

# COMMUNICATING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

## *leadership behaviors and practices*

There are extra pressures on leaders in times of crisis and there are extra challenges due to the uncertainty and ambiguity as issues unfold. But you've got this. Here are some tips for communicating in times of crisis.

### ***leadership behaviors***

**be present  
and  
listen**

*be available*

Make sure you are reachable at all reasonable times; what is most important is to not appear to “disappear” at a moment of crisis. People will automatically become more anxious if it is unclear who is steering the ship.

*be visible*

Make more frequent appearances, albeit virtual ones, to help put your staff at ease. Talk to team members to get a sense of how often they would like to hear from you and in what manner. Check in with people more frequently than you otherwise might.

*listen and  
encourage  
conversation*

Keep in mind that while we're all in this together, some staff members may be more immediately impacted by the pandemic than others and different staff members might have different concerns. Make sure to clearly communicate to staff what they should do if they have questions – who they can reach out to, how, and in what timeframe they can expect a response.

**communicate  
clearly  
and  
calmly**

*be transparent*

Acknowledge what you know and what you don't know. Acknowledge the items that you are still working through, and possible scenarios to prepare for. Share what you are working on and how. Try not to withhold information unless it is really necessary to do so. Be optimistic responsibly.

*communicate  
with clarity*

Words really matter. Choose your words carefully, refer to things with consistent language and share information as clearly and concisely as possible. Whenever possible, have a few people review your communications and provide feedback before they are distributed more widely, to ensure that the information is clear and does not raise unanswered questions.

*orient your  
communications  
to what people  
need to know  
and do*

When you are requesting your staff to act, clearly communicate that action: how it is expected to be done, when it is expected to be done and why it is expected to be done. In many cases, people are looking for more direct information about specifically what they should do than they are currently receiving. Make it clear whether you are expecting your staff to do something vs. whether you are communicating in order to share an update.

## get comfortable with ambiguity

### *assert your need for flexibility*

There will be situations when you might have to change your approach to something, note that information previously shared is no longer accurate, or ask your team to do something they thought they would not have to do. Acknowledge that, as transparent and clear as you are attempting to be, there may still be situations where things change beyond your control or situations turn out completely different than anticipated, and flexibility may be required.

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### *be flexible with others*

Flexibility also applies to your staff. Let them know that they have the flexibility they need to balance their new situations (e.g., working from home with children at home).

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### *get comfortable with a changing set of facts*

Information is changing quickly, which means we are all operating in an environment where we may not have all of the facts. It's ok to communicate the facts and concede what you don't know. No need to be awkward about it – just be matter of fact and ensure your staff that you will communicate additional information when you have it.

## practice empathy

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### *recognize that different people deal with stress differently*

Some people will have a harder time than others dealing with the emotional stress of COVID-19 and managing its impact on their family and friends. Encourage your staff to do things that help to cope with stress, like taking the time to unwind, taking a break from the news and connecting with others. Allow your staff the flexibility to cope in the ways that are best for them. Consider sharing coping resources such as those available from the [Centers for Disease Control & Prevention](#) or the [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration](#).

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### *check your tone*

Do everything you can to make sure that you are not contributing to the anxiety and concern that is already present. Use a tone that acknowledges that you cannot possibly understand each person's individual situation. Avoid saying anything that may come across as insensitive.

## be self aware

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### *pause and check your behaviors*

Check yourself on a regular basis to make sure you are practicing the above behaviors to the best of your ability. In many ways you will be setting the tone for your staff. Consider gut checking your behavior and actions with a couple of close colleagues on a regular basis. If they'd like, you can even return the favor.

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### *triage priorities*

It's easy to get distracted when so much is happening at once. Momentarily check that you are focusing on what is most important to you, your team and the organization at any given time.

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### *consider your own well being*

Do the things you need to do to help you feel calm and collected. Emotions can be contagious, and everyone will be better off when you take care of your own needs as well.

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## leadership practices

rely on familiar channels and routines

*pair the right messages with the right channels*

Different companies often use different channels to share news and information. Consider all the different communication channels your staff typically access and determine which are best suited to sharing frequent updates in a crisis. Communicate with your staff via the channels that provide the best ease of use and access.

*use old routines for new purposes*

As much as you can, embed your new routines into old routines. For example, if staff meetings are usually held at 10am on Mondays, keep doing it, just do the meeting virtually now. If weekly newsletters are routine and well-read by your employees, use them as an opportunity to recap COVID-19-related news.

share information early and often

*communicate early*

When there are new developments or new concerns, it is usually best to acknowledge them even if you don't have all of the answers yet. It is ok to communicate that you recognize X development may create Y issue and that you are currently hard at work determining the best action/response. Provide a sense of when your staff can expect to hear more from you on the topic.

*communicate with frequency*

At a time like this, when things are evolving with great speed and we are being asked to abide by government requests evolving by the day or even by the hour, communicate whenever you need to. Do not be concerned about overcommunicating or communicating too often. It is better to overcommunicate than not communicate enough.

*keep your promises*

Maintain credibility by sharing information and updates with staff when you say you will. If you need more time to figure something out, tell this to your staff. It's better than leaving people in the dark, which may increase anxiety and lead to unhelpful rumors.

combat misinformation

*correct misinformation immediately*

Do everything in your power to keep misinformation from circulating. As soon as you hear inaccurate information circulating among your staff, take action to correct it.

*refer people to credible sources*

Nobody has all the answers. Select credible information sources that you are comfortable directing your staff to for updates. Mainstream news media such as the [The New York Times](#), [The Washington Post](#) and [The Wall Street Journal](#) rate high on scientific accuracy, as do healthcare publications such as [STAT](#), [WebMD](#) and [Modern Healthcare](#). Many publications have made their coverage of COVID-19 available for free. If you have reasons to believe that some sources are more credible or more accurate or frequently updated than others, let your staff know. Providing them with credible resources now may help minimize the need to combat misinformation later.

***about this document***

These recommendations for leadership behaviors and practices were included in “[Navigating COVID-19: a Briefing for Leaders](#)” developed by Orangefiery in March 2020. These tips are intended to be used by business leaders and others to help communicate effectively with stakeholders during the coronavirus 2019 pandemic.

***about orangefiery***

Orangefiery is a consulting and communications firm focused on helping leaders and brands navigate challenges and growth opportunities. We aspire to provide our clients in healthcare, technology and other sectors with intellectually rigorous work that inspires their stakeholders and advances their business goals. With diverse backgrounds in management consulting, corporate communications, brand strategy and journalism, we design and implement real-world, actionable tools and frameworks to help leaders navigate inflection points with positive outcomes.

More information can be found at [www.orangefiery.com](http://www.orangefiery.com) or by contacting [info@orangefiery.com](mailto:info@orangefiery.com).

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