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COVID-19: Credible and effective communication management in an exceptional situation

The rapid global spread of the coronavirus presents companies with challenges of historic proportions. Few companies remain unaffected by the crisis. At present it is impossible to predict how long it will last and how much harm it will cause. In this situation, communication becomes a tightrope act, responsibly balancing conflicting priorities in an environment fraught with uncertainty.

While the health of employees and the containment of the pandemic remain top priorities, the financial and operational consequences of the crisis can quickly reach a scale where they threaten a company's continued existence. All stakeholders are affected: Society as a whole is deeply shaken, employees fear for their health and their jobs, banks and suppliers are increasingly concerned about solvency, customers fear for supply chains and share prices plummet – in some cases steeply.

Because the cause of this crisis does not lie within the company itself, those responsible are judged solely by how professionally they deal with it. They have to make the right decisions under dynamically shifting conditions and escalating pressures in order to secure the health of their employees, the trust of their stakeholders and the continued existence of the company.

What are the communication challenges?

Management between a rock and a hard place

Consistent commitment to the health of employees requires massive restrictions in business operations – while maintaining production, distribution and solvency.

Communication in an uncertain and highly dynamic environment

Active communication is essential to ensure leadership, trust and team spirit; at the same time, making hasty, unreliable statements harbours a significant risk of losing credibility and trust – especially among employees, customers and in the capital markets – and being put on the defensive.

Direct personal interactions no longer an option

Social distancing requirements render in-person dialogue impossible. Companies need to establish leadership and a clear sense of direction through new digital formats. In this way, they can maintain relationships with their most important stakeholders such as employees and customers through electronic channels to ensure continued teamwork, performance and business success.

Leaders under extreme stress

Overlapping and rapidly emerging events can quickly overwhelm leaders, increasing the risk of misunderstandings and possible communication gaps.

Politicians create high expectations

Management is under pressure to call in the available stimulus funding quickly and use it to shore up the company despite having no direct influence on the required process.

Key priorities for communication managers in the present situation:

- Consistently communicate with a single voice. Establish centralised coordination and local implementation of communications based on specific guidelines. This must also include the digital communications of employees.
- In a crisis, the CEO stands for leadership, orientation and trust, especially internally. Externally, a less prominent positioning of CEO messaging is advisable. Timing and the messages themselves – which should generally focus on central and strategic issues – should be reviewed in detail and given careful consideration in terms of their impact and the expectations they may create.

- Retain authority when it comes to commenting on the company's ability to weather the crisis and remain viable. Focus on delivering clear messages and maintaining process transparency in the service of meaningful objectives. Take into account new facts and developments as the situation evolves. All adjustments must remain comprehensible even after the fact.
- Preparation of the most likely escalation scenarios: Infection trend in the company, loss of stakeholder confidence, possible delays in financial support, further deterioration of business outlook, threat of insolvency. Remain aware of stakeholder expectations.

- Communicate attitude and sense of direction with reference to corporate values. These must remain the unshakeable reference point for the company's actions even in a crisis. Activate the company's purpose and make it an effective and tangible tool for managing and overcoming the crisis as a team.
- Communicate assessments and measures regarding COVID-19 on the basis of the latest scientific evidence, coordinating with the responsible committees and external experts.
- Secure trust and confidence of all employees through active and authentic communication rooted in empathy. This applies to all employees with management responsibility. Avoid overly emotional language or signs of panic. Concrete recommendations in this regard: <https://fticonversations.com/2020/03/covid-19-how-should-you-be-calming-your-people/> Constructive cooperation with policy makers, the responsible authorities and experts. Positions opposed to government policy should be publicly communicated only in case of a serious escalation.
- Always treat digital communications as an opportunity: Establish new communication formats for leadership, dialog and cooperation to maintain staff motivation and performance even in the context of remote/electronic communication. Establish and continually maintain the external stakeholder dialogue.
- Provide sufficient communication capacity, together with efficient processes, for an extended period. Share the burden across enough shoulders to "get ahead of the curve", ensure the ability to act and react at all times, and avoid communication mistakes as far as possible.

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