



Hewitt Associates LLC

Communicating With Employees During Times of Crisis

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About This Document

This white paper includes information that employees will need and want in times of crisis, regardless of whether the crisis is generated from within the corporation or through external events. For the most part, this information applies to U.S. employees, although many employee needs are the same, regardless of where employees live.

In many cases, organizations will have crisis communication and response plans in place. In all cases, it is appropriate to check with the leader of the corporate communication function and the human resources function in the organization to see if crisis plans are already in operation.

Establish a Crisis Communication Channel

It is critical for employees and other internal audiences to have an easy-to-find and convenient place to get all communication related to the crisis. Here are some suggestions for convenient channels available in most organizations. Choose the one or two channels that provide the widest access.

For all employees:

- Special section on company intranet home page;
- Special part of company HR Help Center IVR;
- Hotline for employee questions;
- Daily bulletin board postings;
- Password-protected internet site; or
- Daily e-mail update.

For managers and supervisors:

- Password-protected section on company intranet home page;
- Password-protected part of company HR Help Center IVR;
- Hotline for manager questions;
- Daily e-mail update;
- Special manager database for information or discussion; or
- Password-protected internet site.

For retirees:

- Password-protected internet site;
- Special phone number with daily recorded updates; or
- Retiree organization or club channels.

Crisis Communication Messages

In creating a crisis communication plan, key messages should be developed first and used to guide the remainder of the plan. These messages should be provided to all managers who will be asked to represent the company's position to employees.

The key messages sent by the organization to employees during times of crisis should be clear and easy-to-comprehend. They should be repeated constantly. The key messages provide tone, context, and continuity for all additional messages.

Key messages sent to employees and key messages sent to other critical audiences i.e., the media, customers, business partners, communities, shareholders and the government, should be integrated.

Crisis Communication Tips for Managers and Leaders

- Be up front regarding sensitive or confidential information. If you cannot discuss something, tell the audience you cannot address it and why, rather than leaving them wondering.
- Speak to the specific audiences' concerns. Put yourself in the audience's shoes and provide the information and reassurance needed from their perspective—not yours. Anticipate their questions.
- Use personal language and acknowledge emotions. Business language is not appropriate for some messages. Acknowledge the inevitable emotional component of the crisis.
- Appreciate the individuality of responses to crisis as well as personal opinions about the crisis itself. Everyone will deal with the crisis differently. Business will go on, but each individual will have his or her own timetable for recovery.
- Put other bad news in context (layoffs, lower raises, smaller bonuses, restricted budgets). Strive to communicate these changes in a connected way and with the appropriate rationale and business context.

Employee and Manager Communication Needs During Crisis

Some or all of these operational and employee related issues may be affected, depending on the specifics of the crisis.

| Operational Issues | Communication Needed |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Building and facility security | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication revisions to standard policy to all facility, location and parking managers. • Communicate the type of identification employees and visitors are required to provide. • Disclose security precautions being taken in company facilities • Provide instructions for employees if a facility must be closed because of a security threat. • Review building evacuation procedures. |
| Internet and e-mail usage | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate the regular internet and e-mail policy and any special short-term changes to it. • Explain clearly the reasons for these policies. • If access to news sites will be allowed, give employees “smart usage tips”. |
| Time off | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate the general policy and any special crisis-related exemptions to all employees. • If employees can donate time off to others, re-communicate this policy. • Managers will need instructions for recording time off for employees in special situations so they can be paid appropriately. • If crisis results in military reserve call-up, recommunicate company policies and programs to reserve members and managers. Determine if information on activated employees will be shared and how it will be shared. |
| Travel | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate any changes to policy to the corporate travel department and corporate accounting department and to travel approvers. • Communicate the company’s position/policy on business travel and keep it updated. • Provide recommendations for alternatives to travel and links to resources for teleconferences, videoconferences, etc. • Manager communication could include references to the corporate travel department to help arrange travel for employees with family members involved in the crisis. |
| 401(k) and employer stock plans | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide information on these plans to all employees on the Crisis Communication Channel and on plan administrators’ sites. • Give internet links to appropriate financial advice sites. • Provide reminders of any company-sponsored financial/investment services. • Advise managers to send employees to professionals for financial help. • Communicate similar information on Retiree Channel. |

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| Donations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate any onsite donation events. Provide links to appropriate relief agencies' internet site and phone numbers. • Describe corporate donations to relief organizations. • Communicate options for employees to add their personal donations to corporate funds. • Recommunicate any applicable company policy on matching donations or time off for volunteer/relief work. |
| Company-sponsored events | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate whether company-sponsored events for employees, retirees, and/or the community will continue, are cancelled, or postponed. |
| Media relations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommunicate the company policy on media relations • Ready manager spokesperson, if needed. |
| Customer training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide employees in customer-facing roles with information/quick training in how to deal with distraught customers. • Recommunicate the company's policy for "do the right thing". • Provide appropriate employees with guidelines for responses to take when customers are hostile or threatening. |
| Effect on business | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide regular messages from CEO or President regarding the company's actions to help during the crisis as well as anticipated effects on business in general and the organization's business specifically. This should go on the general Employee Channel as well as the Retiree Channel. Link employees to the corporate intranet site to press releases and public financial information. • Post messages from division heads regarding specific parts of the business that may be affected differently from the rest of the company. • Communicate with the marketing/sales force the appropriate tone to take with customers and clients and any stop/start actions to take with customers. |

| Employee Relations Issues | Communication Needed |
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| Manager and supervisor responsibilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate to managers which company policies are open to their interpretations, for what reasons, and for how long. • Provide key messages for managers to send to employees. • Instruct on appropriate approval and paperwork needed to authorize “doing the right thing”. |
| Travel accommodations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate directly or through managers with employees who must travel frequently what expectations will be. • Provide frequent travelers with wireless phones or pagers to allow them to communicate easily with colleagues and family members. • Give frequent travelers ideas for creating “safer” itineraries. |
| Additional employee support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alert the Employee Assistance Program to expect higher volume. • Communicate the EAP to all employees and provide managers with tips on when it is appropriate to refer employees to the EAP. • Provide employees with links to emergency support organizations and other organizations such as churches that are providing support and counseling. • Remind employees of any available spaces for quiet meditation or “group space” for employees wishing to get together to discuss the crisis. |
| Applicable company policies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommunicate or link employees to appropriate company policies including those listed above as well as policies regarding weapons and other controlled substances, discrimination and hated activities, safety, public transportation, National Guard service, etc. |