

COVID-19

31 July 2020

Pandemic communications

Communication has played a pivotal role throughout COVID-19. From government messages telling people to stay at home to businesses informing staff about changing priorities, the importance of excellent, strategic communications has been clear.

Where misinformation spread, we witnessed American citizens drinking disinfectant to protect themselves. And where communications were thoughtfully planned, we saw the NHS recruit 750,000 volunteers in 24 hours.

The effects of the pandemic have moved swiftly and with great uncertainty, so the way organisations and leaders have communicated has been incredibly important. The Edelman Trust Barometer has shown that the most credible source of information is seen as employer communications, at 63% trust, above the government at 58% and 51% for traditional media.

Communicating with colleagues

The biggest challenge for communications directors – engaging with colleagues – also brings the biggest reward. Organisations across the globe keeping colleagues engaged and safe has been seen as a key factor in fighting the virus. Having a communications director on the leadership team ensures the connection between strategic decision-making and delivery of clear, timely and transparent messages.

Never before has the role of the communications function evolved so much and so quickly. In the NHS it has meant maintaining a two-way dialogue with home-based colleagues in a digitally-led world while also considering those who must continue to provide face-to-face care. To support this, the adoption and enhancement of a broad range of communication channels has been vital, as has finding ways to help colleagues respond, ask questions and influence.

The communications director plays the lead role as conduit between boardroom and shop floor, but it isn't just their responsibility. Being visible as a leadership team is as important to an open and trustworthy dialogue as the messaging itself, so we've seen more digital all-staff events to fill the gap left by the disappearance of corridor and tea-point conversations.

Board members should have a good understanding of how colleagues feel and of ways to proactively invite engagement. The ability to listen well is crucial – it shows respect, builds knowledge and provides opportunity for issues to be addressed.

As the world gradually reopens, the duty of care of boards must continue. Mental health has been adversely affected by the pandemic, with 69% of adults in the UK reporting they are very worried about the effect COVID-19 is having on their life. Now more than ever, communications directors and boards must allow space for open dialogue and access to leadership.

Communicating with the outside world

Engaging with citizens in the right way continues to be key. COVID-19 prompted the most significant overnight transformation in the history of the NHS as it diverted resources to care for coronavirus patients while pausing many normal services.

Communicators have worked hard to engage with communities during this difficult time. In lockdown, social media has been the go-to way to engage and stay close to people. Creative thinking about how to deliver messages in different ways – as videos or infographics, for example – has helped to cut through potential language and learning barriers.

As well as embracing digital tools, communications directors have had their work cut out trying to connect with the hard-to-reach, as we outlined in a [previous bulletin](#). Equally, the link between internal engagement and external has been explicit. Your colleagues are the best conduit for messaging to citizens, so reassuring and informing them in the right way really helps an organisation to show a confident and safe front to communities.

This proactive communication with communities is ever-more important, with misinformation routinely going viral on social channels. In April the government set up [sharechecklist.gov.uk](https://www.sharechecklist.gov.uk) to help educate the public on disinformation linked to pandemic. Communications teams have worked hard to cut through misinformation too, with tactics such as paid-for advertising on social channels.

The next challenge is to show that you're open for business. Communicators will have to continue to be thoughtful, showing citizens the bigger picture while also influencing on an individual basis.

Looking beyond COVID-19

The pandemic isn't over and there remains great uncertainty about what will happen next. Throughout the world, it has been clear that individuals, organisations and countries have responded best to the crisis when engaged with on a human level with clear, definitive information.

This has been a moment in history when the importance of specialist communications has shone through. Boards should consider how to keep making use of the expertise of communicators to look at authenticity and clarity of voice – it really works.

Questions for boards

Primarily, boards should consider whether they have an expert communicator on their senior leadership team who is able to coordinate key messages to colleagues and citizens.

Other questions boards might like to ask of themselves and of their communications directors include:

- Are colleagues genuinely being listened to? Is their voice fed back into board decisions and messaging?
- Do you, as an individual, have a connection with colleagues and a way for them to engage with you? Do you know how your colleagues are feeling?
- Are your communications clear, simple and human?
- Is the citizen voice making it back to the board room?
- What can be learned from the response to your COVID-19 communications that can be used to enhance future engagement?

If you have any questions or comments about this briefing, please call us on 07732 681120 or email advice@good-governance.org.uk

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