

Employee Crisis Communications 101

Here are five suggestions for smart employee communication during difficult times from consultant Alison Davis.

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by

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It has become both more and less challenging to communicate effectively with employees during crises. On the one hand, the 24-hour news cycle and proliferation of social media sharing means that problems and bad news can spread quickly. But some of the same social media tools and other technologies have made getting messages to employees easier.

Here are five suggestions for smart employee communication during difficult times from Alison Davis, a consultant and co-author of “The Definitive Guide to HR Communication: Engaging Employees in Benefits, Pay, and Performance.”

- **Assume any electronic message will become public.** Ten or 15 years ago, companies could reasonably expect that companywide memos would be kept confidential. Those days are gone, Davis said. Millennials in particular have grown up expecting to share what they know with wide networks of people. Some even consider it their duty to make information free.
- **Use high- and low-tech means to communicate.** Social media tools like Twitter or internal corporate social networks can help get messages out to the workforce fast, and email and text messages to mobile phones can do the same. But Davis warns that many companies, especially those in industries such as retail and hospitality, have to think about more traditional means like printed documents and face-to-face meetings. “Few organizations have 100 percent of employees with instant access to email,” Davis said. Face-to-face meetings also inspire more candid conversations and build trust.
- **Lean on leaders.** Davis said it is a mistake to rely solely on CEOs to be the messengers in troubled times. When other senior leaders can

articulate the same points, it shows the company is unified and pulling in the same direction, she said. At large organizations, the top 100 or so executives should be expected to step up and lead in employee communications. “Especially in times of crisis, you don’t want only CEOs to communicate,” she said.

- **Move quickly.** A key to managing a crisis is to tell your side as it unfolds, rather than letting others tell the story for you. Employees who don’t get an official explanation may take their questions and guesses to public forums like Facebook, fueling an unwanted fire of speculation. It may be that, early on, all you can say is that you’re aware of the problem and working on it. But providing at least a preliminary statement is better than staying silent. “That’s an external communications principle,” Davis said, “but it’s also an internal communications strategy.”
- **Have a plan in place.** Deciding what to say to employees amid a crisis is hard enough. You don’t want to add the headache of assembling a communications team and figuring out how to get messages delivered to all workers, Davis said. One way to prepare for predicaments is to communicate regularly with the workforce through a company portal, for example. Organizations that do this are less likely to have to scramble to set up communications channels. When you don’t have a plan, Davis said, “that’s when you really get into trouble.”

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