

LEADERSHIP

Communicating Through the Coronavirus Crisis

by [Paul A. Argenti](#)

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The coronavirus epidemic seemed far away for me until last week. Then came news reports about someone infected in New Hampshire. Rumors started to spread, closely followed by questions: How can we find out more information? Should we send the kids to school? The next day, we discovered in both the local and national news that the infected person, a resident at our local hospital, had attended a party with students from the Tuck School, where I teach, bringing the crisis right to my office door. Classes and

events were canceled and all international travel was suspended for the university. My mind was racing. Should I go in to work? Is it OK to buy lunch here? Are we prepared to quarantine at home? How long will this go on?

In fast-moving and uncertain situations, many leaders face questions they may not even have answers to. As someone who studies crisis communication, I regularly tell my students and clients that you need to communicate early and often with your key constituencies throughout a crisis. Even if you're still trying to understand the extent of the problem, be honest and open to maintain credibility. Approach the situation with empathy. Put yourself in your constituents' shoes to understand their anxiety. You will sometimes get it right, and you will often get it wrong, but it is still better to be as transparent as you can.

Step 1: Create a Team for Centralized Communication

Decentralized communications is understandable and even desirable in large, complex organizations. But in an emergency or fast-moving situation, you need a crisis-response team. With the coronavirus, we are seeing this happening at all levels: President Trump appointed Vice President Pence to head up the national effort. Dartmouth, and many other universities, have created task forces. A school district I worked with this week created a team made up of the superintendent, as well as all of the school principals. Intel has a standing pandemic leadership team in place, as part of its business continuity planning.

Ideally these teams should be small, five to seven people. You need to include a member of the leadership team, someone from corporate communications, an HR executive, and an expert in the area of concern. This team should:

1. Meet regularly to monitor the situation closely as it continues to evolve.
2. Be the main source of information about the crisis.
3. Give regular updates to key constituencies.
4. Be as transparent as possible. Explain what you know, what you don't know, and your sources of information.

5. Be succinct. Long turgid messages written by health professionals or lawyers will not be read or easily understood.

Step 2: Communicate with Employees

Employees are your most important constituency and function as ambassadors to the community. If they aren't informed and don't understand what is going on, communications outside of the organization will be more difficult. The company needs to demystify the situation for employees, put everyone's mind at ease, and provide hope for the future.

Studies have shown that leaders, in particular, have a special role reducing employee anxiety. In my study of crisis communication after 9/11, many employees described how important it was to hear the voice of the leader, whether live or through email, phone messages, or social media. When the coronavirus crisis hit the Tuck School, the MBA program leadership team camped out in a central location to ease everyone's anxiety and provide updates regularly.

To communicate with employees, organizations should:

1. Post information regularly in a highly visible location. This can be a physical location or virtual — email, the company intranet, or a Slack or Facebook channel.
2. Describe how decisions were made about issues such as travel, [working from home](#), etc.
3. Communicate no less than every other day.
4. Try to provide timely information rather than waiting until you know all of the answers.

Step 3: Communicate Regularly with Customers

Customers require a different approach than employees given that companies do not have the same access nor frequency with this constituency. You should:

1. Focus on what is important to the customer. For example, Target sent out [a note from the CEO](#) to customers, describing enhanced cleaning procedures and additional staffing for order pickup and drive up services.
2. Provide relief when possible. JetBlue became the first [airline to waive change and cancel fees](#) for coronavirus-related concerns. The move went a long way towards reassuring current customers as well as bringing new ones on board. CVS Caremark is working to waive early refill limits on 30-day prescription maintenance medications. Insurance companies, in contrast, do not consider the coronavirus a valid reason for cancelling a flight.
3. Focus on empathy rather than trying to create selling opportunities. Companies should rethink advertising and promotion strategies to be more in line with the current zeitgeist.

Of course, the situation becomes very different when your organization is at the center of a crisis. Many point to the way Johnson & Johnson handled the Tylenol crisis as the gold standard. During the fall of 1982, seven people died after taking Extra Strength Tylenol, which was the best-selling painkiller on the market. Capsules had been injected with cyanide by someone who has never been identified. The company recalled over 30 million bottles of Tylenol, and created new tamper proof packaging.

But Johnson & Johnson also established a set of best practices for communicating in a crisis, including speaking early, often, and directly with its consumers. It issued a national alert, telling people to stop consuming Tylenol products. It established a toll-free number for consumers to call with questions or concerns. It held regular press conferences from company headquarters. Johnson & Johnson leadership, particularly chairman James Burke, took extraordinary steps to communicate with customers and get it right. Many credit his transparency and calm demeanor with stopping the crisis from growing, allowing the company to regain 95% of market share within a few months, and ultimately enhancing the company's reputation.

Step 4: Reassure Shareholders

The epidemic has created intense volatility in the financial markets in the last two weeks and turned what was an incredible bull market into a potential recession. With earnings season just around the corner, publicly listed companies have a special responsibility to communicate the impact of the virus on their operations. Skadden has published considerations related to SEC disclosures, and Joanne Wong, a senior managing director at FTI Consulting in Hong Kong offers this sound advice for handling investor relations:

1. Be transparent in communicating near-term challenges
2. Use the crisis as an opportunity to reinforce the corporation's long-term fundamentals
3. Communicate what you are doing about the problem

In addition, you should be paying attention to travel guidance and developing communication plans around your annual meeting, including setting up webcasts for shareholders.

Step 5: Be Proactive with Communities

What happens within organizations around the coronavirus affects everyone in the communities around them. At the very least organizations should do their best to make sure their actions do not negatively affect members of the community, but you can also think about a crisis as a time to enhance relationships with the local communities in which you operate by:

1. Providing resources such as cleaning supplies or food for those in quarantine.
2. Providing information to the local media to help to calm the communities down and while also enhancing your organization's credibility.
3. Providing transparency about what is happening within the company rather than going radio silent.

You can also share ways in which you're helping your local, national, or global community in a crisis. For example, as Lauren A. Smith, co-CEO of consulting firm FSG writes, you can use your philanthropic arm to help. Cargill, for example, which has

more than 50 business locations and more than 10,000 employees in China, announced a donation of 2 million Yuan to the Chinese Red Cross and sent hundreds of thousands of face masks to affected areas.

When dealing with uncertainty, leaders need to look at communication from the perspective of your audience and have empathy for them rather than fear of doing the wrong thing. This requires companies to communicate when they don't have all of the information, to reveal as much as they can about sensitive information, and to be vigilant about correcting mistakes without worrying about the repercussions. As tennis champion Billie Jean King once said: "Champions keep playing until they get it right."

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