

HR Communication Tips for Uncertain Times

Lessons Learned by Seasoned Professionals

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With 180+ years of experience and more than 100 human resources (HR) communication and change projects in 2019 alone, the experts on our Strategic Advisory Communication team have seen and learned a lot. While what we are all experiencing right now is unprecedented, we have a few professional and personal tips to share with our fellow communicators and HR leaders during these uncertain times.



Jim Hoff
Senior Partner

Chicago, Illinois

Act Fast and Have a Plan

During these extraordinarily uncertain and fast-changing times, you may not have time for a detailed strategy, but it's more important than ever to have an agile plan. Focus on the key elements—unique audience needs, consistent core messages, alignment of multiple communication streams, and optimal channels—and make it easy to update. Having a straightforward plan will give you and your leaders a sense of forward momentum and sharp focus on practical progress.

How I #StayAtHome

When daily patterns are so disrupted, it is easy to let weekdays and weekends blur together. Our family has made a commitment to use Friday and Saturday nights for movies and board games.



Anna Albi
Consultant

Cincinnati, Ohio

Focus on Your Highest Priorities

Your top HR communication priorities for the year—like a new career development process or promoting the 401(k) plan—may still matter, but they have been abruptly taken over by other urgent communication needs. Focus on clearly and frequently communicating your absolute highest-priority messages, and then thoughtfully reshuffle your other short-term and long-term priorities to fit the new reality.

How I #StayAtHome

I try to focus on what I can control—which, in times like these, means avoiding looking at my 401(k) balance and making sure I get some exercise, even if it's simply walking up my home stairs.



Pam Hein
Partner

Chicago, Illinois

Create One Go-To Message Document

It's easy to lose control of communicating consistently when everyone is scrambling to get information out and competing for employees' limited attention. How can you get a handle on it? Create one master message document with one clear owner. Include approved key messages and make updates as needed. That way everyone creating communications can work from the same core messages. This will reduce rework and message mix up, and help you stay true to your voice and employment brand.

How I #StayAtHome

I try to text or video chat with a family member or friend every day to check in and see how they're doing.



Andrea Mindell
Partner

Norwalk, Connecticut

Coach Leaders to Be Steady and Authentic

Employees crave clarity, direction, and support from leaders at all levels—from the CEO to their direct managers. Help them be steady and authentic in the middle of this storm. Coach them to communicate professionally (using the message document, of course), but also not be afraid to share their personal stories and invite employees to share theirs. One simple technique is to give leaders weekly—or even daily—talking points, feedback, and tips.

How I #StayAtHome

I love taking long hikes with our dog to clear my head in the fresh air.



Rob Lewis
Partner

Toronto, Ontario

Keep Up a Conversation

Now more than ever, communication means dialogue. You need to inform your employees, but it's just as important to listen and respond. Whether it's on video calls, via an email box, or on the intranet, provide a way for them to raise concerns, ask questions, and offer solutions. Keep a running COVID-19 question and answer page on your intranet, use pulse surveys or quick virtual focus groups to gather input, and harness the power of social media to drive connectivity and engagement.

How I #StayAtHome

My sourdough starter is healthy again, and there's a fresh loaf of bread from the oven twice a week!



Heather Tredup
Partner

Seattle, Washington

Find Your Best Communication Channels

With work locations and patterns disrupted, employees will be cut off from normal communication channels like in-person conversations and meetings, digital screen reminders, and breakroom communications. It's time to get creative. Identify and maximize your most effective communication channels given the current realities. They might be bundled recap emails, quick videos created on a smart phone, opt-in texts, virtual meetings, social channels, and even hotlines.

How I #StayAtHome

Finding a daily escape is important, whether reading one more chapter in my book or spending a half hour watching my favorite, guilty-pleasure TV show.



Nicole Durham
Director

Denver, Colorado

Keep It Short and Simple

It can be a challenge to get people to read HR and benefits communications in the best of times, and now people are scared, overwhelmed, and distracted. Now is the time for a relentless focus on creating short, easy-to-read, simple-to-access communications. Quickly review every communication for readability. Create short communications that link to additional information. Repeat critical messages and clearly call out actions needed and actions taken.

How I #StayAtHome

When the news and social media feel like too much, playing games or doing puzzles are great distractions.



Joann Hall Swenson
Partner

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Send Targeted Communication on Hot Topics

In times of crisis and volatility, many things that once seemed so important seem small now. Focus on what's important to your business but also to your people—like what to do if I'm worried about paying my bills and how to manage my anxiety. Then create bite-sized, targeted communications around what people care about most. Highlight the help they can get from the rewards and benefits your company already has in place and how they can easily access the most helpful resources.

How I #StayAtHome

With so much uncertainty, I try to focus on what I can do today to make progress and bring a little goodness to every situation.



Carol Sladek
Partner

Chicago, Illinois

Redefine Expectations

Should I work from home? Should I shake hands? Am I expected to work 24/7 now? How am I supposed to do my job remotely? Is my job secure? When will work life get back to normal? Workforce expectations—and even aspects of the employee value proposition—are changing. Work with your HR leaders to determine the expectations you need to reset and communicate those expectations in a clear, authentic way.

How I #StayAtHome

I'm learning to share my home office with my young-adult daughter and be productive but have some fun along the way.



Johanna Rollins
Executive Assistant

Chicago, Illinois

Put Your Oxygen Mask on First

You cannot help others if you are not physically and emotionally healthy yourself. As the flight attendants tell us, put the oxygen mask on yourself first before you help others. Take care of yourself physically and remember that no one is immune from these stressful times. A quick instant message "thank you" or an encouraging "I'm here to help" email can go a long way. Together we will weather these days and come out stronger for it.

How I #StayAtHome

Before I send an email, I ask myself, "Will this be helpful right now to the person receiving it or will it just add to the person's overflowing inbox?"

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