

Leadership Messaging Skills

Announce your news before someone else does

by: Joanne L. Smikle, Ph.D., Smikle Training Services

If ever there was a time when a leader's messaging skills matter, it is now. The capacity to use language to create dialogue and build trust is essential. In the past few weeks, I have witnessed major messaging dilemmas that have cost individual leaders and their organizations credibility and trust. This has negatively impacted relationships and reputations on the individual and organizational levels. In this article, I will share two distressing leadership messaging examples and offer four techniques for effective crisis communication.

Disastrous Dilemmas

A multisite organization found that three of its headquarters employees had COVID-19. These employees did not just test positive — one was hospitalized and the other two experienced several weeks of dire illness. Each employee, two of whom were senior leaders, let the CEO and COO know of their status. The other employee, a front-line employee, notified his direct supervisor who then made sure the senior team was notified.

One of the directors called asking if her department had been notified of her status since her team members worked in relatively close confines. The COO said they had decided not to tell employees or anyone else because it was not a large employer; it only had three locations. This director decided to call her team members and let them know. They were considered essential employees and were still working in the facility.

To make a long story short, the senior executives made the decision not to tell employees, vendors, customers and other stakeholders that the company had three employees stricken by the virus. The CBS affiliate in the company's city somehow got wind of the outbreak and sent a news crew to the company to cover the story. The entire region learned all about the sick employees.

Needless to say, this was a disaster for the organization. The CEO scrambled to get a message to all employees, the board of directors and every imaginable stakeholder at midnight after the news report ran. The email assured everyone



that precautions had been taken, and all of the company's employees and everyone who encountered them were safe. That was a ridiculous message because it assumed that everyone who had been in contact with anyone in the facility had been tested and was fine. The CEO came under fire from all sides. Employees were afraid, the board members were annoyed, and vendors and customers were distrustful. Imagine how much different things could have been if the leadership team had immediately crafted an honest message and sent it out sooner rather than later.

Another messaging misstep happened when an owner was shopping for buyers for his business. The company employed roughly 1,800 employees spread throughout the state. This was a family-owned business that had a mission statement emphasizing open dialogue, honesty, a family atmosphere, trust and other truly laudable values. It had managed to create a culture that actually lived up to those values. The owner found a buyer and opted not to tell anyone other than the CFO and a select group of key players that he was going to sell. At first blush, that seems acceptable. It

was his company and he had every right to sell it. The problem was that the company had spent years touting family values and trust.

A news release was published in a major industry publication announcing the sale of the company. This is how the company's employees officially learned about the sale. There had been rumors, but nothing was confirmed until the news release. The CEO said he was looking for the right opportunity to meet with employees at each location and tell them, but that he never had quite enough time. In fact, he was fraught with emotion because he did not want to sell the business that his father started 50 years ago. He was selling because he had grown weary and did not have an heir who wanted the business. He felt that he had let down the employees who had made the company so successful and simply could not face them. Imagine if he had allowed his vulnerability to show and had real conversations with all of those employees who he thought of as family members.

These examples, while different, illustrate the importance of forthright messaging from leaders. This becomes more imperative in the midst of crises.

Before introducing effective messaging techniques, it is important to clearly identify the lessons learned from the two examples. In the first, putting health and safety first should have been the leadership team's first instinct. Pretending that staff had not contracted the virus was almost insane. The initial message needed to acknowledge the employees having contracted the virus. In that message, the steps that were taken and plans for additional precautions should have been clearly explained. It would have been wise to call for a press conference instead of letting the press descend on the company's headquarters.

In the second example, while most would have compassion for the owner's deep emotional response to selling his business, that did not absolve him of the responsibility to live the values that he had so vehemently advanced for so long. When you have built a company culture around dialogue, honesty and treating each other like family, you have to model those values consistently — especially during the most difficult times. At the sunset of such a wonderful enterprise and career, he should have been able to exit with grace and dignity. Imagine how much more respect and esteem he would have maintained had he been willing to share his emotional angst with the people he valued so dearly.

Whether you are looking for tools to message about the

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current pandemic or are facing other pivotal junctures in your business, it is important to think about how best to communicate with employees and other stakeholders. Knowing how to craft and deliver messages is a critical leadership skill that can be developed and gets stronger with practice. The four techniques presented below will help you become more confident and competent at messaging.

(1) Spin Wears Thin — People are

listening for substantive, straightforward messages during crises. They want to know that their leaders have spines to deliver the facts. Crises are not a time to practice your ability to sugarcoat or put a shiny veneer on your communication. This is not to say that transparency should be absolute; it is a tool that should be used with care. The trick is to modulate between giving a direct, candid message and providing too much information.

For instance, in the case of the organization where the three employees contracted COVID-19, the leaders could have constructed a message that acknowledged the outbreak. While it would have been transparent to state that at least 300 people had come in contact with the employees during the time they were showing symptoms, the information about the 300 people is too much transparency. Divulging that much information creates more panic and does not serve anyone well. It is also information that cannot be readily or easily verified. The direct, candid approach verifies the facts that need to be known. It does not share more information than required. It also does not interject any guesses. This approach assumes that the listeners are discerning and respects their intelligence.

(2) If You Mess Up, Fess Up — Have the humility to admit your mistakes. The hero complex is not useful during crises. People respect leaders who can be honest about their errors. During crises, there will surely be mistakes and missteps. Be prepared to quickly acknowledge yours and those of your team. Do not dwell on them. Clearly identify the corrective actions that you have taken, address the questions that come up and then move on. Dwelling on your mistakes is not useful. Rather, acknowledge them, have limited, structured dialogue, and then articulate the next steps.

Returning to the example of the owner selling his business: He could have exited on a much higher note had he called an all-hands meeting and apologized for not communicating his decision to sell to the employees that he thought of as family. He would have maintained their esteem had he acknowledged his own vulnerability and come clean about his sadness about his decision. Because he was not able to do that, he left with people feeling that he was just greedy

Four Messaging Techniques

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for wanting to sell and wanted to get a lot of money for the company. The employees felt they had been duped by all of the emphasis on trusting and valuing each other as family.

(3) Candor With Compassion — “We are closing, we care and we know that your lives are forever changed.” This is the type of candid, compassionate communication that is required during catastrophic times. It acknowledges the reality of the situation and the human impact, and does not leave any uncertainty about what is coming. This direct approach demonstrates respect for the employees and keeps the leader in a positive position as a straight shooter.

What is equally important is sharing the unknown. What I mean is, if you are facing a merger, layoffs or a transfer of ownership and do not know all of the details, it is wise to say that. What does that communication look like? It is clearly stating that there are negotiations pending, elements of the negotiations are confidential, and details will be communicated as they become available. This lets employees know that you are sharing as much as you can, are concerned about quelling their angst and are not hiding information. Using candor with compassion also acknowledges the unspoken and the awkward — the elephants in the room. It eliminates the mystery and provides as much clarity as possible.

(4) Test the Message Before Delivery — We are well-intentioned when crafting communication. However, what sounds good in our heads may not sound as good to recipients and may not actually communicate the message that we intend. I know that am very direct and that can be viewed as blunt and uncaring. When I have important messages to deliver, I bounce them off trusted confidants who care enough to tell me the truth.

Find people who will listen to your messages and critique

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them. I try to get people who have different world views to listen to or read my communications before I send them. This is not to say that I take a survey and whittle it down to a weak, noncommittal message. Rather, I use their feedback to enhance or sometimes soften what I am trying to convey. I find it especially helpful to jot down their comments, come back to the message and see which elements I think need to be changed. Make

sure that you wind up with a message that is consistent with your core beliefs, diplomatically says what you intend to say and reflects the wise counsel that you gathered from your trusted advisors.

Summary

While it is imperative to deliver skillful, compelling messages during crises, this is a critical skill that leaders need to develop to build their toolkits whether there is adversity or not. This skill enhances credibility, builds confidence in the leader and creates more trusting relationships. Mastering these skills takes practice and patience. Employing these four techniques will enable you to get your message across in a thoughtful, deliberate manner. ■

Joanne L. Smikle, Ph.D., an authority on leadership and organization development, provides virtual and on-site services to businesses across the country.

Her virtual leadership learning prepares resilient leaders for an ever-evolving world.

Beyond Smikle's consulting business, she actively serves on advisory boards and volunteers with organizations that assist poor and underserved populations.

Read more of Smikle's insightful articles at www.smiklespeaks.com.

