



Crucial Communications for High-Performance Teams During COVID-19

A crisis, especially one as severe as COVID-19, is a pull-the-rug-out-from-under-you moment. Think back just 45 or so days ago, and reflect on how you once earned your living, lived your life, and took time off for R&R. All the old compass points of routine and stability have now been disrupted. The new "social-distance" reality that we are in creates an array of workplace challenges, not the least of which involves how we communicate with colleagues from stay-at-home, virtual offices. And doing so in ways that demonstrate empathy and understanding with colleagues as they cope with the crisis.

Attention gets diverted. Self-absorption replaces being other directed. Anxiety is heightened. Issues get confounded. It's overwhelming to get beyond the noise and maintain focus to engage in productive, business-related conversations.

It's why transparency, brevity, simplicity, and explicitness in conversation, all in the service of accelerating issue resolution, are cardinal virtues in a time of existential crisis. You don't have the luxury of posturing, playing the finesse game, and engaging in point-counterpoint, back-and-forth argumentation. There are just too many forces at work conspiring against being on-target and gaining closure. "Landing the plane," now, is top priority.

A week ago, I was asked to observe the communication dynamics of a senior high-performing team as its members dealt with business issues, as COVID-19 hovered in the background. Here are some of the areas I focused on to assess the way the team communicated. These might well serve as a useful template for you and your team as you talk, text, e-mail, and Zoom your way through the crisis:

The Role of the Leader

Does the leader:

- provide a safe space so colleagues have an opportunity to express their personal issues and needs?
- model the communications' behavior he or she expects?
- call out team members for evading or not being authentic?
- deal head-on with issues rather than deflect from discussing a problem through distraction, humor, or some other withdrawal device?
- avoid asking leading questions and discussions aimed at some preordained solution?
- exhibit patience in virtual team meetings, especially with those whose members are challenged by technology?
- plan for both regular meetings to touch base with the senior team and keep the level below informed and aligned on a consistent message?

The Role of the Team:

Do team members:

- engage in transparent, authentic discussion by avoiding beating around the bush or miring discussion in endless cycles of repetition, wandering, and hairsplitting?
- accelerate issue resolution by rapidly identifying issues, identifying the key decision maker, determining involvement, and designating someone accountable for implementation?
- let whoever is speaking know that you “get the point” as well as “get where they are” on an emotional level by listening actively?
- “talk straight” and move out of their comfort zone to “go there,” even with those “I’d-rather-not-say” issues?
- coach one another by providing feedback when communication derails?
- debrief immediately following the meeting to assess how they are doing?

If we are at war with COVID-19, as surely we are, then effective communication becomes a key weapon to help every high-performing team cut through the inevitable anxiety to ensure that the business succeeds now and long after we have won the war.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Howard". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally below the text "Best regards,".