

CRISIS COMMUNICATION

How to Reassure Your Team When the News Is Scary

by Allison Shapira

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We've all had that moment on an airplane where we experience turbulence. Maybe you are rudely awakened by a sudden jolt, or you stand up to use the restroom and have to hold onto the back of someone's seat. Within a few seconds, the pilot's voice comes over the intercom. What are you listening for? You are listening for reassurance through the uncertainty of turbulence.

With Covid-19 concerns around the globe, it's not just the airline industry that is experiencing a sudden lurch on its normal journey. Many business leaders are asking how they can communicate uncertainty both internally to their teams and externally to their clients — whether it's about participating in an upcoming conference or delivering on a signed proposal. Communicating in the face of uncertainty is a constant leadership challenge.

In addition to working with the airline industry on this topic, my team and I have worked with Fortune 500 companies around the world who need to manage high-stakes communications to multiple audiences simultaneously. Here are five steps we have found to be incredibly effective:

1. Pause and breathe.

Before you start communicating to others, take a minute to pause and breathe. When you are the most senior person in a room, your team takes its cues from you in terms of how to act and how to feel. Taking a minute to center yourself will ensure that you present a calm, rational force to your colleagues and clients. This applies over the phone or through email as well. When you feel anxiety, you transmit that to others. A study of empathetic stress found that observing others experiencing stress could cause observers to themselves to feel more stressed.

2. Put yourself in your audience's shoes.

In public speaking, knowing your audience in advance is critical. In times of uncertainty, it's paramount, regardless of the medium. Do a thorough strategic analysis of who you are communicating to. What are their concerns, questions, or interests? What do they need an immediate answer to? You might use language such as, "I know many of you may be thinking..." The quicker you can address what's on their mind, the quicker you will be able to calm them down. If you are not addressing their most pressing interests, they might not even be listening to you.

3. Do your research.

In times of stress, misinformation can be especially destructive. Seek out credible sources of information, and read the information fully before distilling it into clear, concise language. Share those links with others, so that they too have a credible resource. As a faculty member

at Harvard, I appreciate that the university created a separate webpage with credible sources for more information and that it sends frequent emails with updates.

4. Speak clearly and confidently.

You can speak with confidence even without 100% certainty. You can confidently express doubt or uncertainty, while still sounding like you are in control of the situation. You might say, “Reports are still coming in, but what we understand so far is this...” Communicate frequently with your audience, even without news to report, so that they know you are actively following the issue. Fellow communication expert Nancy Duarte wrote an insightful article on this topic several years ago and said, “People will be more willing to forgive your in-progress ideas if they feel like they’re part of the process.”

5. Have specific next steps.

In times of uncertainty, it’s helpful to provide your team with tangible action items. Discussing your own next steps or recommending next steps to your audience gives them a sense of control so they feel like they are contributing to stabilization. Use language such as, “Here are the steps we are taking” or “Here’s what you can do” to demonstrate action.

Communicating through uncertainty is an essential leadership skill, regardless of whether or not you have a formal leadership role. In fact, the ability to communicate through uncertainty is part of what demonstrates to others your leadership readiness. Use the above steps to first find your own sense of focus and then allow yourself to transmit that reassurance to others.



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