



Why Messaging Matters So Much—and How to Keep It Consistent Inside Your Company

Description

Messaging. It's a word that means more to me every day, and I am sure that's true for many others. How does one message the coronavirus to their children? How does a business owner message the virus's impact on the company to employees and shareholders? How does a leader message it to those they lead in the workplace? How do elected officials message to their community what has changed and what it means for the future?

Recently during an interview, the host started a conversation with me by saying “Quint, I am sure you have been through similar things like COVID-19 before.” I said, “No. I have some experiences that may transfer, but nothing quite like this.”

Like most business owners, I have seen revenue drop significantly. But that's just one challenge. There are some jobs that require employees to be in the normal workplace and others in which employees can do at least some of their work from home. The leadership must be different in each situation.

I have never been in a situation where schools and childcare centers are closed, so employees who are working at home are “teachers” as they help kids navigate online learning. (Keep in mind, they cannot bring help into the home!) When employees have children or parents to care for, work hours are all over the place.

One person shared with me that each night after the kids go to sleep, she works. Her husband, whose job is out in the field, asked her why she is working at night. She explained that during the day, she is teaching their children so her hours now are different. (She likely offered him the teaching position!)

Consider that in many cases both parents are working from home. Also, college students are back in the house. Togetherness is nice; however, there is a human limit to how much we can reasonably take!

Business owners and employees alike must also learn and implement process and behavior changes associated with the need for masks, gloves, plexiglass barriers, and other safety measures.

Finally, everyone is wrestling with serious work-related questions like, *Are we going to close? Are we going to go out of business? Will I be safe?*

So yes, there have been lots of changes, and it's up to leaders to address various aspects of the new normal calmly, clearly, and proactively. Not only do the best leaders make a point to speak directly to employees and citizens, they also need to cascade this messaging so that everyone is speaking in the same voice.

I have found that making sure everyone in your organization is hearing the same messaging does not "just happen." Here are a few exercises to help you learn how managers can cascade information and answer questions. (Of course, in all cases, these may need to happen via Zoom or phone call.)

- Organizations that are the best in communication are those that take time to clarify the key talking points to assure consistency. After your next meeting with your leadership team, ask them to send to you the top takeaways they are going to share with their area. As you review the responses, you might find the takeaways are so different you will question whether they were in the same meeting. It's always just best to reiterate the most important talking points.
- Collect from managers the questions they are being asked by their direct reports and possibly customers as well. Then provide these questions to the managers in small groups or individually. The assignment is: "You have just been asked this question. How would you answer it?" Don't be surprised if there is lots of inconsistency. Collect all the answers. Then, create a master list of best ways to answer each question. Continue to collect questions and create answers periodically. Besides helping leaders learn the best way to answer questions, it's another way to create consistency. It's valuable for staff too.
- When you give a leader a message to take to the staff, ask that leader to share back to you exactly what they will say. For example: "After checking work hours and revenue, we have decided to adjust our hours on Sunday. It seems that on the days we close at 5 p.m. we do much better. We have been closing at 2 p.m. on Sundays, but based on what we've seen, we are going to now expand our Sunday hours until 5 p.m."

Of course, this is an easy example, but I have found that it's easy for the desired message to be lost in translation. There are tougher messages, such as products being discontinued, hours decreased, staff reduced, and so forth. These messages especially need practice. Don't assume that others will explain things as you do. Ask them to demonstrate and you'll be able to share feedback and redirect them if need be.

Remember, how leaders talk about the circumstances our employees and citizens face—and how we frame the actions to be taken to address them—will determine how they experience these tough times. Messaging is *always* important, and even more so today. Getting the messaging right and making sure it's consistent throughout your organization or community, is one of the best things you can do for those who follow you.

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