

Leading With Transparency in Times of Uncertainty



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While not a new concept, the importance of transparency in the workplace took on more urgency during the pandemic as our daily lives, including our work environment, were upended. Worldwide, both within the workplace and outside of it, uncertainty became the norm rather than the exception across many influential sectors: geopolitical, natural and business. And there are no signs of things calming down anytime soon.

In a volatile climate, organizational transparency becomes more essential to your business success. As your employees cope – or attempt to cope – with constant upheaval and uncertainty, helping to foster stability toward mental health is of prime importance. Any reassurances you can offer your teams will go a long way in stabilizing their anxiety levels,

at least regarding the workplace since external factors are most likely beyond your control.

Ask yourself: If your management team is not leading with transparency, what is your response to the uncertainty? Are you then leading with opaqueness? What does that mean for our employees?

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Transparency vs. opaqueness

Transparency facilitates a more open, less hierarchical approach to management and a culture that tilts toward learning and innovation. It assumes that data and information will be of value to people. A culture of transparency helps to decentralize information, and with the right information, we've witnessed individuals become leaders.

The more employees connect to your company's overall business objectives, the more room is given for inspiration to arrive. Transparency allows for ownership and alignment, enabling the business to unlock growth. In addition, it encourages individuals to take ownership of problems and mistakes, solutions and their departments. It discourages finger-pointing. It is evidence of mutual respect between the organization and its employees.

In this environment, employees stay connected to what is happening within the organization and don't have to spend valuable time questioning the company's direction or plans. If a problem develops, the focus stays on solving the problem versus spiraling into a perceived cover-up and becoming part of the subsequent rumor mill churn.

Organizations led by transparency foster a culture that acknowledges we don't have all the answers and are learning together as the business grows.

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On the flip side, opaqueness assumes hierarchy. The lack of transparency permeates the organization, causing silos and territorial fiefdoms. Opaqueness facilitates a culture that guards information and knowledge and instructs people what to do instead of providing opportunities to lead. There's no ownership by employees. There's the leadership team and everyone else.

Here are some tactics your organization can leverage to foster a culture of transparency.

- **Document your vision, strategy and goals.** Openly state these north stars, even sharing them externally, instead of having people guess or make them up for you. This level of visibility will ensure the alignment of your go-to-market strategy with your vision, mission and goals.
- **Share internally how the business is meeting its goals.** Measure how the business is performing monthly or quarterly against a transparent plan that you've put in place. Share OKR (objectives and key results) reporting of how the company is performing. Use this information to foster a culture of learning. At PandaDoc, we understand that some of these OKRs will fail, but we let everyone know it's okay as long as we learn from our mistakes.
- **Regularly schedule all-hands meetings.** Implement these meetings at the company and at departmental levels. Schedule "ask me anything" meets with leaders so employees can voice their questions or concerns. PandaDoc's all-hands have a cadence to them. We publish a calendar of what we're going to discuss; for example, a monthly or quarterly business review, an OKR review, show and tell and what's happening in various departments. We also structure time to talk about things

happening in the world that impact us.

- **Schedule sprint reviews.** Have departments share their accomplishments within a designated time – for example, over the past month. Record and post these on your company website so everyone in the company has the opportunity to view them. At PandaDoc, we invite our entire company to join our weekly product and engineering sprint reviews.
- **Create a culture where your employees feel safe.** Not every employee feels confident enough to ask leadership-related questions during an all-hands meeting. Provide structured ways to encourage the questions. Let your employees know that they can have one of their co-workers ask the question on their behalf. It's a simple way of letting your employees know that you have their back, and it provides a way for all employees to have their concerns addressed.
- **Take note of what other companies are doing.** Software developer GitHub, for example, is implementing some innovative ways to promote transparency. Two that come to mind: They publicly expose their employee onboarding and offer a two-week CEO shadowing opportunity for employees.
- **Understand that you don't have to share everything in real-time.** You might not want to share a new development in real time; some may require a well-thought-out plan. But you do want to get in front of the rumor mill before your employees start to have that nagging feeling that something is wrong. And definitely, before the information is available on the internet. Share as quickly as possible what's happening, and what the plan is so your employees can decide their next steps. Sharing this information helps cultivate mutual respect.

As you think about leading with transparency, it's critical to note that your business is already transparent, even if you don't want it to be. There's no point in hiding negative

information. It's going to come out. And you don't want the information shared on Twitter before you've shared it with your employees. A better business practice is to embrace and lead with transparency to foster a more positive working environment for everyone.

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