

HR'S GUIDE TO

COMMUNICATION IN CRISIS



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Introduction

According to the [World Health Organization](#), stress, depression, and anxiety are leading causes of disability and absenteeism from the modern workplace. In the UK alone, regular workplace stress costs [13 million workdays](#) every year. This negative impact is even more pronounced during times of crisis, both for individual or collective, making the responsiveness of human resources departments vital to prioritizing and promoting employee wellbeing.

The current global health crisis is shining a spotlight on the negative impact of stress on employee productivity and wellbeing, with nearly [half of American adults](#) reporting that their mental health has been negatively affected by COVID-19 and its repercussions. When a crisis hits, it's imperative to protect business systems, processes, and profits, but the most important asset to be protected is employees.



Honest communication in times of crisis

Human resources departments provide important support and guidance to employees and managers during times of crisis, with an understanding that the impact of a crisis extends beyond the workplace. To this end, it's important to convey honesty and credibility during any communication.

Honest communication should be to the point, objective, and factual, but delivered with empathy. This will give employees the information they need to remain productive and deliver company messaging to stakeholders, while at the same time helping remedy uncertainty and anxiety. Honest communication is integral both to the ongoing health of a business and to the psychological health of employees, so make this the basis of your HR crisis strategy.

At the outset of a crisis:

- Immediately initiate communication with management and employees
- Outline the situation and deploy an initial, unified message to be communicated with stakeholders
- Share any pertinent and verified information
- Let employees know that HR is available for any questions or concerns and that they should expect regular updates

Once an initial message is released, you can formulate an internal crisis communication strategy based on company and employee needs.

Prioritize psychological safety

Placing workers' wellbeing at the forefront of crisis management strategies will contribute to the sustainability of your business and ensure operational continuity. HR plays a pivotal role in opening up effective lines of communication and creating a culture of candor, even under the most difficult circumstances.

The number one thing HR can do during a crisis to help employees manage stress is to initiate an honest, comprehensive communication strategy. While communication will contribute to maintaining operational capacity and conveying unified messaging to relevant stakeholders, the most important benefit is the psychological safety of employees.

During a crisis, HR leaders can foster a culture of candor by encouraging open communication and initiating contact with employees. Some ways to foster this culture include:

- Setting individual standing meetings
- Facilitating team-wide roundtables
- Creating opportunities for employees to express concerns or challenges
- Working through problems with empathy and not with judgement
- Acknowledging employee input

While many employees may be hesitant to approach HR about personal mental health struggles, even in the context of a greater crisis, maintaining practices that encourage open and honest communication will signal a willingness to help and promote employee engagement.

Another way to prioritize psychological safety during a crisis is to encourage employees to practice self-care. When people are under stress, it can be difficult to make enough time do even the most basic things, like eating and sleeping well, getting outside, and setting aside time to relax. Communicate wellbeing-focused reminders to promote health and also lighten the mood.



How can HR facilitate honest communication?

In times of [uncertainty](#), rumors, assumptions, and misinformation can cause a lot of damage. As the adage goes, the fear of falling can be worse than the fall itself. Crisis situations are unstable and in flux. From one day to the next, a business may have to pivot or restructure, leaving employees feeling apprehensive. If left unaddressed, this apprehension can spread and spiral, leading to less productivity and leaving employees worse off. Acknowledging how difficult uncertainty can be and the toll it takes demonstrates compassion and opens up lines of communication.

Once there is reliable information to share, it's important to do so swiftly and concisely. Even when the news isn't good it's often still better than not knowing, so communicating relevant facts and details will create more confidence and quell anxiety.

Transparency can be difficult when the information you are communicating is negative but, as an HR leader, effective communication during a crisis will position you as a source of truth. Rather than speculate, employees will know they can seek out HR for information and guidance.

Another important strategy when communicating with employees during a crisis is to let them know what resources they have access to. Whether the challenge is personal, professional, or global, some employees may need more assistance. Communicating what options they have and how to pursue them will reduce stress and provide employees in distress with solutions.

During regular times employees may not be aware that HR is available to provide psychological support, so it's important to initiate communication and let them know that you are around to support them. Whatever the company policy is or what assistance programs are available, providing clear details about them will reduce anxiety and provide direction.

Once the foundation has been laid, there are a number of ways that HR can ensure that communication remains open and honest, and that adequate, ongoing support is being provided to employees.

1. Confidentiality

When faced with a crisis, transparency is important. But unless confidentiality is guaranteed, it is unlikely that employees will feel comfortable sharing challenges. Left bottled up, these challenges will eventually affect performance and company morale. HR has an opportunity to guide solutions with discretion and in a way that protects the privacy of individual employees. Getting control of the situation, as well as the flow of information, will encourage employees to communicate when they need help.

The role of HR in crisis management is to support employees, but this doesn't mean professional boundaries should come down. Avoid prying or asking too many personal questions if an employee approaches you with a problem. Instead, focus on offering resources and workplace accommodations.

2. Open-door policy

When a crisis hits, one of the first messages HR should communicate is an open-door policy. Once you have laid out your organization's crisis management strategy, encourage your team to come to you with any questions or concerns. Be there for employees and listen to your people when they approach you. Giving employees the space to vocalize issues and concerns will preempt the spread of confusion and anxiety. Making sure that HR leaders are available during difficult times will also help keep a finger on the pulse of employee morale. With a better understanding of what team members are going through, HR can assist management to strategize effective solutions benefitting both employees and the company.


Consider sending [short anonymous surveys](#) at regular intervals to understand how employees are weathering a crisis. Included questions should assess whether employees understand the organization's strategy and their role in its successful execution, how employees feel they are being managed and whether they feel they can approach team leaders when facing challenges, and any areas that need improving. Not only will this signal your organization's open-door policy, utilizing this data will help you respond to oversights or gaps in your crisis management strategy.

3. Navigating between employee and manager

A company in crisis will often adopt an all-hands-on-deck mentality. Employees, however, may find this unmanageable and, if the workload is not adjusted, the likelihood of burnout increases. HR can mitigate this effect by navigating between management and employees, issuing clear guidelines to protect [work-life balance](#). For example, set policies about how long in advance employees must be notified of meetings and when employees are expected to be available. Encourage managers to stay flexible and focus on productivity instead of working hours, and let employees [work from home](#). Another way to indicate your commitment to work-life balance is letting people block off ‘family time’ on their schedules.

HR can strengthen communication between managers and employees by training managers to interact with employees during crises. This may include how to implement reasonable goals and schedules, how to initiate communication with an employee in distress, and how to encourage employee self-care. Creating useful guides and toolkits that emphasize team building and healthy communication can assist managers in implementing effective crisis management strategies.

HR is where employees should turn if they require assistance with management. Whether there is a conflict that needs mediating or an employee needs guidance on how to approach their manager with a specific request or concern, HR is the address.



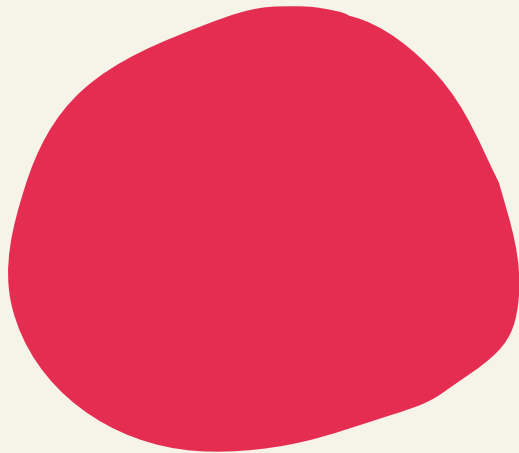
4. Instituting employee assistance policies

Show employees that the company is committed to their wellbeing by offering a robust [Employee Assistance Program](#) (EAP). These programs offer free, anonymous mental health counseling to employees in distress. If possible, expand benefits during a crisis and encourage employees to communicate what additional assistance is needed. Clearly explain what is offered in your company's EAP or other services, including providing links or phone numbers to make reaching out easier.

Here are some benefits to consider including in your crisis management strategy:

- Sick leave
- Compassionate leave
- Work from home
- Reduced copays
- Mental health support
- Subsidized loans

These are concrete ways to support employees during a crisis that will leave a lasting impression. Studies have found that EAP services, including counseling, improve [occupational functioning](#) and engenders employee engagement and retention. When the crisis is over, your employees will either be strengthened by their workplace—or not. This will depend in large part on effective HR leadership and communication.



How should managers handle communication in times of crisis?

Managing employees during a crisis can be challenging. To strike the fine balance needed between pushing productivity and supporting employees, the first step is to communicate. In practical terms, send an email or internal newsletter honestly outlining the situation and the company's strategy to overcome it.

- Offer concise information about how the workflow will be impacted, how tasks will be delegated, and what the expectations are in terms of output.
- Set a schedule for regular communication with a team or individual employee.
- Explain what provisions are being made to accommodate employees in distress, for example, flexible hours, working from home, or time off.
- Provide contact information and details about EAPs or other forms of support.

Aside from communicating information, managers should communicate empathy. Emphasize that employee wellbeing is the company's first concern and encourage any team member who needs additional guidance to ask for it freely. Keep communication frequent and open to ensure that employees aren't left out of the loop.


It is tempting to cut salaries and bonuses when disaster strikes, but, if financially feasible, providing the opportunity for bonuses is a great motivator and will alleviate the anxiety of income uncertainty. Another possibility to motivate and reassure employees is [offering learning and development opportunities](#) to expand skill sets in case of restructuring. Keeping good employees will propel an organization's future success when the storm blows over, so it's vital to manage teams with compassion and agility.

Managing an employee who's having trouble working

People have different circumstances and personalities that will affect how they handle workload during a crisis. While some employees will quickly adjust to a new reality, others may struggle. At the outset of a crisis, clearly outline what expectations are in terms of work tasks, timelines, and meetings so that employees have an opportunity to regroup and plan accordingly. Offer as much flexibility as possible and make sure to detail any assistance programs that are available to your team. If it is feasible, paid leave, reduced hours, or additional flexibility will go a long way in demonstrating care and support.

During a crisis, there are a few things managers can do to maintain open lines of communication with team members who may be struggling:

- **Stay connected with regular calls**, both with the team and one-on-one where participants are encouraged to discuss how they are managing during the crisis. These don't need to be formal meetings; casual hangouts can foster deeper and more meaningful communication.
- **Communicate with honesty and authenticity.** Managers are human too and letting employees see that during a crisis will provide comfort and camaraderie. Of course, this isn't the time to overshare, just enough to demonstrate empathy.
- **Be flexible about work hours, deadlines, and working from home** (within reason, of course). If paid leave is a possibility, communicate that this is a possibility if you see that an employee is having trouble working.
- **Maintain healthy, respectful boundaries**, especially with employees working from home. Sending messages after work hours or insisting on video conferencing is invasive and may cause unnecessary anxiety.



Once everyone has had a few days to acclimate, take stock of the situation. Assess productivity, collaboration, and morale, make adjustments as needed to ensure that employees are keeping up without suffering undue stress. Speak with employees individually as well as in team meetings to facilitate open communication and encourage employees who may be struggling to access counseling or health services.

The goal here should be to find workable solutions—not to alienate a team member in distress. If an employee continues to struggle and is unable to complete necessary tasks, this may be a good time to involve HR to strategize a long-term plan.

1. Readjust expectations

When a team member is unable to manage their workload due to the effects of a crisis, sit down with them and take time to outline all of the tasks currently on their plate. Discuss what the employee believes they can handle openly and with empathy and adjust expectations accordingly. It's important to let the employee communicate in a supportive environment, otherwise, they may feel pressured to assume more responsibilities than they can actually manage.

Once there is clarity about workload, redistribute tasks to prevent gaps in business operations. Covering another employee's projects will likely put more weight on the shoulders of fellow team members, so make sure they are rewarded for their dedication.

With an interim plan in place, check in regularly with your team to understand whether things are working well and adjust as needed. If these changes are likely to impact clients or other departments, communicate what measures are being taken to ensure continuity and productivity.

It's important to set clear timelines for making adjustments and discussing next steps with an employee in distress. At every interval, communicate your expectations, including any specific goals or tasks the employee is expected to accomplish. Not only will this promote continued employee engagement, but it will also give the employee in crisis a sense of direction and psychological safety.

2. Create a performance plan

Once concrete timelines and expectations are discussed, develop a performance plan that aligns the individual's and the organization's needs. [Performance plans](#) are an effective management tool promoting mutual understanding and honest communication between managers and employees towards the shared goal of organizational success.

Despite challenges, managers need performance data in order to keep the business moving, even during a crisis. Utilizing performance plans to evaluate how an employee in crisis is functioning will help managers make critical decisions about an employee's future at the company and take any necessary measures to retain a talented team member going through a rough patch.

While in regular times evaluations can identify employees who would benefit from additional development and those whose performance is stellar, during a crisis they can help identify the impact of a crisis on employees and guide assistance strategies. Another benefit of performance plans during a crisis is that they provide an opportunity for constructive, solution-oriented communication with employees struggling with their workload.

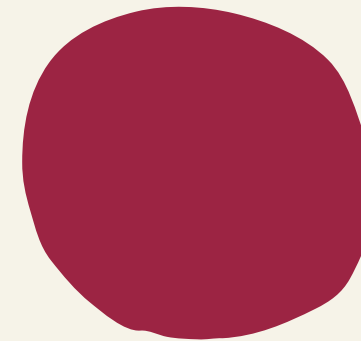
Can you ethically fire an employee in crisis?

If an employee continues to struggle with performance despite ongoing intervention and assistance, it may be necessary to consider terminating their employment. In a crisis, the compassionate and correct thing to do is to keep employees on the payroll for as long as possible, however, this may not always be an option. For a company in dire financial straits, letting a struggling employee go may be necessary, especially if the situation is affecting other team members or clients.

It is difficult to fire an employee who is already anxious or distressed, but if it is necessary then it should be done as kindly as possible. Here are some ways to soften the blow:

- Provide the employee with ample notice so that they can make arrangements.
- Give the employee a generous severance package.
- Offer recommendation letters or to serve as a reference for future employment opportunities.
- Encourage the employee to continue accessing any assistance programs offered by the company until they leave.

Firing an employee in crisis is an absolute last resort. The best way to avoid getting to that point is to identify an employee in crisis early and initiate interventions as quickly as possible.





Identifying an employee in times of crisis

In times of crisis and in times of plenty, employers should keep an eye out for employees who are struggling. The signs of distress vary from person to person but usually, if an employee displays noticeable behavioral changes or begins to show inconsistent performance, they may need additional support or guidance. Of course, in a catastrophic situation, for example, during the COVID-19 global pandemic, it's safe to assume that everyone is in crisis.

During a national or global crisis, organizations and their employees will inevitably be affected. In such situations, the plan is to be prepared. Human resources departments are equipped to initiate crisis-management protocol and communicate effectively with employees when

disaster strikes. While employee confidence and trust are vital under normal market conditions, this is even more acute in a crisis. Without it, morale drops and the risk to employee wellbeing is greater.

While a global crisis will likely affect most employees, some may struggle more than others. Identifying an employee in distress early can stop a downward spiral before it accelerates.

One thing to look out for is a sudden drop in performance. This may be indicated by reduced productivity, but also by more mistakes or accidents. An employee in crisis may struggle with decision-making and planning, resulting in disruptions to workflow, or they may not be motivated or engaged to the same degree that they were previously.

You may also notice that the employee is missing meetings or doesn't actively participate, or that their attitude is more negative. When an employee is struggling, they may bring that tension to work, causing conflicts between team members or even disciplinary issues. You may find that the employee is putting in longer hours but with less output, or that they are struggling with timekeeping. Many of these signs are subtle and not directly performance related, so use intuition and commonsense to identify an employee in crisis. If something 'feels off,' don't brush it off.





The role of HR in these times

In the modern workplace, the role of HR has expanded to include a greater focus on employee wellbeing. During a crisis, HR becomes vital to how an organization weathers the storm. During such time, human resources leadership must support employees and create a culture of compassion and communication. Here are 10 ways that HR leaders can carry an organization and its people through a crisis:

1. Develop a rapid response, honest communication strategy that puts people first
2. Position HR as a source of truth to prevent the spread of misinformation
3. Check-in with management and employees to identify what is working and what needs adjusting
4. Communicate what resources and assistance are available to employees experiencing challenges or stress
5. Utilize performance data and surveys to assess morale and productivity
6. Promote flexibility and agility, including retraining or aligning valued employees to new roles
7. Practice generosity by relaxing policies for work hours, paid leave, and remote working
8. Communicate positivity and support, including encouraging employees to practice self-care
9. Train managers to identify employees in crisis and how to manage them effectively
10. Create open door opportunities for employees to communicate honestly about their concerns and fears

Some crises are impossible to anticipate or plan for, but how a crisis is managed will make the difference between organizational recovery or collapse. HR's role during these times is to guide policies and strategies that prioritize employee wellbeing and foster open and constructive communication.

In 2020, it's time to make smarter decisions
when it comes to your people and organization.

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