



How to Talk to Your Team When the Future is Uncertain

by Rebecca Knight

As the coronavirus pandemic escalates and disruptions to business-as-usual continue, managers are [grappling with the unknown](#). You don't know when your employees will be able to return to the office or how different things will be when they do. Regardless, you need to be in constant communication with your team. What information — and how much of it — should you share with your reports about the health of your organization? How can you be candid about the possibility of pay-cuts and layoffs without demoralizing your team? And, during this period of uncertainty, how can you offer assurance without giving people false hope?

What the Experts Say

The Covid-19 pandemic is an unprecedented event in modern history. And yet, according to Paul Argenti, Professor of Corporate Communication at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College, the experience of managing through it is not necessarily unique. Similar to other crises, such as 9/11 and the global financial downturn, workers feel scared and worried. "[Uncertainty triggers fear](#)," he says. "People are freaking out and wondering, 'What does this mean for my company, my job, and my future?'" Your role as a manager is to "project confidence and strength." Even though the situation is fast-moving and you don't have perfect information, you need to be honest about what you know, says Amy Edmondson, the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School. "Task one is transparency," she says. Explain to your team, "here's what we do know, here's what we don't know, and this is what we are doing to close that gap." Your second task is to "articulate a sense of possibility and hope." Accomplishing both of these tasks, however, is no easy feat. Here are recommendations for communicating with your employees during this uncertain time.

Steel yourself

Before you utter or write a word to your team, you need to understand the challenge that lies before you, Argenti explains. Essentially, "you're teaching people how to succeed in a crisis," he says. "This is the [ultimate test of your leadership](#) and an opportunity for you to show your employees what you're made of." Summon your courage. As a frontline manager, your goal is to be "the person [your workers] turn to"

for guidance and direction. The right mindset is critical, says Edmonson. Channel your inner “platoon leader,” and prepare as you would for battle. She recommends sticking to your routines as much as you can. [Eat well, exercise, and try to get plenty of sleep.](#) “Put on your own oxygen mask first,” she adds.

Make a plan

Next you need a strategy for how and when you will communicate with your team about the situation as it's evolving. When your organization is in crisis, you need to “communicate early and often,” Argenti says. “The ostrich with its head-in-the-sand approach doesn't work here.” Your team needs to know what to expect in terms of when and how frequently they'll receive information from you as well as from your company's leadership. He suggests doing periodic small meetings and one-and-ones to understand your individual team members' most pressing issues. Ideally your organization has created a central “[coordinated clearinghouse](#)” where employees can pose questions, says Edmonson. Encourage your employees to use this resource so that the information provided directly addresses their concerns.

Navigate your conversations with care

Consider your audience. Think about your employees' perspective, says Argenti. “Look at the situation from their shoes and think about what you yourself would want to hear.” You'd most likely want reassurance that “eventually this is going to end,” of course, but more importantly, you'd like to believe that leadership “isn't hoarding information” or waiting for the other shoe to drop. Allay their fears as much as you can.

Be humble. The fact is, “none of us has a great deal of clarity for what lies ahead,” says Edmonson. So, you need to admit what you don't know. Let's say, for instance, an employee [asks you whether there will be layoffs](#), and while you've been told that's up for discussion, you aren't sure whether they will happen and you don't how deep they'll go. Argenti recommends saying something like: “I wish I could tell you exactly what is going to happen. We're giving you updates as soon as we know them.”

Don't sugarcoat. You may be tempted to gloss over news that won't be well received. The desire to alleviate your team's anxiety is understandable; but, cautions Edmonson, it does no one any favors. “When you sugarcoat, you come across as a liar or someone who's out of touch,” she says. If, for instance, management has decided to cut pay, but hasn't landed on a precise number, don't pretend it's not happening even if you can't give specifics. Besides, all of the facts of the situation will become apparent over time and softening hard truths can backfire. “When the truth comes out in dribs and drabs, it [doesn't] build trust.”

Be responsible. No matter what, if you haven't gotten the greenlight to share information about layoffs or pay-cuts, you cannot say anything. “You can't even hint,”

says Argenti. “You have a responsibility to the company” to “toe the party line.” Even when an employee asks you a direct question, you cannot say: “I am not supposed to tell you this, but...” The best thing to do, says Edmonson, “is to maintain your compassion while explicitly acknowledging the high level of uncertainty that currently exists.” She recommends saying, “All of us wish we were not in this situation, but we are, and we must work together to do our best amidst the uncertainty, challenge, and chaos that this crisis has brought.”

Try to be consistent. Communicating openly with your team becomes more complex when or if your immediate boss or upper management is responding to the crisis in a way you disagree with. “Wrestling with that challenge is tricky,” says Argenti. He recommends that, “as best you can, make it sound like [you’re telling the same truth](#), but you just have a slightly different spin on it.” Say, for instance, your boss lays out a [remote work policy](#) that requires all employees to be online from 9am-6pm. But you believe in giving employees more autonomy in how and when they work. You might spell out the policy and add that during this stressful time you trust your workers to use their best judgement. “Find a place where you can agree and respectfully disagree,” he says.

Seek to inspire

Rise to the occasion of the moment. “Affirm the capabilities of your team” and [use rousing language](#) to encourage everyone to work together, says Edmonson. She recommends saying something like, “I believe in each and every one of your capabilities — and I believe even more so in our joint capabilities. We can do this together.” Admit “what you are up against” and acknowledge that there will be hard times ahead. But also “convey a sense of strength in terms of bearing what we’re going to have to bear.” Express your “hope that you will all get through this crisis” and “you believe in the long-term future” of your organization, says Argenti. “Be as enthusiastic as you can be,” under the circumstances. Your tone should be “not too positive and not too negative,” he adds.

Offer support

Finally, it’s important to make a special effort to understand your team members’ individual worries and stresses. “You can’t manage other people’s emotions; [all you can do is minimize the fear they have](#),” says Argenti. Because most employees are working remotely, you can’t rely on hallway conversations to take their emotional temperature. “There aren’t enough Zoom meetings in the world to make up for” what’s lost when your team isn’t physically together. Check in with your team on a regular basis to get a handle on “where people stand.” Listen carefully to what people are asking and saying. Most people need to hear they’re going to be ok, says Argenti. Give “every reassurance you can.”

Principles to Remember

Do

- Understand the leadership challenge you face — you're teaching people how to succeed in a crisis.
- Consider your employees' perspective and think about what you would want to hear if you were in their shoes.
- Encourage your team through rousing, inspiring language. Your message is, "We can do this together."

Don't

- Trade in speculation. Be honest and truthful about the facts on the ground.
- Sugarcoat the situation. Otherwise, you'll come across as a liar or someone who's out of touch.
- Ignore the personal touch. Meet with your team members one-and-one and in small groups and offer support.

Advice in Practice

Case Study #1: Be open and honest, but admit what you don't know

Eugenie Fanning, VP of People at SquareFoot, the New York-based commercial real estate startup, says that during these difficult times, she is trying "to be as honest and transparent" as she can be with her team. But at the same time, she admits that she doesn't know what the future holds. "This is unknown to me, too," she says. "It's okay not to have all the answers."

Due to the effects of the coronavirus outbreak on business operations, the company has had to make some hard choices. Early on in the crisis, the company's CEO, Jonathan Wasserstrum, announced that the company had trimmed marketing and travel expenses and that SquareFoot's 10-person leadership team (which includes Eugenie) would take a reduction in salary. A couple of weeks later, he announced that SquareFoot would implement company-wide pay cuts.

"He was transparent about where we were cutting from the budget, and how much we were cutting," she says. "But people were concerned about the possibility of layoffs and many managers were fielding questions after the fact. I wanted to help make sure that messaging was consistent across the board."

To that end, Eugenie has had frequent one-on-one calls with her reports as well as other people managers throughout the company. She is straightforward and confident. "I say, 'I don't know what's going to happen, but I can tell you that layoffs are not in the discussion at all right now,'" she says. "The goal is to keep our team intact and come out of this in the best possible position."

She is also candid. "These are uncharted waters. Three or months down the line, we will reassess. But knock on wood, we will be more back in the swing of things by then."

She says that since she had already built trusting, solid relationships with the company's employees, the message is well received. Even apart from the uncertainty of the global pandemic, her career in startups has helped her gain perspective. "I've been laid off and I've laid people off," she says. "In startups, you have to roll with the punches. But I understand that for people who are just starting out, there is still worry."

Usually the company holds bi-weekly all-hands meetings where employees can anonymously submit questions to the CEO and COO; but now these meetings are done on a weekly basis and involve more middle managers.

Importantly, she says, she is coaching company leaders to make sure that their tone conveys positivity and strength. "The message isn't just, 'This is how we're getting through this.' But, 'Here are the things we are doing to make sure we come out of this in a strong position.'"

She is also trying to strike a confident tone herself by making a special effort to highlight the company's recent successes. "I am trying to communicate the wins that we're having," she says. "I want to show the teams that what they're doing matters."

Case Study #2: Think about your audience and convey positivity and strength

Andres Lares, the Managing Partner at Shapiro Negotiations Institute, the Baltimore-based training and consulting company, says that once the business risks of Covid-19 became evident, he and his two partners sat down together to discuss how they would talk to their team about the company's situation.

"We talked about our own personal experiences of the financial crash in '08," he says. "And we thought about [the current health pandemic] from the perspective of our employees. What would people be thinking about? What might they be afraid of? What are they anxious about?"

Based on this conversation, Andres came up with several guiding principles for how they would communicate with their team. Their goal was to be empathetic and sensitive to their employees' concerns, while empowering middle managers to step up as leaders within the company.

First, they decided they would communicate more often than usual. "Every Monday we meet with everyone on the team, and I meet with a core group of managers one-on-one twice a week," he says. "It's time-consuming, but it's been very helpful. It gives people a platform to share concerns and helps us craft plans with our managers to employ across our company."

These one-on-one conversations have become invaluable. “At a time when people are feeling uncertain and it’s hard to see light at end of the tunnel, it’s important to feel that what you hear from leadership is the truth,” he says. “We want to make sure we’re always clear and give our management team a level of ownership and responsibility to move the company in the direction we believe we need to go.”

Third, they wanted to instill confidence in their management workforce to feel comfortable and committed to the message from leadership before relaying it to their fellow employees. “We instruct our managers to be empathetic and transparent with their teams and to not be shy in leading them in the direction we all agree is best. This provides a certain degree of unity across the entire company, something that is essential in a time of crisis.”

Employees have been working remotely for weeks now and so far, Andres and his partners have not had to make any changes to their workforce. “We have not laid off a single person at the company or made salary adjustments,” he says. “We have considered, and we will continue to consider it. But it is not going to happen soon. The worst that will happen over the next few weeks is that there will be a reduction in pay.”

Andres is being open with employees about the company’s financial situation. Business has taken a hit. But he has filed paperwork with the U.S. Paycheck Protection Program, and he is hopeful that they can continue to keep people on. “There may have to be tough conversations, but we are not there yet,” he says. “I’ve seen people heave a sigh of relief [when they hear that.]”

Importantly, Andres is reassuring his team and sending a strong message that everyone is “in this together.”

Andres says he’s immensely gratified by what his team has accomplished in the past month. “Our team is working harder and more productively than ever,” he says. “The proudest moments have come from seeing others in the organization step-up as leaders and take on tasks that wouldn’t usually be their responsibility.”

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