

4 Communication Moves That Ease Anxiety in Times of Crisis

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Just as we got used to the chaos of the Covid-19 pandemic, we experienced a second pandemic: the social unrest from the growing rage about systemic racism. Tough topics like racism require introspection and response from the business community, and there has been a wide variety of responses to these issues. Consumer demands are shifting, and as business owners, we need to communicate what we're doing to address the dual pandemics of social upheaval and coronavirus.

Businesses face challenges related to plans for reopening or reclosing. There are ever-shifting social norms along with polarizing political discourse over the conflicting data from various sources. The dual pandemics have caused businesses to implement unparalleled yet necessary operational changes. The very ground under us is shaking beneath our feet.

Business owners, our employees, and our customers have become weary. Collectively we long for a return to "normal," but we're uncertain of timelines or even the possibility to do so.

Whether you are a small business owner, entrepreneur, or the CEO of a multinational organization, the key to maintaining trusting relationships with employees, customers, and the communities you serve is having good communication skills.

Effective communication will enable you to provide calm in the storm, demonstrate changed behaviors at the leadership level, reinforce values, and establish new cultural norms.

Behavioral science gives us insights into how we can improve the quality of our communications. As a business owner, you will need to assess how you can communicate more effectively if you want people to respond differently.

Here are four ways to communicate more effectively:

1. Simplify your message

We live in a microwave society, complete with short attention spans and sound bites. The 24-hour news cycle moves at the speed of light. The level of complexity in your message has a significant impact on whether or not it lands well. Be direct. Steer clear of industry jargon. If you are seeking action, be clear and specific on the “ask.” Breaking up written information with headings allows for ease of readability. Make key points stand out in bold font, use bullet points for lists of information, and repeat critical issues for emphasis. Plan out the use of Hashtags to ensure specificity and clarity of the intended usage.

2. Time communication right

Effective communication is timely. Make a habit of communicating early and often. This early action allows you to help you bring people on board and engage them. There is a danger between communicating too much too early and communicating too little too late.

Jumping in too early without the benefit of enough information can create fear, increase anxiety, or promote apathy among stakeholders. Conversely, communicating too late can breed an environment that is ripe for resentment, mistrust, and genuine

confusion.

People are more receptive to communication when they can engage or take some form of action. Providing a mechanism for asking questions or giving feedback is a simple way to do this. You can improve trust and transparency by involving people early in the problem-solving process. Doing this in a conversational format, even if in a group or community conversation, is the best way to do this.

Break down complex processes or multiyear efforts into smaller, manageable defined stages meaningful to your audience. Allowing people to commit to something smaller makes them more likely to say yes to more significant challenges over the long-term.

3. Cut through the noise

Like executives, business owners have taken on a leadership role in these times of societal transition and crisis. This role requires you to help your employees and customers to make sense of some complex issues and understand how they will be affected.

Truly successful communications cut through the noise and create a framework for understanding everything else they hear. Facilitate team conversations about the context of current events, the realities they face in the real world, and how the company's commitment to its values will consistently shape the response. This is a great way to get everyone on the same page.

We are increasingly being faced with the discomfort of cognitive dissonance from conflicting messages. ("We are committed to reopening quickly" but "consumer safety is our top priority.") As a result, people may simply dismiss your words. You can reduce the potential for dissonance with clear and concise messaging: "We are committed to providing services

most safely and efficiently for our employees and customers.”

4. Know that words matter

Words have power. The words spoken by leaders can make or break support for the development of organizational cultures and behaviors. Studies show that language affects behavior.

Your communications can benefit from framing messages with proper language and nuance. For example, news outlets reporting a Covid-19 spike that has “*killed* 812 people in the past 24 hours” is scarier than one that is reported as a “*mortality* rate of 1.14 %.”

When expressing changes in process, policy, or service offerings, choose words that promote calmness and understanding. It’s a unique time in the business world. Communicating effectively is mission-critical. It can save people’s health and bring social reform and justice to all.

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