



Effective Corporate Communications During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The ability for leaders to effectively communicate in times of crisis is more apparent today than ever before. Questions bubble up. Should people go to work? Can we provide services via tele-medicine platform? What about HIPAA? Should our staff or consumers quarantine themselves at home?

In fast-moving situations like this, behavioral health leaders often face questions that they don't have ready answers to. First and foremost, communicate early often with every manager, employee and consumer. Make sure that your approach is guided by empathy - put yourself in the shoes of the people that you lead in your company, try to understand how anxious they must feel, and attempt to make them feel better as much as possible. You will get it wrong sometimes, but you need to be as transparent as possible. And always be honest about the limits of your knowledge in order to maintain credibility.

Here are some recommendations that can be used to guide communications within your organization:

Build a team for focused communication

Many of us already have crisis plans and business continuity plans in place. In those plans we have laid out our protocols for centralized communications. Crisis response teams, ideally, should have no more than five people. One of the members should be from corporate communications or marketing, one from HR, one should possess knowledge of the pandemic, and you should have someone from the leadership team. It's okay if the team does not include the CEO, as he or she may be working with funders and other key stakeholders. The team should get together on a daily basis to monitor the situation as it evolves, be the go-to source in the organization or community for information on behavioral health during the pandemic, and offer regular updates to all departments, stakeholders and be transparent.

Stay in touch with employees

Your company's employees are your most valuable asset, and they function as your company's ambassadors to the community. If your employees don't really understand the way the pandemic is developing, and what people need to do to protect themselves, communication with the community is likely to be difficult. Clarity and demystification should be the mantra to follow.

Communicating with employees requires the posting of information at visible public locations, both physical and virtual. You also need to provide information about how decisions were arrived at in the areas of work-from-home arrangements, residential services, crisis or emergency services, medication management and travel. Put relevant information out as you have it; don't wait until you have all the answers.

Talk to your consumers on a regular basis

Your employees aren't the only people who look to you for information in a crisis. Your consumers and community partners need your leadership, too. You have probably by now received emails from many CEOs, for example, posted a note to all customers about the improved cleaning procedures put in place for the COVID-19 pandemic, and the enhanced ability of the company to deliver their services.

Airlines during the coronavirus epidemic announced the waiver of cancellation and change fees for passengers whose travel plans were affected. CVS withdrew early refill limits on prescriptions. In what way can you communicate the most important elements of your services to your consumers and families that rely on you for care?

Through all your communications, you should make sure that the company's empathy shines through. These communications shouldn't be seen as advertising and promotion opportunities. The more you can use your communications to show your consumers that you genuinely care, the more likely you are to earn and maintain their trust and loyalty.

Put the organization's stakeholders and community at ease

During an outbreak, it's important to make helping the community your company's priority. At the very least, nothing the company does should have a negative effect on the community. You can help by providing coping skills tips, access to emergency mental health services, food or hygiene supplies to people who are quarantined, talk about how you're handling the crisis within the organization, soothe fears about potential job losses, or announce services to support first responders and local residents.

Bottom line: in the face of uncertainty, make sure everything you do is informed by empathy.

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