Leaders need to practice compassion for themselves and action self-care. They should role-model the boundaries set between 'work' and 'home' and allow themselves time to breathe.

And, by authentically sharing their feelings with their people (role-modelling vulnerability), leaders will make it much easier for their teams to do the same, reinforcing psychological safety as they go.

—

Stability through context and values

Uncertainty, scattered teams and waning workflow can be alarming and disconcerting. It's important to instil as much stability as you can through your communications in a crisis (particularly in the early stages).

How? Well, as they say: if you can't provide content, provide context.

It's important to provide as much information and detail as possible. That means being specific about what's required of people and what is being done for them on behalf of the organisation. If you have no news, reporting that you have none will keep people feeling in the loop – and that nothing is being hidden from them.

—

Tip: Use your values as an anchor

Provided they're well-established, your organisation's purpose and values can provide a sense of stability, acting as an anchor as you weather the storm. If your words and actions are aligned to your values and are clearly in pursuit of your purpose, you'll have a good chance of securing long-term engagement and belief.

Balancing hope with authenticity

While we don't know how long the effects of this crisis will persist for businesses or employees, as a leader it's important to help your team see a positive future they can work towards.

But it's critical to balance optimism with authenticity. That isn't easy: judging the right levels of realism with the optimism a team needs can be demanding.

It's worth noting however that your people will need to draw very different things from your communications with them at different times in the cycle of a crisis. You may not need to instil hope all the time – just at the right time.

"You don't need to instil hope all the time – just at the right time."

Tip: Framing your comms

Blind hope and 'silver lining seeking' can result in offense or backlash. To emphasise hope, particularly during the early stages of a crisis, instead look for and share real stories of solidarity from across the organisation to reassure people and activate them to help.

Summary: Meeting your employees' needs through the crisis cycle

We hope these simple tips have provided food-for-thought on how leaders can instil trust, compassion, stability and hope throughout the various stages of a crisis (and recovery from it).

None of this is a precise science. It's a delicate balancing act that requires a leader – backed by a great communications team – to have a high level of intelligence on what their organisation is, where it's at, and how its people are feeling. Self-awareness too.

With that in the bank, they'll be in a position to nuance content, messaging, tone and channel use to keep their people switched on, engaged and as healthy as possible.

CRISIS PHASE	DEFINED BY	EMPLOYEE NEED	LEADERS SHOULD ASK	CHANNEL FOCUS	LEADERSHIP THEME FOCUS	
React	Uncertainty	Utility and clarity	– What do you need? – How can I help?	Official channels e.g. Email	Trust	Compassion
Re-Establish	Finding a new normal	Support and empathy	– How are you feeling? – What's working well?	Video chats and online collaboration tools	Stability	
Rebuild	Pro-activity	Hope and optimism	– What have we learned? – What can we take forward?	Face to face, and making the most of physical spaces where possible	Hope	

——

At RY, we were lucky to have a solid business continuity plan in place, backed by a prepared IT team when the current crisis struck. It meant the switch to home-working was as near to seamless as possible.

Having the right technology up and running freed our leaders to focus on their people.

– Many have built certainty in their team's days by running daily team meetings or one-to-ones

– We've used social platforms to set up a 'virtual refectory' for casual chats, and created channels specific for sharing mental health and parenting tips

– Our chairman has put in personal calls to most people at RY, and won't stop. He has made himself available for chats, as well as publishing a weekly 'broadcast' video

– Teams are running regular quizzes and social drinks, and we've created the 'Vickies'. A virtual pub in honour of our local for that post-work pint

– Like many organisations, we are to a degree still making things up as we go along. But the mood is positive and optimistic
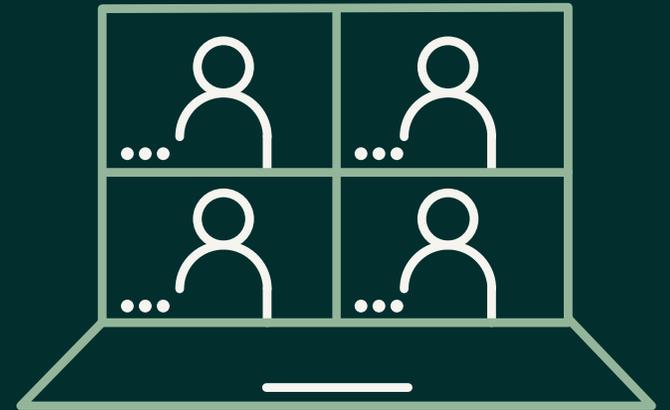
We hope this simple briefing and package of guidance helps you navigate the weeks and months ahead. But if you're looking for something that dives a little deeper, we'd love to chat.

Employee Experience Team

hello@ry.com
Visit us at **ry.com**