

6 Critical Steps for Leading Through Crisis

COMMUNICATE EARLY AND OFTEN

Uncertainty breeds panic. Leaders don't need to have all of the answers; providing updates as new developments unfold helps employees remain calm. It's a common leadership mistake to let crickets sing while the rumors sling.

STEP
01

“I think the most important thing to learn from this or any other tragedy is that unlike the frustration we feel sometimes on an airplane when something goes crack or the plane doesn't leave and there's total silence from the cockpit, that's the worst thing to do. The best thing is transparency and openness.”

— Frank Keating, Governor, OKC Bombing, 1995

SHOW GENUINE EMPATHY

Global leadership consulting firm, DDI, cites empathy as the most “critical” skill after surveying 15,000 leaders across 300 companies in 18 countries. Empathy is not saying “sorry” or “I understand.” Acknowledge employee concerns, ask clarifying and confirming questions, and express real concern. Offer help.

STEP
03

“Empathy is the door that opens your voice to the information that you want to communicate. So if people can perceive that you actually care about them in a genuine, human way, I think they're much more willing to listen to anything else that you have to say. If you don't do that, you have really lost your audience because people won't listen to you.”

— Julie Gerberding, M.D., Director, CDC SARS, 2003

WALK THE TALK

Nothing rings more hollow than a leader that says one thing, but does another. Don't ask your team to do something you aren't willing to do yourself. If you expect them to answer customer requests after hours, you should be available too. Be a living embodiment of your company's values and culture.

STEP
05

“Particularly during a crisis, employees have a need to hear from their leaders frequently. When leaders appear calm, concerned, knowledgeable, and in charge, workers feel encouraged and are more likely to have confidence that things are under control and will be fine.”

— Gene Klann, *Crisis Leadership*, Center for Creative Leadership

“Transparency is ‘job one’ for leaders in a crisis. Be clear what you know, what you don't know, and what you're doing to learn more. You can't manage a secret, as the old saying goes.”

— Amy C. Edmondson, *Harvard Business Review*

STEP
02

BE TRANSPARENT

Bad news doesn't get better with age and now is not the time for spin. Your team will appreciate honesty and respect your leadership in the long-term for using straight talk. Partner with human resources to make sure your messaging has the right wording and sensitivity.

“Give people things to do. As much as possible, give them relevant things to do; things that are constructive and relate to the crisis they're facing. Anxiety is reduced by action and can restore a sense of control.”

— CDC, *Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication Guidelines*

STEP
04

ASSIGN CONSTRUCTIVE ACTIVITIES

Give your employees constructive tasks to perform so they can peel away from the 24-hour news cycle. Tasks could include:

- Check-in calls to remote team members
- Creating job aids for telecommuting
- Sharing resources e.g. EAP, Teledoc

“A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.”

— Christopher Reeve 

STEP
06

ACT AS IF

It's a tired old saying, but employees look to leaders to set the tone. Project a focused, calm demeanor. Avoid barking orders or looking anxious. If you panic so will your team. There isn't a playbook for every crisis. You are in the job because someone thought you can lead. Act like it.

