

Hello, Council members.

Thank you for attending the Communications Leadership Council's virtual retreat on June 10, 2020. Though we couldn't be together with our toes in the sand, that didn't stop us from having vibrant and important discussions on how we as communicators can help our organizations during these trying times. Below is a summary of the topics we discussed during the retreat, organized into categories for easier reading.

As always, thank you for talking so openly about your jobs, challenges and successes. We are honored to have you as part of this community.

### **THE LAST 90 DAYS—AND THE NEXT 90**

#### **Realities of the last 90 days for communicators included:**

- Long days and hours at the height of the pandemic. Exhausting, but rewarding.
- Pushing out lots of COVID-19 communication for employees from a special intranet site on how to use PPE properly to sending COVID-19 care kits to staffers.
- Education was key. Messages focused on how to use PPE properly as CDC guidance changed, as well as updates from public health experts.
- The tone of communications changed. It became more personal and focused on the health and safety of clients, employees and their families.
- Increased use of video. Many communicators leaned heavily on video. At one org, the CEO recorded Zoom videos once to twice a week, often from his bedroom. Real moments are important for employees to see. If they see the CEO on video, getting interrupted by children, employees can relate. It's authentic and real.
- Increased focus on wellness messaging. Communication around mental health resources, resource for parents, Netflix ideas for children, personal wellness, etc., was critical. Make sure your workforce knows about all these resources.

#### **Expectations for the next 90 days include:**

- Managing comms as your organization transitions to a "new normal."
- While still focusing on COVID-19, comms messaging is shifting to return to normal operations.
- For a hospital system, that means resuming elective procedures and educating the community that it's safe to return to the ER if they have an emergency condition, for example.
- Tap employee sentiment. Survey your employees and see how they feel on return to work. For a NYC-office based office, its survey shows that WFH satisfaction is high—95%. This, from an org who was not remote prior to the pandemic.
- It's okay to admit there's so much you don't know about the next 90 days. In terms of a potential second wave of COVID-19 in the fall, educate employees as much possible with what you do know.
- Messaging has shifted to return to the workplace. One NYC-based organization plans to open its office June 29 and the return is voluntarily.

### **CULTURE DURING TIMES OF CRISIS**

Even though it might not seem like it, now is the perfect time to work on your culture.

**Five lies we often hear about organizational culture:**

1. **Culture is someone else's job.** No; it's everyone's job—from the front-line employee to the CEO. However, it's especially the job of communicators. Blend culture into everything you do.
  - Marriott's CEO, Arne Sorenson, is a good example of an authentic, honest leader.
2. **Our values are on the wall.** You should build culture into every touchpoint. Begin at recruiting—way before you even hire someone.
3. **Culture is fluffy.** No; culture can drive the bottom line (e.g. employee retention, employee satisfaction). The only way to put customers first is to put employees first. If employees are satisfied, they will work hard to satisfy your customers, and that will bring success to your shareholders.
4. **If I empower my employees, I might lose control.** Aim for freedom within a framework. You obviously have parameters you have to work within, but give employees freedom within that. Empower them to think like owners and solve problems for customers.
  - Ex: A Southwest Airlines flight had only one passenger. The crew created a TikTok of them dancing with the customer. This post showed how they were catering to customers during COVID, and it was only possible because employees had the freedom to do this.
5. **We can't afford to work on culture.** There are many inexpensive ways to improve your culture.

**Some free ways to improve your culture are:**

- Boost leadership visibility.
  - Consider all the channels and access points you have to increase leadership visibility.
    - Ex: Southwest Airlines posted a photo of its CEO talking with employees at an airport gate—all wearing face masks.
    - Ex: Feature the leader in a video series where he answers employee questions on various topics. During COVID, episode topics could include how the organization is approaching personal protective equipment and cleanliness, voluntary separation packages for employees, etc.
- Live your values.
  - Ex: Establish an employee assistance foundation to show how much employees mean to the organization.
- Put storytelling front and center.
  - Storytelling allows you to show the limitless ways employees are helping customers.
    - Ex: If your call center employees are all working from home, share stories of what they are doing from this unique working situation to help customers.
    - LinkedIn is showcasing brands doing good during this difficult time.

**The most important internal teams to partner with on culture are:**

- HR
- Technology: They'll support the channels you'll use to communicate.
- Diversity and inclusion
- Senior leadership: Your leaders must model the culture if they want employees to buy into it.
- Internal comms

#### **How can leaders live the organization's values?**

- **Continuously repeat the values.** Any time leaders communicate with employees, they should touch on or exemplify the values in some way. In 2004, Southwest's Gary Kelly records a weekly message to employees (sent via intranet).
  - Give leaders a specific comms platform to regularly reach staff.
    - Ex: A weekly message on the intranet
- **Incorporate values into performance reviews.** During these conversations, look at how each employee (at every level of the organization) is embodying the values.

#### **How can you use leadership voices other than the CEO?**

- Have each leader talk about the areas that report to them.
  - Ex: The head of HR should talk about emergency leave; the head of operations can discuss cleaning and safety procedures.

#### **What long-term, strategic changes will the past three months bring to internal communications?**

- Internal comms is in the driver's seat right now. To seize this opportunity, consider:
  - What are you doing to reach your employees holistically?
    - Don't just share what is going on within the company, but resources employees might need for their personal lives, as well.
  - How can you use technology to better meet employees' needs?
    - No employee wakes up excited to check out the intranet. Find ways to reach them where they already are (Ex: Facebook Workplace).

### **RECOVERY COMMUNICATION**

#### **What are some best practices for communication during COVID-19?**

- Provide regular updates on the state of the pandemic.
- Have leaders provide assurance to employees.
- Have pride in your organization. Are there ways the organization has rallied behind its supply chain teams or essential workers?
- Focus on the future: What new technology can you employ that will keep teams connected, productive?

#### **What are some goals for reintegration plans?**

- Be responsible
- Be measured

- Be flexible

### **What do phases of reintegration look like?**

Focus on bringing people back slowly and when they are ready.

Example 1:

- Phase 0: current state
  - Employees primarily working from home
- Phase 1: limited reintegration
  - Focus is on behaviors (e.g. social distancing), rather than reconfiguring the office (e.g. plexiglass between cubicles)
- Phase 2: expanded reintegration
  - More employees return to the workplace, but this will be based on location to comply with local requirements
- Phase 3: flexible and culture focused
  - Identifying and executing a new normal. Perhaps employees being in the workplace on alternating days

Example 2:

- Phase 1: 10-30% of employees are in the workplace
- Phase 2: 20-30% of employees are in the workplace
- Phase 3: 40-75% of employees are in the workplace
- Phase 4: 75-100% of employees are in the workplace

### **What are best practices for reintegration?**

- Avoid the phrase “return to work.” This implies that those who have been at home have been on vacation and alienates staff who have been going in.
- Constantly communicate what you are doing to keep employees safe as they return.
- Know that you will have several audiences:
  - Employees who have been home/employees who have continued going in
    - Ways to show love to both groups:
      - Allow them to take anything from the office home with them (e.g. furniture)
      - Provide coloring kits for their kids
      - Shoot a weekly video series where guests join from wherever they are working, whether it’s their living room or a control facility.
  - Employees who are looking forward to returning to the workplace/employees who want to continue working from home
    - For those who want to return, find ways to bring back the social aspects of the workplace while maintaining safety.
- Accept that full teams won’t return for quite a while.
- Consider preparing welcome packages as staff return.
  - Include hand sanitizer, masks, yard signs, etc.

### **How can you prepare for the pandemic's next wave?**

- Have a disintegration plan. Just as you might be planning ways to bring staff back to the workplace, have a plan for returning them home, if necessary.
- As you bring people back to the workplace, be open to taking a step back at any point.
- Do what you can to prevent virus spread. Conduct temperature checks, and continue encouraging workers who want to stay home to stay home. Continuously monitor local conditions and regulations.
- Be clear with employees that return to "normal" will be slow and leaders are figuring things out as the situation evolves. Don't expect perfection from leaders.

### **What's the best way to handle ever-changing messages on the pandemic from "the experts"? They often don't seem to know what they're talking about.**

- Establish an expert within your organization whom employees trust and who can offer perspective on what is happening in the news.
- Have clear communication with your organization's leaders. Share your communications approach with them so all messaging is consistent

### **Should you tailor your organization's position on an issue to different segments of the workforce?**

- Yes. Think of comms like a suit. If anyone were to put on my suit, it wouldn't fit right.
- Communicate within the framework of your values rather than politically.
  - Ex: Say your culture focuses on how to mitigate risk. This allows you to say you're going to assume the worst and mitigate from there.
  - Ex: If your organization doesn't want to weigh in politically re: George Floyd, you can still reference your corporate value of respect or belonging.

### **What are some examples of ways to communicate with staff during these unprecedented times?**

- Weekly CEO communications
- Senior-leader town halls
- Dedicated COVID-19 resource intranet pages
- Week in review email
- Employee app

### **How can organizations encourage healing for employees affected by civil unrest?**

- Empower employee diversity networks to hold virtual group sessions.
- Host a companywide "courageous conversation," and break off for individual conversations after via Zoom. Involve the CEO and head of diversity and inclusion
- Have a day where employees companywide can volunteer locally or work on personal allyship journey.
- Start an employee assistance program.
- Have the CEO share his/her vision forward for the organization and encourage leaders to continue these conversations with their teams.

### **LAYOFF AND FURLOUGH COMMUNICATIONS**

## What are some ways I can plan and execute layoffs?

### Before a layoff:

- Be joined at the hip with HR.
- Understand the business rationale behind the decision.
- Develop a core team—legal, PR, IR, senior executive team all must be involved.
- Put any confidential documents in network folders that can't be accessed by other employees
- Think through internal and external perspectives. What will clients think when the media breaks the news?
- Rehearse your scripts—know them like the back of your hand.
- Be mindful. What projects can you pause or eliminate that people who will be let go are working on? Don't push them to finish a project for you right before they're let go.
- Know minute by minute what's happening the day of layoffs. Be crystal clear on who's doing what and when.
- Practice, practice with the CEO. Do dry runs. Look to the camera, speak with empathy, take ownership.
- Plan to buffer the HR team. Have executive leaders be the buffer because the HR team will be bombarded with questions from employees and leaders can share the workload and answer questions.
- Messaging:
  - Bring everything back to your values and assuming what you say internally will be public.
  - Talk about what you're doing to help those let go. (e.g., Repurpose your recruiting team to help place all impacted employees, extended health care coverage, etc.)
  - Make sure people know there are no plans for future layoffs, if that's the case.

### During a layoff:

- Keep calm and keep your leaders calm.
- Tell your leaders this will be a difficult message to deliver. They need to be genuine or they'll have a retention problem among remaining employees.
- Be as transparent as possible.
- Treat layoffs like a crisis and plan accordingly.
- Show empathy!
- Change passwords.
- Don't forget managerial comms. Make sure to schedule time with mid and junior level managers and arm them with messaging and FAQs.

### After a layoff:

- Check on and take care of remaining employees. The silence will be filled by employees thinking the worst. Partner with HR to make sure those staying still feel valued. Survivor guilt is real.
- Come up with an engagement plan for those who remain.
- Take some time for yourself—block out an hour to go on a walk and decompress.
- Audit your tech platforms. This is a challenging when conducting layoffs remotely. Make a list of who has access to what. Ship pre-paid labels for employees to send back technology.
- Outline a plan to collect personal belongings from the office.

- Fortify your culture. Consider scheduling 15-minute sessions with the CEO and remaining employees and ask: “How are you?” Build those relationships.
- Reactivate your Employees Resource Groups. Ask your leadership team to engage with them.
- Monitor social media. Switch to talking to what’s happening in the industry vs. how great you are. Laid off employees might call you out on being hypocritical.
- Celebrate your wins. Drive a message of hope.
- Encourage dialogue. Hold weekly ask me anything videos, for example.
- Encourage remaining employees to write LinkedIn endorsements for those let go.
- Comment publicly if someone lands a new job on LinkedIn. If done by the CEO, that shows that you support your employees in and outside of your company.

## **EMPLOYEE BURNOUT**

### **What does employee burnout look like?**

- Burnout is defined as emotional exhaustion and is inclusive of symptoms that prevent you moving forward. The conclusion: you can’t run on 110% energy 110% of the time.
- 1 out of 4 respondents to a recent survey indicating they’re experiencing mental health issues due to the pandemic:
  - COVID-19 brought everything in life to a new level: change in work volume, in company expectations, in actual office environment, etc.
    - Consequently, people are seeing spikes in depression and anxiety.
    - Despite working more hours and longer days – on average, 3 more hours a day – employees feel like their productivity has dropped.
      - The mindset of employees: “I’m working more; I’m dealing with the burden of the pandemic overall: I can’t focus or work as hard as I’d like.”
    - Even if an employee thinks/knows their company is doing okay, the general economic outlook can still produce a great deal of anxiety
- People who have taken a pay cut are experiencing more anxiety than those laid off.
  - Studies in the U.S., Canada, and Australia have shown that while losing a job is very stressful, furloughed employees and employees with reduced salaries are demonstrating higher levels of anxiety.
    - Those employees start to feel less essential to their organization, and the limbo state of their job status beings to feel permanent.
  - Employers should understand these various states of work and communicate updates to staff consistently. Hopefully furloughed or reduced pay employees can resume normal work conditions, but if not, at least that transparency will reflect well on your organization.

### **How to identify burnout (and reduce it):**

- Burnout can show up in a variety of ways – irrational behavior, highly emotional, mistake prone, inability to focus.
- Be careful not to overly diagnose. Reach out and ask an employee if they are okay and if they need assistance.
- What we can do for ourselves:

- Self-care sounds like a buzzword or marketing gimmick, but it is critically important. Self-care means making daily decisions to take care of yourself and ensure you're healthy.
- Schedule items in your calendar and treat it like a meeting with your CEO. Take micro-steps and form micro-habits that you can build into your day.
  - Examples: 3 minutes of deep breathing, 45 minutes exercise, 5 minutes watching a video.
- Creating a daily routine is a reminder that there are many things within our control, even if many external factors are not.
- What we can do for our spouses and kids:
  - Create a childcare schedule, map in each of your times for self-care.
  - Be specific about your routine and commit to it.
- As a leader, be transparent and admit that you don't have all the answers. Employees should offer reciprocal feedback: share what's working and what's not working.

### **Employees' well-being is top of mind**

- If there's a silver lining to the pandemic: employers seem more concerned about well-being than ever before! It's being pushed to the top of leaders' agendas.
- Some organizations are sharing resources and training opportunities with staff that can assist with gauging mental health, understanding emotions, and measuring energy. Other organizations are even sharing some of these resources externally.
- Managers are finding ways to demonstrate empathy in a variety of ways. For instance, some employers are offering employee assistance programs to contractors, despite them not being full-time staff.
- As we discuss the return to the workplace and the accompanying anxiety, managers should be providing them with the information needed to feel confident about the process.

### **LEADERSHIP THROUGH CRISIS**

#### **What questions should we ask ourselves?**

- Are you content with your role but looking for more of a seat at the table?
- Do you have a strong voice within your organization?
- Do you feel you could be a more powerful leader within your organization?
- Can you move up or pivot into a new role within your organization?
- And the biggest question: how can I help?

#### **The common themes of compelling leadership:**

- Agility: The ability to pivot quickly out of the comfort zone and how do you/your team respond. How do you lead when your vision has to shift?
- Resilience: Can you withstand this storm as well as what's to come? Do we lean on our values and form a united front during times of crisis?
- Inspiration: Find where your resources come from

- There are no more fancy offices to bring clients into, no restaurant outings – without certain ‘perks’ that organizations typically offer, the playing field is more leveled. And it’s easy to lose momentum when employees are overly reliant on old, daily routines.
- Be the inspiration to your team: create a resource hub for them, and be transparent in your communications!
- Focus: Where are you putting your urgency? What are your deepest stakes? People are focusing on ancillary problems as opposed to the future and where the company needs to go. Be sure to develop your message for the future.
- Vulnerability: We’re learning how to operate on camera more, figuring out new tools, getting accustomed to a new way of operating – not only are we vulnerable, but we need to have grace/acceptance for others.
  - Understand how employees work in a variety of ways, as well as what else is going on their lives.
  - Create space for digital outings in addition to digital meetings. Instrumental communication happens in casual moments – create casual environments with colleagues, whether it’s a virtual happy hour or some other informal hangout.
  - We’re not all in the same boat, but we’re all in the same storm – understanding and appreciating each person’s “boat” is crucial.

#### **What are the new comms challenges for leaders as we support moves back to the workplace?**

- Now that things like commutes don’t exist, employees may be resistant to returning. As tolerance about work from home continues to grow, a lot of the things that accompany that are now firmly here to stay
- We can begin taking steps by returning to some of our old routines as we continue working from home. For instance, we don’t need to be on camera for every meeting: start reintegrating conference calls in lieu of video meetings.

#### **Some employees might feel like they’re being judged while on video. How can manager work with staff so they’re not feeling judged?**

- Encourage your team to not be concerned with their home office/environment – get to learn what their ‘boat’ is!
- We should all create boundaries within our home as workspaces – managers can lead by example and show how to create a better work/life balance
- If employees still feel insecure, managers can also outline what environment is suitable for a specific session. They can alert staff what’s a formal video meeting and what’s an informal digital gathering – employees can situate themselves in a quiet, non-distracting room for an important call and they can use their mobile phone to talk around the neighborhood during an informal session.

### **MANAGER COMMUNICATIONS**

**Managers are crucial during a time of crisis:**

- Some employees feel like their organizations are overdelivering on COVID, underperforming on issues about racism and racial injustice.
  - While layoffs, furloughs, and other difficult matters have occurred due to COVID, it's not new terrain for companies. However, organizations unaccustomed to discussing systemic racism or diversity and inclusion are "uncomfortable about being uncomfortable" and feel ill-equipped to speak up or comment.
- If your organization doesn't have any D&I initiatives, try to start small and get bigger. Is there a voice or employee within the organization that can have a seat at the table and the opportunity to speak up about what the organization needs to do to move forward?
- Ultimately, it's our job as communicators to step up: we need to lead the charge to put programs in place and put pressure on executives to speak up.
  - Employees are going to make demands about speaking up, and employees are the ones who determine which companies they should stick with or walk out on.

#### **Making strides in D&I work:**

- One member acknowledged that executives at her organization had a hard time figuring out what language they should use to respond to the death of George Floyd and the surrounding conversation about racism in the country. They sought her help in re-tooling their language to make sure it was appropriate and effective.
  - The organization hired its first D&I executive in recent weeks, and its CEO has had more conversations about race and equity in the past week than the organization has ever had in its history.
- While these are great steps, it's important to check in with executives continually to see how they'll respond to D&I issues down the road whether 1 month, 3 months, or 6 months from now.
- If your organization doesn't have an employee resource group or a diverse set of employees that can share their stories and experiences, they need to seek out tools and items online that they can provide to employees to help educate them.

#### **Comments by attendees:**

- "By changing recruiting practices, performance practices, our values, the way we communicate with each other, all of this can lead to real change. Yes, it will take years to change behavior but we cannot wait anymore."
- "As communicators we have a responsibility to do better...Next week, our Black Business Resource Group and Talent Management teams are co-hosting two workshops called "Conversations on Race" for managers of people. Happy to share what we learn and how the conversation goes."

### **HOW TO TAKE A STAND IN EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATION**

**How has executive communication changed in the past few months?**

The pandemic changed the medium; protests changed the message.

- The medium went from “podiums to personal computers”:
  - Long shots to close ups
  - Attention to distraction
  - Crowds to control
  - Ceremony to content
    - Now, when the speech is over, you have content to leverage rather than just applause (material for website, snippets for social media, etc.).
- The message:
  - Before we talked about diversity. Now we talk about race.
  - Before we talked about equity. Now we talk about justice.
  - Before we talked about discrimination. Now we talk about racism.
  - Before we said “systematic.” Now we say “systemic.”

#### **Things to keep in mind before your organization takes a stand:**

- You must develop specific messages. Right now, we’re talking about black people. Not people of color or other discriminated groups.
- Your response must be timely. People will remember what your organization said or did—or did not say or do.
- Your statement must be actionable.
- Your message should be no nonsense. It’s not time to advertise. It’s time to be authentic and raw.
- You must be diverse. Listen to people. Race is incredibly personal. If you haven’t lived an experience, you don’t know that experience. Now is the time to practice the inclusion you’re always preaching.

#### **Hard truths you must acknowledge when developing your plan:**

- Systemic racism is real and in your organization.
- Black people are not OK right now. They come to work, but they are not OK.
- Inclusion is just an idea if you have systemic racism.
- Eventually, this will all go away.

#### **Best practices for crafting your message:**

- Form an interdisciplinary team.
- Create an action matrix to identify actions your organization can take that will align with its brand and values.
- Set your terms.
  - Ex: Commit to saying the names of those who were murdered (Breonna Taylor, George Floyd), words such as “murder” and “race.”
- Encourage executives to write their own statements so they are as authentic as possible.

#### **How can we talk about race?**

- Ask: Talk to people who have lived the experience.

- Absorb: Listen, and connect to your own experience so it isn't about you vs. them. If you hear pain or anger, connect that to a time you felt pain or anger before.
- Accept: Accept that what the person is saying is true, because it's their experience. They've lived it, and they know it.
- Adjust: Your reality is the reality you know. Everyone has truths and realities.
- Articulate: Even though D&I is driven by HR or legal, communicators are by far the best equipped to lead D&I efforts.

### **How can white people have discussions on race?**

- The biggest challenge white communicators face is not saying the wrong because they are racist, but because they don't listen.
- There is often black anger and white fragility, and you have to navigate between this.
- Educate yourself. Yale and Cornell each have courses.
- Before you send any statement or do anything, have an honest conversation. Do you have black friends or someone you can talk to honestly?

### **How can a brand authentically speak out when they haven't said anything on the topic before?**

- Be authentic and own your mess. The companies who get slammed are the ones who say "We've talked about this before," when they haven't.
- Just because you haven't done it before, doesn't mean you can't do it now.
- If the company doesn't want to say something, find out why.
- Be true to your brand.
  - Ex: BabyNames.com listed names of black people killed by violence, saying that they were all someone's baby once.

### **How do you handle pushback on your stance?**

- Know why you're taking a stand—and it can't be to sell more stuff.
- Be clear about what your terms are.
- Know that you won't necessarily get it right straight out of the gate. Be flexible.

## **RESOURCES**

[Janet Stovall TED Talk](#)

[UPS press release re: justice and reform to advance equality](#)

[Target announcement of commitment to resources for rebuilding efforts and advancing social justice](#)

[General Mills' CEO response to George Floyd's death](#)

["Talking about Race" from the National Museum of African American History & Culture](#)

[Diversity and inclusion certificate at Cornell](#)

[African American History course at Yale](#)