



In Hard Times, Communication Will Save You.

Description

As some of you know, I have started a biweekly podcast in which I chat with leaders from all industries on how theyâ??re tackling the many challenges we face today. Most recently I had the privilege of speaking with Mark Clement, who is the CEO and president of TriHealth, a \$2.1 billion healthcare system in Cincinnati, Ohio. (Click [here](#) to listen.)

This was an important conversation for several reasons. One, healthcare has been one of the hardest-hit industries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders in all industries can benefit from learning how a major healthcare system is tackling this challenge.

Two, I have a long history with Mark. He and I worked together back in the early 1990s at Holy Cross Hospital in Chicago. I consider Mark one of my biggest mentors. He has always chosen values over revenue, which made a huge impression on me. He taught me how crucial it is to invest in leadership and training. Doing so pushes responsibility and authority to the front lines, which is so important in times when we have to act quickly, decisively, and in a unified way.

In the podcast, Mark explains how TriHealth took a \$100 million loss in the first months of the pandemic. During hard times, you expect emotional bank accounts to be depleted, but when you handle things the right way, you can actually strengthen relationships and positively impact the entire organization. In TriHealthâ??s case, they came back stronger, more aligned, and more cohesive than ever. Now, at about three months into reopening, the system is at about 95 percent of their previous levels of revenue and clinical activity. A huge part of their success lay in how they approached communication.

Mark believes (and so do I) that being able to provide consistent, well-thought-out, real-time communication is one of the most crucial leadership competencies. In fact, great communication is what differentiates *managers* from *leaders*. Managing is dealing with operations in a stable environment. Leading is more about navigating change and bringing everyone to a higher level of performance. Itâ??s about creating followers.

The right kind of communication alleviates anxiety. It keeps people engaged and connected (to each other and to their sense of purpose). It keeps organizations nimble, adaptive, highly aligned, and able to innovate. Communication is always important, but in a time of uncertainty and rapid change, it is absolutely vital. It actually helps build your resiliency because it helps people manage the change and apply what they learn in future times of hardship.

When you realize how large TriHealth is, it's clear that keeping everyone up to date with consistent messaging is a major challenge. The system has more than 12,000 employees, about 1,200 employed and aligned physicians, and 150 unique sites of service. They care for more than 600,000 members of the community.

When COVID hit, TriHealth used video technology to reach distributed stakeholders quickly and effectively. This allowed them to bring everyone at every level together more often. At the same time, they doubled down on on-the-ground tactics like leader rounding (executed safely, of course). Fortunately, they had the right culture in place, which helped them navigate the crisis.

Mark points out that there are two dimensions to communication: what's being said and how you say it. Here are a few tips on how to think about what you're saying:

Get intentional about communication and make it a priority. You need to get crystal clear on the information you want shared, and hardwire mechanisms to cascade messages throughout the organization. This is the only way to make sure the right messages reach everyone.

Underscore good news but be honest about impediments. This isn't what Mark calls "happy talk." It's honest, straight talk. Uncertainty requires transparency and openness. People want to feel that they're fully supported and in the know.

Start with *why*. Make sure people have a good grasp of the external environment. This helps them understand why you have to make tough decisions.

Connect back to your vision. At TriHealth, communication always links back to the system's vision of getting healthcare right, improving the health of the community, improving the experience of care, and delivering greater affordability and value while creating a more engaged physician community and team member community. Whatever they are communicating—wins, progress toward milestones, barriers, etc.—it's always inside that framework.

Now for the second dimension: How do you communicate messages inside your company? How do you hardwire delivery of these messages? Consistency is everything.

I'm about to share a few communication tools Mark Clement relies on and that you may want to try in your company as well. Just be aware that these are not hard and fast guidelines. Use the ones that work best for you.

Also, adjust the frequency as needed. Dial it up when things are more urgent; then bring it back when appropriate. In the height of the COVID crisis, TriHealth was holding weekly town halls and leadership meetings to push out talking points in their communication cascade. Now that things are settling down a bit, they've moved back to a monthly basis.

Leadership Development Institutes (LDIs). Early in Mark's tenure at TriHealth, he implemented LDIs on a quarterly basis. They'd bring 900-plus leaders together, both administrative leaders and physician leaders, for intense training in leadership skills needed to meet organizational goals. This is a great time to communicate key messages.

Town Hall Meetings. When these started out, they happened quarterly. The CEO and other members of the senior team would go on the road and conduct 15-plus forums around the system. COVID forced them to go virtual. During the first week in March when COVID hit, TriHealth started holding these weekly in order to provide real-time communication. They included all team members and were bi-directional so that people could ask questions.

Monthly Senior Leader Meetings. In these meetings, TriHealth creates an information communication cascade deck. Each senior leader is responsible for cascading talking points to their leaders, who are responsible for cascading them to their leaders, who in turn cascade them to frontline team members. (Again, at the peak of COVID, these were held weekly.) Also, questions that may have come up during rounding or other parts of the cascading process are discussed.

Weekly Updates. This is a message from Mark to all stakeholders. It started out as monthly, but a couple of years ago, it started happening weekly. Local hospital presidents and ambulatory and business unit leaders are required to forward Mark's message to their organization along with a message from them. This way, the message is really personalized at the local level.

Daily Huddles. These occur throughout the health system in every functional, operational, and staff department and division. Mark calls these tier-four huddles. They allow safety and other relevant issues to cascade upward: from frontline, to hospital, to division, to senior leadership. Again, this is a way to allow for bi-directional communication.

Weekly Rounding. Every leader, from Mark on down, rounds on team members on a weekly basis. Frontline leaders round monthly on every team member. The idea behind rounding is that leaders take time to touch base with employees, make a personal connection, find out what is (and isn't) working well, and so forth. Leader rounding on staff is the single best way to raise employee satisfaction and loyalty and attract and retain high performers. In times of crisis, rounding is a great way to keep people up to speed and solicit their questions or concerns.

Hardwiring these tools into the fabric of an organization is vital. It moves your communication from being sporadic and scatter-shot to being unified and consistent. In good times, great communication accelerates your performance. In hard times, it will save you. It's just too important to leave to chance.

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