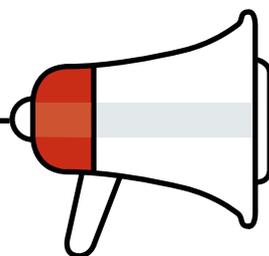


May 2020

Effective internal communication in a crisis



thepartnersgroup
PR • Communications • Digital

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The time to act is now



Internal communication has very quickly moved up the priority list for many small and medium sized business owners. And if it hasn't, why hasn't it?

Chances are, it's because you are juggling so much as you adapt to the current situation. You may be changing your business model or making your factory safe to cope with increased demand with a reduced, socially distanced workforce.

Time is in very short supply for business owners right now, but not making the time to communicate with your team leaves you vulnerable to a disillusioned, disengaged and unproductive workforce when you need them most as you emerge at the other side of this crisis.

Can you risk losing your best people?

Get communication right, and you will go a long way to making sure your team sticks with you through the current crisis. Get it wrong, and you risk losing talented and loyal staff who have been left feeling alone, isolated, out of the loop and uncertain about their future.

Here to help

Structured internal communication is new territory for many SMEs.

We've compiled this guide to share advice on communicating effectively with your team in the current climate. Following it will help you keep the people in your team right behind you and rooting for you as you shape your future focus and company direction, leaving you with a business that is fully resourced and well equipped to face the future.



Five communication tips for remote teams



The art of communication is the language of leadership.



James Humes

Whether your entire workforce is working remotely, or you still have some staff working on site, the chances are your team is no longer working together in the same way it was at the beginning of the year.

The worst thing you can do at a time of crisis is keep your team in the dark. Now more than ever, business leaders need to be visible and communicate openly and often about the action they are taking to safeguard the company's future.

Here are five areas to consider:

1

Keep talking

Talking to your team members regularly is essential if you want to keep them engaged and on your side.

Now is the time to lead with empathy, to be transparent and authentic.

In times of uncertainty, regular business updates are key. They don't have to be long winded, and you don't have to have all the answers. The key is to communicate frequently, consistently and honestly. How often you update your team will depend on your business but given the current pace of change, our view is that a weekly update is not too often.

A company-wide meeting or message will help keep your entire team in the loop. Hearing directly from the business owner is ideal and following up a video update with an email reiterating key points and inviting questions is useful. Even if nothing has changed since the last update, it's important to let people know nothing has changed. Where there are gaps in information, people start filling them in with speculation, which isn't helpful to anyone.



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Five communications tips for remote teams



Larger businesses might find it useful to compile FAQ sheets, but remember to update and circulate them regularly. You will no doubt be reviewing policies and procedures, too, which you will need to communicate to all employees.

Depending on the size of your business, daily video calls between smaller departments and teams may also be useful for setting and sharing (realistic) goals and workloads. And don't beat yourself - or each other - up if you don't achieve every goal, every day, in among everything else that's going on.

It's also important to review your communication regularly as the situation evolves to make sure it continues to have value to your employees, and that you're not just doing it for the sake of it.

2

What to say

Create opportunities to balance formal business updates with opportunities for more social conversation.

When it comes to company updates:

- **Treat people with respect and be open and honest in the information you share.**
- **Let people know the current situation and the plan for the coming days, weeks and months, as far as you know it.**
- **Don't feel pressured to say more than you know at the time of communication: nobody has all the answers right now.**

Providing regular, honest updates and making yourself available to answer questions from your team means that you can give real time information, which is far more helpful than speculation and conjecture at a time when things are changing so quickly.



Five communications tips for remote teams



Celebrate the wins

It's important to share and celebrate successes within the team. You may have news about new contracts, employee news or targets met and sharing this, along with information about what that means for the business in the short and longer term, is valuable for people to know.

Share the bad news

It's important to sensitively share the bad news, too, however uncomfortable it may feel. Giving an accurate and balanced picture is important. If people have been furloughed to cut costs and your business updates only focus on the new contracts you are winning, it sends out mixed messages and people may well start to feel resentful.

Keep your company culture alive

When it comes to more informal communication, be aware that the shift from seeing colleagues every day - sharing news, office gossip or dissecting the latest Netflix series - to being geographically distant is huge. Those tiny shared moments during a regular day at the office are the glue that binds teams together.

Are you creating opportunities for those conversations to continue now that your team or teams have become more disparate? If not, you risk losing that cohesion and team spirit. WhatsApp groups are a great way to keep that everyday conversation going. Whether it's sharing book reviews, podcast recommendations, recipes, children/pet/lockdown haircut photos or the latest meme; WhatsApp provides a platform for those watercooler conversations to take place across teams, departments or - depending on company size - the company as a whole.



Five communications tips for remote teams



3

Listen. No, REALLY listen

We've all heard the phrase 'we have one mouth and two ears so that we can listen twice as much as we speak'. Now is a good time to follow this advice. Communication is not just one way.

Everyone has a lot going on now. Emotions are running high and people are juggling so many different priorities, concerns and worries. Nobody knows what the future holds, but if your team knows what the position is for your business, and they know they will be updated regularly, that can offer some stability and reassurance in difficult times.

Be available as the leader of the business for people to talk to you. Whether that's letting off steam or asking questions, your job is to offer clarity where you can.

And remember to ask for feedback on your communication efforts. Are people getting the information they need from you as a business leader? If not, what's missing? Take the feedback on board and use it to plan your future communication. If that means a change in how/what you communicate, let your team know the reasons for the change.



4

Choose your channels

Think about the internal communication channels you have already as a business, and what they can offer in the current situation. Could your company e-newsletter become a platform for sharing news about the team and their achievements during lockdown, as well as business successes? From new baby arrivals to quizzes and baking competitions, an internal newsletter offers opportunities to continue sharing the 'office gossip' that many people are missing in the current situation.

Continued...



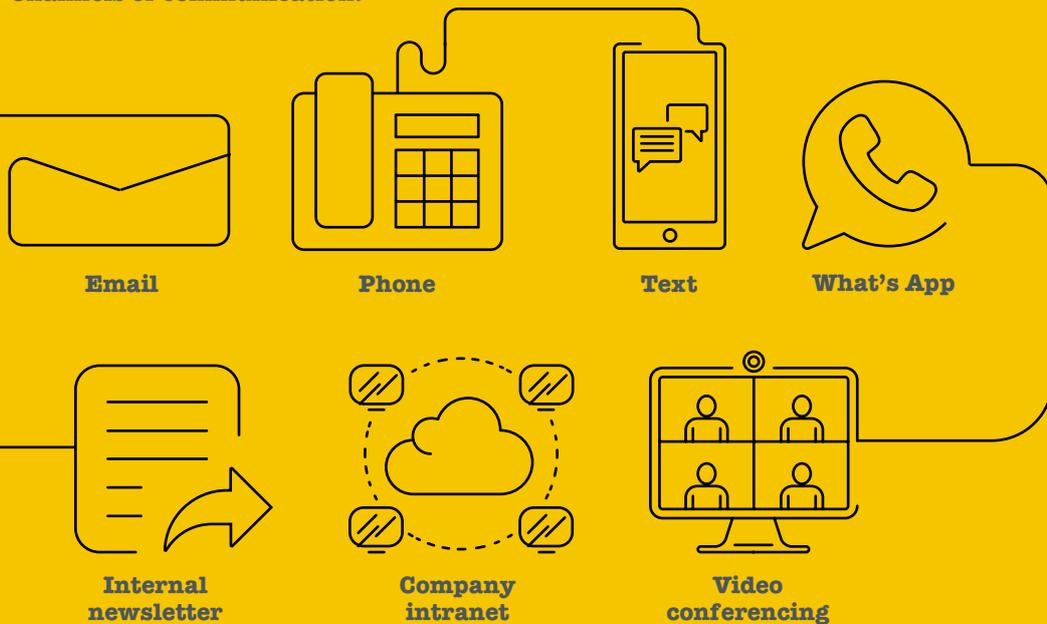
Five communications tips for remote teams



It's also worth bearing in mind that communication channels have exploded, and people can feel overwhelmed trying to keep up with family WhatsApp groups, school WhatsApp groups, work WhatsApp groups as well as their usual email load. Add to that meetings via Teams, Zoom, Google Hangouts etc. and you can see why people are experiencing technology fatigue.

For a lot of businesses, video calls are something of a novelty. But for many people that novelty is wearing off. So, before you communicate, think about the best means of having that conversation. Does it have to be a video, or would a phone call be more effective?

Channels of communication:



5

Have fun!

It's even more important right now to create opportunities for everyone to come together – especially if some people are furloughed – to share what you've all been up to and remember what binds you together as a team.

Find ways of having fun together as a business and within individual teams. We've heard some brilliant ideas from clients and others including Friday drinks, company-wide quizzes, weekly challenges with prizes for staff or money donated to charity, bingo, bake-offs, race days, Murder Mystery evenings...the list goes on.



The F word



Furlough has brought a new set of challenges for business owners. In communication terms, there are several areas that require careful thought. Handle it badly and you risk alienating loyal and dedicated team members, who may not be there when you are ready to bring them back into the business. Handle it well; and you will retain a committed and supportive team.

Here's our communications advice around furlough:

Furloughing team members

We have heard many anecdotal stories of people whose first indication that they were being furloughed was receiving an official letter. No conversation with their manager, no discussion, no talk of the reasons behind the decision and how it fit into the short- and longer-term business plans.

Imagine how those people are feeling now about the company that employs them. Loyal? Motivated? Keen to support the business? Don't count on it. Not everyone sees furlough as a "paid holiday", which is how one company leader described it on a company-wide video call, shortly before announcing which of their "lucky" staff were to be furloughed.

The value of one-to-one conversations with your team during times of change cannot be underestimated. Consulting with people before they are furloughed, understanding their individual situation and circumstances, listening to concerns they might have, and sharing with them the reasons behind the business decisions you are making and their role in supporting that long term plan, goes a long way to building understanding and bringing your team along with you.



The F word



During furlough

How often have the people on furlough leave from your business heard from you? How often have they heard from their line manager? Are you communicating what's happening and changing in the business, so that when they return to work, they know what they are returning to? When did they last have an opportunity to chat to their furloughed, and non-furloughed, colleagues?

It's important to do all you can to maintain morale within teams that are working remotely. It is arguably even more important to maintain morale among furloughed team members, who are at risk of feeling disconnected from the business. People on furlough leave can still take part in business update meetings. They can still speak to their colleagues. But it's up to you as the business owner to create and facilitate those opportunities. All the advice in the previous section around communicating with remote teams applies here, too.

And don't neglect one to one communication. People will often put on a brave face on a group video call and rarely say if they are struggling. When was the last time you checked in with your furloughed team members individually, and went beyond the 'how are you' pleasantries to find out how they really are?

Leaders need to ask better questions than 'how are you?'. Try instead, how are you finding furlough? What are you struggling with? How can I support you? Work aside, how are you? On a scale of 1-10 (where 10 is super happy and 1 is super stressed and anxious), where are you? Where would you like to get to? What do you need to help you get there?



The F word



Ending furlough

We are hearing from people who were furloughed 'until further notice' in March and have heard nothing from their employer since (at the time of writing, it is the end of May). Three months of radio silence is a very long time. It is essentially a quarter of a year of uncertainty, of not knowing whether they will be expected to work for another consecutive month, not even knowing whether there is a job for them to come back to.

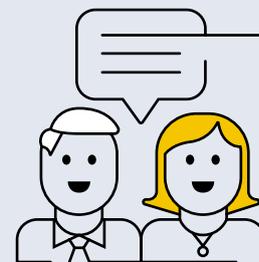
That may sound dramatic, but it is the situation in which many people currently find themselves. Take this approach, and you may find yourself facing a big business risk, as you may not have a team of people left to call back into the business when circumstances change.

Instead, get in touch as far in advance as you can to let them know the next steps. Is their furlough leave likely to end or be extended for the month ahead? If they are expected back at work, what hours will they be working and what will be expected of them? We all know how quickly things can change in the current situation but letting your team in on your thinking is not only courteous, it's also incredibly helpful to them.

Regular check ins will help make sure your furloughed team members stay 'in the loop' on your business plans and understand their role in those plans. Giving people whatever certainty you can at a time when it is in short supply goes a long way. For more information on this topic, read our advice on [communicating as you bring people back to work](#).



Adapting for the future



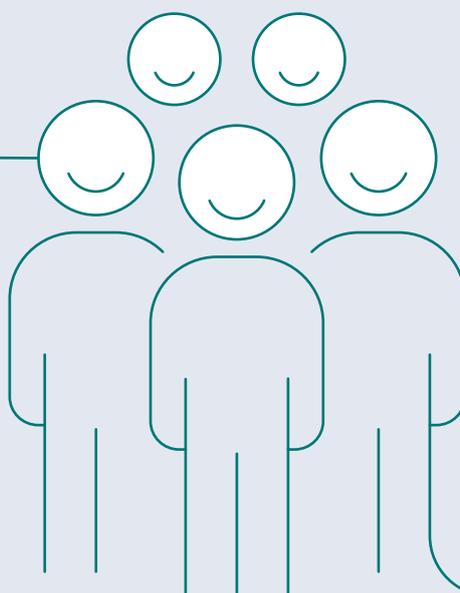
At the time of writing, many businesses are taking the first tentative steps towards bringing people back into the workplace and making sure they create safe working environments. Communication has a role to play here, too.

As the business owner, you will likely have (safely) visited your company premises at some point over the last ten weeks. But some of your team may not have set foot outside their homes during that time, and the thought of going back to an office environment might genuinely frighten them.

Everyone's experience of the pandemic has been different. Some people have continued with relatively normal life, while others have lost friends or loved ones. As such, everybody has different feelings and anxieties about the current situation, and about the future.

Asking people for their thoughts and views on returning to the workplace will help with your decision making and enable you to address any areas of concern. Communicating the steps you are taking to ensure a safe return to work is crucial, and putting in place ongoing evaluation that looks at how everybody is feeling will help make sure that you continue to bring your team with you as you face the future.

If you've worked hard to keep your team informed and involved up to this point, don't risk losing that goodwill now. Consultation and regular communication will help make sure that you don't.



How do you want your business to be remembered?



We are asking people this question a lot, and it is incredibly relevant when it comes to internal communication.

Once the pandemic is behind us, how do you want your employees to remember and talk about your business? Will they talk about the fact that they were treated fairly, with respect and kindness, or will their lasting memory be feelings of disconnection and a lack of care from their employer? Will they choose to be employed by you based on the way they have been treated?

Many businesses have had tough decisions to make. The way they have made those decisions and communicated them to their teams will have a lasting impact. The honesty, empathy and openness in Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky's **announcement to staff about redundancies** shows how to lead in a crisis, whereas the **JD Sports approach to staff safety** at the onset of the pandemic left many feeling that the business was prioritising profit over people.

The actions you are taking now and the way you communicate those actions within your team will define people's perceptions of you as an employer and will leave a lasting impression among your current workforce as well as future employees, customers, suppliers and partners. Communication matters, and it's important to get it right.



And finally...



We hope this gives you food for thought, and that you find the guidance helpful during this time.

If you're finding internal communication challenging, or would appreciate a sounding board, Partners directors Karen Tinkler or Monica Green are available and happy to answer any questions you have.

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