

The role of managers during COVID-19, social unrest—and the next big crisis

How to prepare your people leaders to guide difficult or uncomfortable conversations

Every survey from the beginning of time tells us that employees want to hear from their direct supervisor about important organizational updates and changes. They still want the big picture from the CEO or other top executives, but they want their managers to explain, interpret and fill in the gaps.

With COVID came massive shifts in how we work, including work-from-home, safety updates, job loss, re-orgs and updated job duties. Today's social unrest brings psychological safety updates, open language that wasn't regularly used in the workplace (racism, etc.) and greater need for organizational groups like Employee Resource Groups or Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) working groups. The next inevitable crisis will bring with it more change.

What is the common thread? Difficult conversations in the workplace. Safety, diversity, layoffs and re-orgs are not comfortable conversations for many leaders. Add to that difficulty that many leaders will be having these conversations virtually in the near term. But they are essential, courageous conversations to retain and engage your workforce. That's why we need to prepare our managers.

Here is our guide to help managers excel at leading difficult or uncomfortable conversations with team members.

- 1. Encourage authenticity.** You can't emphasize enough that managers need to communicate authentically. Effective leaders communicate from a place of compassion, so we need to encourage supervisors to show empathy and be transparent and authentic. Lead by example and avoid jargon and platitudes. We don't know what our teams are going through personally, even if they look like they are showing up professionally. Encouraging them to check in with their teams and really listen is the first step.
- 2. Translate your organizational statements into action.** Now is the time to lean on your organizational values, mission and purpose statements. They're not just website decoration. It's time to put them to action.

In a virtual call or email to managers, reiterate those statements and include what they mean in action to help employees understand them. Some popular

words or phrases that may be in your statements include: “patients first,” “people first,” “human-centric,” “improve customers lives,” “support communities,” “Help people live better,” “to make a difference,” “innovation,” “diverse.”

Find stories in your organization that put these words to work and share those specific stories with managers. Encourage managers to add their personal stories around these ideas, too. Employees are more apt to believe in the organization’s stance on human rights issues, safety and health if they can see what it looks like in action. Don’t just share one story, share several.

- a. Example: As an organization we value diversity. It means when we put together cross-functional working groups, we intentionally look at educational background, race, gender and critical thinking approaches to ensure diversity in thought and experience. Take the 100th anniversary celebration working group for example. <Click here> to read about the employees participating in the preparation and planning. (Provide a story that talks about each of the member’s education, interests or unique things about how they approach projects.)

3. Create a conversation guide. Even well-trained communicators can have a difficult time discussing uncomfortable topics. That’s even more true for leaders and managers. It’s critical to equip them with a communications guide to help them prepare for and have difficult conversations. That guide should include conversation starters, FAQs to questions you think employees will ask, “don’t say/do say” words and resources to share, such as the organization’s code of conduct, Employee Support Group pages and HR hotline or representative contact information.

- a. Example of D&I conversation starters: “How have you experienced inclusion on our team?” “It’s my job to ensure everyone has a voice on our team. How can I do better to give you and the rest of our team more of a voice in decision-making?” “What suggestion do you have for improving inclusivity within our own team?”
- b. Example of “don’t use/do use” words: Avoid saying “them” or “those people.” Don’t mention only binary he/she pronouns but include “they.” Avoid phrases that are discriminatory like “powwow,” “peanut gallery,” “thug,” “ghetto,” “crazy,” or “lame.” [Click here](#) for the Linguistic Society of America’s guidelines.

4. Give managers priority. Details shift quickly during uncertain times. That means that employees are on edge wondering what changes will come next or what the organization will say next.

Give people leaders a heads-up on organizational messages, even if it’s just 30 minutes before the official memo, article or statement is released (but ideally a day in advance). Managers need to know the information first and have time to prepare before employees approach them. Include FAQs for managers when

you send the heads-up. Think about the most common questions direct reports will ask and provide clear and substantive answers. Create a central repository of this information that managers can access and know the most up-to-date information will be there.

For extremely sensitive topics, having a “safe-space” meeting with people leaders first can help empower them to handle difficult conversations with greater confidence. It’s important to give them space to get more comfortable alongside their peers.

People come to a company and leave a manager. So, make sure your managers are prepared. This will increase employee trust in the organization and impact retention and engagement.

5. **Set expectations.** Some managers avoid communicating good news and “easy-to-communicate” updates with their teams. When it comes to difficult conversations, the resistance can be even greater. Once your managers have reliable information, guide them on how to distribute it in an effective manner. Sending an email to the team is not going to cut it.

You need to provide a roadmap of what a good communications plan looks like. That means including prompts like, “What do I want my team members to think, feel or do after I communicate this information?” “How does this information affect our team directly?” “How can I describe this idea in a way that relates to the what our team does day-to-day?”

The “one and done” approach just isn’t enough. Help your managers understand all the channels available to them—email, text, team meetings and one-on-ones, among them—and the right time to use each. Don’t forget in this virtual era to remind managers that when face to face isn’t available to use video meetings. Employees will feel the communication is much more authentic if they can see their leader.

6. **Measure and adapt.** It’s not enough to send information to managers and hope for the best. You have to follow up and see what worked, what didn’t and what could be better.

Measure impact through a short pulse survey, a call for feedback on the manager portal or by holding a leadership-only meeting to take questions. Make sure you report out what you’ll do to improve the process or adapt in the future. If you stay silent, managers won’t continue to provide feedback, which you can’t afford in a crisis, or any other time.

- a. Example: Pulse survey questions include:
 - i. I felt prepared to share the news about the most recent re-org with my team.
 1. Strongly agree
 2. Agree

3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly disagree
- ii. I'm sufficiently informed to answer questions from my direct reports about the most recent re-org.
 1. Strongly agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly disagree
 - iii. I was able to answer most of my team members' questions about the most recent re-org.
 1. Strongly agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly disagree
 - iv. I received sufficient lead time from executive leadership before the re-org announcement was made.
 1. Strongly agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly disagree

When people managers are not actively communicating, it can impede the effectiveness of even the best-laid communication plans. At the organizational level, when managers are not communicating—especially with customer-facing frontline employees—it can erode trust, efficiency and engagement.

Change is the only constant—it will probably accelerate. Organizations will be facing the next crisis before we know it. By following these tips to help enable your people leaders to communicate, you'll help your organization navigate change effectively. You'll also take important steps to increase employee engagement, trust in leadership and boost morale.

Want to learn more about how you can improve your managers' communications skills? Interested in diversity and inclusion training or coaching for managers? Email Kristin Hart at Kristin.hart@raganconsulting.com.

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