

Lessons Learned: Employee Engagement in the Age of COVID-19

I attended my first teleconference on COVID-19 in late January. Some in my Agency's senior leadership was extremely concerned about the implications of COVID-19 reaching the United States and more importantly our Agency. Our Agency has personnel all over the Globe and employees who constantly travel around the world, so the likelihood of it affecting us seemed extremely high to our leadership. The rest of us weren't so convinced. But we dutifully complied. We engaged our medical director and staff, reached out to the Centers for Disease Control, and drafted simple messages to the workforce explaining the coronavirus and possible symptoms. If only we knew in late January what the next few months had in store. We were busier than humanly possible and as always communications became the most critical component of crisis management.

In hindsight, that concerned leader could do an "I told you so dance" as COVID-19 spread rapidly in late February to countries where our overseas personnel were stationed and in March cases started to spike within the U.S. Though he wasn't totally right. He refused to allow us to use medical terms in messages, which slowed down comprehension of the virus. I just had to point that out. But soon, our task to explain what COVID-19 was in January ballooned to websites, town halls, videos, regular employee emails, social media posts which covered topics such as COVID-19 impact on those with pre-existing conditions, teleworking, social distancing, proper hygiene, building maintenance and availability of testing.

Looking back at those first three months of 2020, I learned five valuable lessons that can be applied to whatever next crisis we encounter.

Communicate often with substance.

We were directed as the spread intensified to create a regular messaging tempo by issue notes to the workforce thrice a week. We developed a simple template for messages that could be updated with new information regularly. The issue – senior leadership didn't like it. So unfortunately, the creative types brainstormed other techniques to discuss the crisis: infographics, videos, personal anecdotes, leadership reflections. While those messages were read, they become white noise and didn't always address the simple message of "what is going on and what is our Agency's response". So instead our hotline fielded more than 1,000 calls a day. I remember hearing a talk from a State Department official who said they post really informative messages (not necessarily interesting ones) on social media, so citizens can stop calling them. Man, did we miss the boat. What was the point of all of those messages if employees still needed to call Human Resources to obtain the answer to their question?

Lesson Learned: Definitely communicate often but give the kind of detailed information that will prevent phone calls. If you have nothing to say, just push. It is fine.

Simplify that website.

We knew we needed a website but we kept tinkering with the format to figure out how to best display all of the information we had in a user-friendly way. This took months to discover. It also confused our employees. We quickly realized that certain layouts worked better: full bleed, left navigation, icons in the center. However, even those icons became a point of disagreement, to cartoon or not cartoon. But people couldn't leave well enough alone. Quickly, the page became cluttered with so much information that people went back to their old reliable way of figuring out information, calling the hotline.

Lesson Learned: A more interactive website with the ability to query topics of interest turned out to be the best solution in the end.

Too many cooks do spoil the broth.

At one point, our daily task force meetings numbered in 100 plus attendees. Guess what 100 attendees have? 100 different opinions. Our communications campaign slowed down significantly because managing that much input into our planned tactics became overwhelming. The solution was only slightly better. The task force was pared down to 15 but those 15 weren't the same people who had been following the issue since the beginning. With the rapid pace of work, those of us in the old guard didn't have an opportunity to pass our expertise on to that team and as a result were a few missteps. The team wasn't familiar with certain policy restrictions that should have been outlined in messages. And you know what that caused? You got it: calls to the hotline. In reflection, the transition could have been much smoother and interpersonal communications could have been much improved. So many issues arise because people in charge aren't talking (and listening!) to one another.

Lesson learned: Create a core team early and maintain that team for the duration of the crisis. Shifting gears in the middle of crisis planning confuses your audience and the messaging.

Feed the trolls.

Our Agency has a very robust social media platform and influencers who really do affect how the Agency operates. During our crisis communications execution, the trolls were vicious, while many were obtuse. A senior executive and I were chosen to respond to social media posts, mainly in an effort to correct misinformation online. Though we would laugh offline at all of the ridiculous questions we received. However as the virus spread, many of social media posts were demanding something we couldn't do, which was close the Agency to stop the spread. Since we are an Agency and not a Department, we could not unilaterally close without permission. hilariously, not providing the answer people wanted ruined my reputation. Seriously. Employees can give thumbs up or down to other employees on social media and during the early days, my score plummeted to 2. For perspective, many prolific posters have scores in the thousands. My role as social media responder became the one job no one wanted. No one! Where were all

those bright ideas now? That didn't mean I didn't receive kudos (privately of course) for how prompt and informative I was but that 2 burned me up. However, by the end people didn't take action unless I confirmed someone's post was accurate.

Lesson Learned: It is painful but you have to stay in the trenches to gain credibility you need with your audience.

No one cares about your spokesperson.

Turns out in a crisis people only want to hear from the top leadership. That means the Director or the Deputy Director. Occasionally employees want to hear from the experts but only if the expert is standing next to the Director. In top-down authoritative organizations, other senior officials are only the warm-up acts for the Big Kahuna. That Director could repeat verbatim the same policy that the HR Director has provided to the workforce multiple times, but for many unless the Director said it, then it isn't true. It took a little while to get the Director to just step in and repeat what had already been said. However, once he decided to give a speech. So many people tuned into his video chat that the system crashed. Did he provide some new enlightening information? Nope. Was it important that it was said by him? Yep.

Lesson Learned: Get your Director / President / Chief out in front early and often to recap the current status and next steps. It doesn't have to be long but it needs to be done.

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