

Don't forget about your employees during a crisis...

In the first South African study to explore the crisis communication needs of employees specifically, University of Stellenbosch Business School (USB) MBA graduate Leana Kotze highlighted that, in an organisational crisis, "An employee-centred approach is good for employees, and for organisations too."



**"What if, and I know this sounds kooky,
we communicated with the employees?"**

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Environmental disasters, corporate fraud, product failures, the disruption wrought by a global pandemic: any of these can propel an organisation into crisis communication mode, but in the drive to manage the fall-out and protect their reputation, companies often neglect to talk to their most important stakeholders – employees.

The uncertainty, insecurity, fear and anxiety that go hand-in-hand with a crisis impact negatively on employee productivity and engagement, and in turn affect the organisation's performance, yet research shows that employees' needs are often ignored in a crisis.

Executives tend to prioritise communication with external stakeholders such as the media, shareholders, affected communities and government, but neglecting employees' needs not only hinders productivity and performance, it can also backfire on external crisis communication efforts when staff share their negative views with other stakeholders or on public platforms.

Practical guidelines

Employees need to make sense of a crisis through clear, relevant, useful and consistent communication; they need practical guidance on how to continue doing their jobs; and they need to believe that the employer is showing care and consideration for them, and listening to them.

Kotze said that while managers were aware of the need for communication in times of crisis, it was mostly viewed from the perspective of senders such as senior executives with little attention paid to what employees actually needed from their organisations.

Employees tend to have stronger and more complex relationships with the organisation than other stakeholders, and they are “ambassadors” for the organisation who interact with and influence other stakeholders – hence the need for a tailored and employee-centred approach to crisis communication, Kotze said.

Her research provides new insights into employee crisis communication in South Africa and offers practical recommendations for managers to optimise internal crisis communication in a more employee-centred way.

Kotze said her study was motivated by a “dearth of both local and global research” on internal crisis communication, particularly in relation to the needs of employees.

“Internal communication has a significant influence on employee engagement, which in turn positively influences their productivity and organisational commitment. This makes internal communication an indispensable element of crisis management, as ineffective communication can significantly worsen a situation that is literally a matter of life and death,” Kotze said.

Focus group feedback

She conducted separate focus groups with senior executives and with employees, drawn from a number of organisations that had previously experienced crises.

“A surprising finding from the feedback of both executives and employees was that South African organisations actually do aim to follow an employee-centred approach to internal crisis communication, and that managers actively strive to understand and meet employees’ needs through internal crisis communication.

“This is a departure from previous research in other countries which found that organisations often ignore employees’ needs during a crisis. Albeit from a small sample, it might suggest a progressive approach by South African organisations, and it warrants further research,” Kotze said.

Her research found that employees have a strong need for “sensemaking” – the process of gathering and processing information to understand and make sense of a crisis, and find meaning, direction and purpose for moving forward. They expect their employers to provide that information and will turn to the grapevine instead if they don’t, causing a risk of unfounded rumours and misinformation spreading.

Consideration and useful, relevant instruction

“Employees want communication that they deem clear, relevant and useful. To be relevant and useful, information should enable employees to do their jobs, help them understand how they and their work are impacted by the crisis, and tell them how to act in response to the crisis,” Kotze said.

Crises are perceived as a threat and they spark fear, she said, and “employees need to believe that the leadership is in

control and need to be made aware of what management is doing to manage the crisis.”

A further need is for care and consideration, a need that is met when employees feel their voices are being heard and when the organisation shows that it is acting with consideration for employees.

Kotze recommends a number of guidelines for managers to consider in developing an employee-centred approach to internal crisis communication:

- The most important information that organisations should provide to employees is about the impact the crisis will have on their job security, salary, and related issues. If this information is incomplete or not yet available, the organisation should communicate openly as to the reasons, and assure employees the information will be provided as soon as it is available.
- Internal crisis communication messages must be consistent, and the organisation’s actions must line-up with what has been communicated.
- Managers should make use of surveys, questionnaires, feedback platforms and personal interaction to “ask and listen” to employees’ needs. This should include physical or virtual platforms where employees can air grievances and raise concerns within the organisation.
- Employees should have options to engage anonymously with the organisation.
- Showing care and consideration goes beyond asking and listening, and organisations should take concrete actions aimed at meeting employees’ needs, addressing their emotions and reactions to the crisis, and showing that they care.
- Employees know that business must go on in the face of a crisis, but don’t want to feel that the organisation is prioritising its own interests and performance over the needs of human beings. Communication that encourages work to go on is necessary, but must show sensitivity to the impact of the crisis on the ground.
- While communication and visibility from the senior leadership is essential, the organisation should also deploy direct line managers and supervisors in the communication effort, as they are closest to and most credible to their teams and can play a key role in gauging sentiment, facilitating collective sensemaking, and giving feedback to the organisation on employees’ needs and concerns which can be used to refine ongoing communication.
- Meetings within teams or departments are important to facilitate collective sensemaking, where employees can discuss the crisis and its impact, and share information with colleagues they are familiar and comfortable with.
- As much as employees want information, they also don’t want “information overload” which can overwhelm and cause further anxiety or confusion.

“If managers strive to follow these guidelines in developing their internal crisis communication approach, this research suggests that employees will react positively. This positive reaction and the satisfaction of employee needs will ultimately benefit the organisation in terms of employees’ identification with the organisation, their trust in the organisation, and increased or sustained engagement and productivity.

“Organisations will enjoy similar benefits if leadership is clearly displayed during a crisis and if the organisation makes employees aware of the tangible actions it has taken in the face of the crisis,” Kotze said.

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