

Communicating during the Coronavirus crisis

A simple 3 step plan to effectively communicate during chaotic times.

The coronavirus crisis is an unprecedented situation. Even those who prepared for a crisis could not have imagined a scenario of this magnitude. The consequences of this crisis are still unknown, but it will likely severely impact and even bring down many organizations.

During a crisis there is always uncertainty, and in a crisis of this scale there is a lot of it.

Uncertainty breeds anxiety and fear and makes it very difficult to think and communicate clearly, but clarity is what we all want particularly when in the midst of the chaos of a crisis.

Clarity doesn't mean certainty. In a time of crisis, it can be very difficult, if not impossible, to know all the facts and be able to determine for sure what the future will look like. Clarity means communicating in clear, simple language and being as open and honest as we can.

Some of the most important assets for organizations during this time is to have clear thinking and strategic flexibility. To achieve clear thinking, we must:

1. Recognize
2. Reassess
3. Respond

1. Recognize

It's important we acknowledge reality and the challenge of our current situation. Doing so will show we're being realistic and not downplaying or exaggerating.

Recognizing our current reality, means we need to:

- a. Acknowledge reality
- b. Be aware of our response (avoid limiting beliefs and scarcity thinking)
- c. Take note of available resources

2. Reassess

Understanding our reality will allow us to better reassess our vulnerabilities as well as possible ways to mitigate risk and potential opportunities.

a. Assess vulnerabilities

Some examples of questions to answer:

- How will our clients/patrons be impacted?
- What is our current cash position?
- Can we continue to provide some services with most, or all of our staff working from home?
- How long can we survive?
- Are people too distracted to pay attention to any fundraising or calls for help?

b. Mitigate risks

Look at our list of vulnerabilities and ask what we can do to mitigate the risk.

It's important to be incremental in our thinking. Remember, don't overreact, think in terms of a tiered response:

- Tier 1 – Minimal but helpful (i.e. pause hiring, pause new programs)
- Tier 2 - Conservative (i.e. redirect resources, decrease program sizes, close non-essential programs)
- Tier 3 - Radical moves (i.e. layoffs, pay cuts, stoppage of services)

c. Explore opportunities

As we assess our vulnerabilities and ways to reduce risk, keep your eyes peeled for any potential opportunities.

Some examples of questions to answer:

- Do these conditions make us more relevant?
- How can we continue to support our clients/patrons?
- How can we provide value during this crisis?
- Can we build awareness and reach new audiences while providing value during this time?
- What are the most important services/programs and how can we continue to provide them in this current reality?
- Is there a program or service we can modify to provide support to our clients/patrons?

Don't overthink it or worry too much about getting it perfect. What is most important is to take action and improve as you go.

3. Respond

Now that we have a better idea of where we are in this current crisis and have assessed our vulnerabilities, risks as well as our potential opportunities we have a better idea of what we need to do and what we need to communicate.

a. Summarize the plan

In a simple and concise way write down the priorities, top actions we're taking. Involve leadership, create alignment and don't delay taking action.

The plan should include:

- What is the situation
- What are our priorities
- What will change

b. Define key messages and platforms

Based on the plan;

- Develop key messages for each audience,
- Select the platforms to disseminate messages
- Identify who is responsible for communicating to each audience
- The frequency we'll communicate
- Create needed materials for communication

c. Communicate to our audiences

Communicate to internal audience first, to ensure everyone understands the plan/direction, know what to do and what to expect, and can consistently deliver the message.

Internal audiences

- Board of Directors
- Leadership/management
- Staff

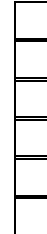
External audiences

- Volunteers
- Funders (Donors, Foundations, etc.)
- Clients/Patrons
- Collaborators/Partners
- Media
- Government

Communications best practices, tactics and tools

First steps checklist:

1. Convene the crisis team – assign main contact and supporting team
2. Immediately and continuously take action to address health and safety issues
3. Build a schedule for communications (i.e. daily briefings)
4. Find reliable sources - monitor and assess continuously
5. Work on: Recognize, Reassess and Respond
6. Monitor, debrief and adjust – regularly



Communication best practices

- Speak with empathy to concerns
- Explain what will change and what will not
- Provide the reasons for the decision
- Don't make promises you can't keep
- Be as forthright and transparent as possible
- Use clear, concise and consistent language

Internal tactics

- Meet/keep board of directors informed
- Meet/keep communication with all staff (provide and gain information)
- Keep clients/patrons informed
- Q&A document for internal and external audiences
- Ensure staff has access to important documents/information (contact lists, EAP key contacts, key messages)

External strategies

- Keep external audiences informed
- Provide ways to engage and listen from external audiences
- Contact media if needed/beneficial
- Engage and activate supporters and influencers
- Social media channel-specific approach and response

Social media

Social media can be a great platform to inform and gain support. Below are some questions and best practices on how to do it.

- Are you in the right social media platforms (think of the audiences you have and want to reach and what social media platforms they use. Those are the same platforms you want to be in.)
- Do you have a company-wide social media policy? If not create some basic policies.
- Organization's channels – Identify limited key staff responsible for posting and engaging using your social media policy
- Ask staff to consider engaging and helping spread organizational messages via their personal social media channels.
- Ensure you have a staff member monitoring social media in real time
- Use or develop a protocol for responding to social media posts, both positive and negative.
- Try to respond to social media inquiries (posts related to customer service) within 24 hours.

Key communication templates

Project plan & schedules		
Create a milestone chart that will show all tactics and what needs to be done by whom and by when.		
Task owner	Date due	Task description

Audience communication template				
Create a chart of all key audience segments with key messages, tools, frequency and the person responsible to communicate with them.				
Audience	Key messages	Platforms/Tools	Frequency	Responsibility
	1. 2.			
	1. 2.			
	1. 2.			
	1. 2.			
	1. 2.			
	1. 2.			

Project plan & schedules

Create a milestone chart that will show all tactics and what needs to be done by whom and by when.

Task owner	Date due	Task description

Crisis communications team

Name & title	Role & responsibility	Contact information

Crisis spokespersons		
Name & title	Expertise	Contact information