8 Crisis Communication Tips for Leaders

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"I wish it need not have happened in my time," said Frodo.
"So do I," said Gandalf, "and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us."
--JRR Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring

You are leading in an unprecedented time. The scope, complexity and pace of change are like 9/11 and the 2008 recession combined. There's no way around it, this is likely going to be the biggest challenge you face as a leader. And we are only at the beginning.

I know how it feels to want to succeed in leading people you care about through a crisis. I also know how it feels to be uncertain, alone, and not confident in the midst of it. Frodo’s statement hits close to home, “I wish it need not have happened in my time”.

In my background as a PR & Media Relations Director and Specialist, I've helped leaders of private companies, start-ups, non-profits and churches successfully navigate through multiple crises with their teams. As a pastor and leader, I've successfully led through various crises myself.

Our Common Enemy in Any Crisis

In a situation like the one you are facing right now, it can be overwhelming to hold together the external circumstances with your desire to make the right decisions and say the right things. Every day brings a new circumstance, which brings a new decision, which brings a new message.

But let me tell you our common enemy in crisis situations: Confusion. Confusion wants to eat you and your people alive with fear, anxiety, cynicism and apathy. And fear, anxiety, cynicism, and apathy are like the Four Horsemen of Apocalypse when it comes to leading in crisis.

Here's the thing, you get to fight Confusion for the good of those you lead.

8 Best Practices

I'm going to give you eight tips I've learned as I've led and helped others lead through crisis. You can start to use them now in your communication with staff, leadership team, internal directives, and public communication.

1. **See and tell the truth.** Don’t minimize or spin; it will only go sideways if you do. Be willing to see the painful reality of the situation and tell the truth about it. Especially in a situation with stakes like the current one,
minimizing or spinning the truth in your own mind or in your communication is a fatal decision. If you want to burn the trust of people forever, then lie or spin now. If you want to maintain and gain their trust, tell the truth. They can handle it; so can you.

2. **Don’t do this alone.** Appoint specific members of your leadership team to help in the decisions and communication. Depending on your circumstances you may want to consider having roles like the CFO, COO, head of HR, the head of marketing, or a lawyer involved. You want to tap into the resources of your team, have accountability, and credibility when you communicate in a crisis.

3. **Understand the concerns of your core audience.** This isn’t about you, it’s about them. Be empathetic to the impact of these circumstances and your decisions on them. Speak to those concerns and impacts directly.

4. **Start with your core audience and move out from there.** You should communicate to your primary audience first, truthfully, quickly and consistently. Be more concerned about communicating to them than to the public. You know the thousand emails you got from companies about the steps they were taking to address Covid-19? Can you imagine being on staff at one of those companies and the first information you got from the CEO was an email he sent to the millions of people on their email list?

5. **Create succinct, declarative message points.** In a crisis people want assurances, not excuses. Explain as little as you can. Think bullet points, not white paper. Don’t worry about people understanding all of the nuances of decisions or positions, tell what you’re doing and how it will address their concerns.

6. **Have a proactive plan for your core audience.** A message with no plan is a secret. Who will be communicating? On what platforms? How frequently? Do you need any software or hardware to make that happen? Who will be responsible for planning and execution?

7. **Distribute message points and instructions to staff and leaders.** Empower frontline ambassadors. With the scope, pace, and complexity of change, there will be many people you are leading who need help or have questions and ideas. Equipping your staff and leaders to answer questions, have hard conversations, and provide help multiplies trust and diffuses situations before they arrive in your inbox.

8. **Understand that anything you write, email, or say will be made public.** In the majority of cases, this is not a problem and, in fact, may be beneficial. However, it only takes one careless text or email to tarnish a reputation. Clarity, tact, and discipline are needed.
You have to decide.

Gandalf was right; you can’t wish for different circumstances, you have to choose to step into those you have been given. I give you those eight tips because of what’s at stake right now. If you don’t communicate well in the midst of this crisis you will aid our enemy Confusion. You will leave the door open to the self-devouring effects of fear, anxiety, apathy, and cynicism among those you lead.

But I believe you can lead your people more successfully through this crisis. I believe you can fight back Confusion and its associates. I believe you can change from feeling overwhelmed, uncertain and not confident to leading with courage, stability, intentionality, and hope.

We can help you.

Tactics are good but they’re not enough. You and your team will need to grow in the midst of this change. At Relational Leadership we help high-capacity leaders and their teams strengthen relationships, build trust and influence, and lead with resilience so they can break through the next goal together.

Schedule your free consultation at relationalleadership.co/connect.