



COVID-19: Communications Considerations for Manufacturing



Managing Risk Through Communications: Implications for an Effective COVID-19 Response

In rapidly evolving situations such as the current COVID-19 pandemic, employees, customers, and other stakeholders are eager to hear from you. While there is often a natural inclination to wait for a final game plan before saying anything, operating with a business-as-usual mindset for too long, hoping that employees, customers, and other stakeholders will do the same, is not a recipe for successful stakeholder engagement. Rather, communicating in some regular cadence is essential. It is, of course, important to vet all communications carefully, but a careful balance needs to be struck as the impact of COVID-19 is on everyone's minds globally – particularly hourly employees who are worried about continuity of income and customers dependent upon sustainable supply chains – and a communications vacuum can exponentially increase business risk.

Business leaders and communication teams are often redefining best practices daily, per the latest developments, as no playbook exists for communicating in this fluid time. Thus, it is important to keep the lines of communications open so your teams know you are focused on the response, understand how decisions affect them personally, and trust you will share information when you have it.

Decisions made will reflect guidance from health authorities, as well as the continuity and health of your business's supply chain, fluctuations in demand for various products, the overall financial health and resilience of your business, and the terms of collective bargaining agreements. All these factors are essential, but first and foremost must always be your commitment to protecting the health of your employees.

Assembling a talented task force representative of various functions within your organization to help inform business and policy decisions is essential. This team should include human resources; environmental, health, and safety (EHS); operations; supply chain; sales; and others as deemed necessary. Assuring a point of view from different parts of the company will help scenario plan and think ahead when it comes to protecting your people. Even with planning and every effort to put people first, it is prudent to consider that litigation could occur as people second-guess the decisions being made today with the benefit of hindsight.

Perhaps most importantly, however, will be your ability to listen. These coming days and weeks are the time to be accessible, recognize the personal impact of disruption on people, and do your best to uphold the health and safety of your employees.

Best Practices for Communicating During Business Disruption

Health and safety first, always.

While business continuity is imperative, it must be clear that the company will do everything possible to ensure the health of their employees. Every communication should note who in the organization is accountable for COVID-19-related issues and emphasize its commitment to health and safety ***prominently***.

- Acknowledge the personal impact on employees, without reinforcing fear.
- Convey clear accountability and transparency – let employees and other stakeholders know who is making decisions and how they have been made.
- Stick to what you know, focusing on your organization’s response without trying to reinterpret or summarize guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO) or other authorities – do not succumb to the temptation to fill in the gaps with reinterpretations of medical guidance or any content not authentic to your organization.



Embrace environmental, health, and safety (EHS) as part of an ongoing company commitment.

Adhering to environmental, health, and safety (EHS) processes are a cornerstone of the manufacturing industry and factored into all operational decisions. Employees, customers, and others are likely used to hearing about them. In the current environment, enhancements to existing procedures are likely very welcome and assuring, though it is important to make clear that the organization considers EHS all the time, not just in times of crisis.

- Position enhancements against the backdrop of existing health and safety protocols already implemented.
- Acknowledge – and continue to reinforce the importance of – prior policies and procedures.
- Point to prior experiences that helped to test and refine the company’s approach to health and safety, including lessons learned from natural disasters, drills or other experiences that provide confidence these new processes will work.

Be specific and transparent about actions being taken– while also providing updates on the current state.

Communications are often prompted by specific policy changes or actions being taken to protect employees, customers, and communities, e.g., enhanced sanitation, asking certain employee groups to work from home, temporarily closing facilities. It is important to communicate these decisions as they are made, even if you’re not able to answer every question. Information in

this rapidly evolving environment will necessarily be iterative.

- Communicate what you know as quickly as possible AND admit what you don't know. People are anxious, and gaps in communications heighten fear. You will be judged not by the crisis but by the way you managed – and cared for your people – through it.
- Introduce policy changes by first acknowledging the context in which they were made – most notably by providing updates on employee safety. In this environment, people often speculate about what led to policy changes and jump to worst-case scenarios. Don't leave them to wonder whether their colleagues/key contacts are safe.
- Explain how the company is responding to any known cases (e.g., temporary site closures, cleaning, quarantines, other support) but be sure to protect the confidentiality of the individuals affected in doing so.
- Keep content as simple and succinct as possible. Use bullets, bold text and headers to organize information and flag key points. Link to outside resources, as appropriate.
- Recognize the interconnectivity among sites, if you have more than one, by sharing the same information across all locations. Don't let the rumor mill do the talking for you.
- Immediately correct misinformation.
- Take care not to overcommit in these early days, which still entail much uncertainty.

Amplify Communication Infrastructure and Channels.

Companies often talk about how highly they value employees, customers and other business partners. They acknowledge their social responsibility and commitment to their communities. This is the opportunity for companies to walk that talk. Aim to be the most trusted source of information for all your stakeholders by leveraging every existing communications channel, building new channels and – perhaps most important – enabling your leaders at all levels.

- Deploy a multi-channel approach, including regular shift changes with trusted site managers, calls, emails, texts, recorded messages on a dedicated hotline, posted fact sheets, website updates, etc.
- Consider printing materials for field teams to take home to share with family members.
- Prepare and activate managers to communicate with confidence by briefing them regularly, answering their questions and providing tools that help them prepare – including strategies to reassure teams and keep them focused.
- Plan early to ensure you can communicate with all employees if your sites close. If you don't have emails and phone numbers that reach employees at home, consider collecting them now and confirm your systems (and in union shops, CBAs) will allow you to use them. If not, consider dedicated websites, apps or other channels.
- Engage regularly with employees and customers, even if operations are suspended. Let them know you are thinking of them.



Keep a pulse on the organization.

As quickly as the current situation is moving, it is easy to become detached from employees and other stakeholders, losing sight of where they are in their understanding of the situation and the most pressing concerns on their minds. Maintaining these relationships over the longer term requires that you listen and directly respond to the questions you're hearing – even if

the answer is you don't know.

- Encourage leaders to stay in front of their teams to the extent they are able. Take time to ask questions as simple as “how are you?” and really listen.
- Establish a process (e.g., regular leader calls or required daily updates) to collect feedback from managers closest to teams in the field as well as your corporate teams working from home.
- Create a dedicated email address or other channel where people can send their questions and reiterate confidentiality.
- Work with functional leaders to answer questions as explicitly as possible. People will only talk to you if they believe you're really listening.

Communication in times of uncertainty and disruption is essential to managing risk and ensuring business continuity for all companies, particularly for manufacturing companies. How leaders communicate to their employees about health and safety is vitally important to underscore why decisions are being made and to lay the foundation for the future when this crisis passes.

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