STUDY: Organizations Rising to the Challenge of COVID-19 Communications, but Needs Persist; Leaders Must Address Concerns and Demonstrate Transparency, Clarity and Openness

MILL VALLEY, Calif. and NEW YORK – April 3, 2020 – A new study shows 83 percent of U.S. organizations have been impacted by the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research shows leaders have risen to the challenge of communicating with employees during the pandemic, but only a slim majority of employees say they are very satisfied with the communications they have received.

"This pandemic has caused a great disruption," said Mike Kuczkowski, CEO of Orangefiery, the consulting and communications firm that conducted the research. "Communications is a critical function in a crisis, and organizations have responded well in the short term by providing employees with practical information on the pandemic's immediate impact to the organization and how to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As it becomes clear that this will be a longer-term disruption from both a health and economic standpoint, leaders should consider ways to address employees' needs and strengthen relationships through communications."

Rising to the communications challenge
In assessing the communications they've received from their employers about COVID-19, significant percentages of respondents said their organizations had been delivering on-topic communications (82%) using the right communications channels (85%) with an appropriate frequency (79%). Respondents also indicated that leaders have been keeping their promises (83%) by following through on doing what they said they would do and communicating what they said they would communicate.

Signs communications should do more
Asked to rate the effectiveness of the communications they've received, smaller majorities said the communications were "very" or "extremely" trustworthy (66%), appropriate in tone (66%), clear (64%), and honest and open (63%). Fewer respondents (55%) said they were very or extremely satisfied with the messages they were receiving, with 11% saying they were not very or not at all satisfied, and only 53% said the messages were very or extremely useful in communicating what employees should think or do.

The leader-employee perception gap
In the survey, leaders rated organizational communications more highly than employees did on several issues. Leaders were more likely than employees to say that communications were very or extremely trustworthy (75% to 63%), clear (69% to 62%), honest and open (75% to 58%), successful at alleviating anxiety and concern

(46% to 33%) and useful at communicating what employees should think and do (58% to 51%). Leaders also were more likely to say communications were frequent enough (85% to 76%) and clearly indicated what leaders did and did not know (29% v. 21%).

Additionally, a slim majority (54%) of employees said they believe their organization is very or extremely committed to satisfying employee communications needs, compared with 64% of leaders. Less than half of employees (43% as opposed to 60% of leaders) said they believe their organization is very or extremely interested in hearing employee feedback during this pandemic.

Directions for the future

In more than 200 open-ended answers to a question about what organizations should do differently for the future, respondents said they wanted to understand clear plans for the organization's future, the impact of the disruption on their role, work and job security, information about benefits, and more consistent, frequent and direct communications from top leaders, with a number of respondents indicating that they were receiving inconsistent information depending on the source of the communication.

When asked what they want to see more of from future communications, the top responses were:
- Transparency about what the organization knows and doesn't know (32%)
- More information about resources for emotional and mental health, including dealing with stress & anxiety (25%)
- Stronger acknowledgement of the difficulty of the situation (23%)
- More frequent communications (22%)
- More clarity in communications (22%)
- More direct acknowledgement of misinformation and/or rumors (22%)
- More information about sick days, personal days and other benefits to deal with sick family members, children at home, etc. (21%)

In more than 200 open-ended responses to a question about the most important thing they want leaders to know about communicating during the COVID-19 pandemic, the top six categories of responses were: be honest and transparent; stay calm and lead by example; help employees stay safe and healthy; be factual; check in and care; and be clear and direct. As one indicative response said, "Just be open and transparent with employees. These are scary times."

"Leaders should recognize that they are giving themselves higher ratings for their performance on communications than employees are," Kuczkowski said. "Being transparent, being as clear as possible, staying calm and showing empathy are critical. These steps, along with demonstrating openness to feedback and clarifying

what the future looks like, are top priorities for building greater employee satisfaction and trust."

The research report, "Leadership Communications During COVID-19," details these findings and provides recommendations for organizational leaders responsible for helping their employee teams and external stakeholders navigate this unprecedented disruption of our lives and businesses. Click here to download the full report. To request the full data set, please reach out to research@orangefiery.com.

Additional information to help leaders navigate COVID-19 is available in "Navigating COVID-19: A Briefing for Leaders." Click here to download. For more information about how Orangefiery can assess organizational communications and implement programs to transform performance, contact us at info@orangefiery.com.

About the Research
The research was conducted online from March 25 to March 29, 2020. 454 respondents completed the survey. Of these 454 respondents, 327 identified as an "employee" and 127 identified as leaders, specifically as a "board member," "member of the executive leadership team" or "member of the management team." Respondents represented all regions of the United States. Respondents also represented organizations of all sizes; 27% worked in organizations with 1-50 employees, 18% with 51-200 employees, 20% with 201-1,000 employees, 14% with 1,001-5,000 employees and 21% with 5,001+ employees. All respondents were required to be employed at the time they completed the survey.

About Orangefiery
Orangefiery is a consulting and communications firm focused on helping leaders and brands navigate inflection points. 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. To learn more about Orangefiery or to sign up for our newsletter visit www.orangefiery.com.

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