

Responding in Crisis:

Communication Strategies for Leaders
During COVID-19



The Brain in Crisis:

This is a culture-defining moment for your organization. These are the stories that will be told for years, like 9/11 and the firebombings in London. Major events stick in people's minds.

- **Stressful triggers cause us to narrow our focus.** In crisis, the human mind is hard-wired to narrow its focus. But as leaders, it's critical we think strategically—which involves thinking widely. We have to make ourselves see the big picture and consider our stakeholders.

Research reveals **three** triggers that we should consider:

Clarity.

Belonging.

Fairness.

Clarity.

Clarity is the ability to see through chaos and contradictions to a future that others cannot. As a leader, it's your responsibility to make sense of where we are and provide a clear, compelling vision of where we're going.

Try this:

- Use clear language to ensure everyone has a shared understanding.
- Create simple rules to add clarity by using "If this, then that" statements.
- Summarize decisions and agreements at the end of meetings.

Case Study: Southwest Airlines

CEO Gary C. Kelly responded with the Southwest Promise, a powerful message that made sense of the current reality while presenting a clear and hopeful vision for the future.

Recommendations: Make sense of the reality and share a hopeful vision for the future

- Acknowledge the turbulent reality and challenges your people face (*where we are*).
- Connect response to organizational history and core values (*where we've been*).
- Paint a clear compelling vision for the future and how you will move forward together.

Belonging.

Belonging is essential to good leadership. Counteracting disconnection and an "us versus them" mentality depends on whether you create a culture of belonging. **To create belonging, leaders need to be empathic and build community.**

Try this:

- Reduce distractions for your team by asking how you can help and if anything is getting in the way of their work.
- Get groups together to work through problems.
- Practice deep listening, where you listen without an agenda, to understand what's behind their concerns.

Case Study: Special Olympics

The Special Olympics demonstrated empathy with a messaging campaign titled #SOMOatHome. They understood their stakeholders and recognized that in the midst of social distancing and postponed athletic events, they can fulfill their mission to enhance the lives of the community and aid in their personal growth through shared activities, even going beyond sports.

Recommendations: Demonstrate empathy and build community

- Demonstrate, listen to and show your people you understand to make them feel known and connected.
- Invite people from diverse backgrounds into the conversation to share experiences and provide input.
- Consider how people in a range of circumstances may be affected by the crisis and how their needs may vary. Ensure your initiatives and communication are sensitive to the unique challenges different groups face.
- Create opportunities for people to come together virtually and create common purpose.
- Revisit your mission. Consider what problem your organization or company really solves and find new ways to deliver on that mission.
- Provide platforms for stakeholders that foster community and sharing.
- Consider how an initiative might impact indirect audiences who are watching how you respond (i.e. donors, investors, prospective employees or customers).

Fairness.

Fairness is the ability to lead with justice and ownership. Fairness ensures that your team understands that difficult decisions are being made with objective criteria. To create fairness, leaders need to communicate with transparency.

Try this:

- Share what you know and what you've been doing. In the absence of information, people assume worst. Get out ahead with a positive narrative.
- Provide consistent recognition and feedback to all your team members using objective methods.
- Hold team members equally accountable for their assigned deliverables.