

Communicating in the Age of the Pandemic

By Judith Filek—President
Impact Communications, Inc.



The year 2020 is like no other. Borders have closed, cities are on lockdown and stocks have plummeted to record lows. People are worried and the level of stress is not expected to lessen anytime soon. For those of you who are managers, communication with your teams is critical.

First and foremost, be honest. Share what you know to be definitive. Be a straight shooter. Have frequent conversations with your teams and get ahead of the rumor mill. In meetings, invite questions and answer to the best of your ability. Your reputation is at risk. Obviously, the number one question people have is, “Will there be layoffs. Am I going to lose my job?” A suggestion for answering that concern is: “As you can imagine, the company is doing its best to continue to satisfy our customer’s needs, but our supply chain has been disrupted. Right now, we still have product, but in the future, we don’t know what our demand will be and if we can accommodate.”

If there are going to be layoffs, transparency is best. “Yes, layoffs are being discussed right now. I should

have a definite answer shortly as to how many. I will do my best to fight for each of you, but I may not have a choice if the company is to survive.” Do not promise what you can’t deliver. It’s a mistake to tell someone they will be rehired. We are not mind readers or able to control those decisions.

Secondly, be clear. Do not bury your message in corporate speak. Short statements are the best. Be cautious of wishy-washy language, “I’m not really sure. I hope not.” “It might not happen.” “You will probably be rehired by the end of the year.” People want the truth, not wishful thinking.

Always have a private conversation with an individual about to be let go. Never conduct a layoff by a text or an email. Someone we coached, who was a contractor and promised a contract, was sent a text message, not even a phone call, saying they couldn’t hire him. A hiring freeze was now in effect.

If the company will be giving a severance package, briefly state what it will be and give a hard copy with the details for the individual to review later. “There will be three months severance because you have worked here for more than 3 years but less than 5 years. You’ll see there are some other services available when you review this document”

Lastly, show empathy. Be caring. People will remember how they felt when they asked a question or when they met with you during this difficult time. Don’t try to hide your feelings. “I know you are worried about this. I am no different than you. I am also worried. I wish things were different. The Pandemic is affecting the entire world.”

Communication skills are important for any manager, but never more so than now. The better the manager’s communication skills, the quicker the team will go back to performing at a high level and the more likely it will be that employees stay focused.

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***Question:** Think back to how you have been communicating during this time. What lessons have you learned? What would you do differently? We're interested in your reaction to this article. Click here – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

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