

# Management Style – The Necessity of Communication and Flexibility in Challenging Times



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**I**n these unprecedented and challenging times, it can be difficult to hold on to the comfort we have been afforded in our reliance on certain universally accepted norms. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced us all to reconsider and re-evaluate aspects of our lives and society that, just a short year ago, we would have considered unquestionable. From our ability to freely enjoy holiday celebrations with our families and loved ones to enjoying the near-absolute freedom to cross international, or even interstate, borders, with

virtually no conditions, most of us took relief in believing that certain norms would remain unchanged, and therefore little thought or consideration was required on our part. While COVID-19 has altered that perspective and completely disrupted many of our comforting ideals of these indisputable norms, one constant that has not changed—and, in fact, has become more solidified—is the necessity of effective leadership to navigate organizations through difficult times. Now, more than ever before in their careers,

managers must effectively communicate with their teams and exhibit significant flexibility in order for their organizations to thrive as we move rapidly toward the post-pandemic world.

The ability of leaders to effectively communicate, both to their teams and customers, is the most critical element in the success or failure of any effort to navigate a crisis. There is no doubt that it is vital for leaders to rapidly identify dangerous situations and to act in ways that show a degree of comforting command and control. However, in his study of the most successful and unsuccessful responses

to public emergencies, noted political scientist Arjen Boin has found that ultimately effective crisis leadership requires leaders to craft and deliver a narrative that helps clarify the problem and unite people in a way that creates consensus.

There are several things that should be considered to ensure that you are communicating effectively as a manager/leader. First, be sure to focus on essential information. Communication has changed dramatically even over the past 10 years, so leaders should assume that their audiences are literally being bombarded with

information from multiple sources. As a leader trying to navigate your organization through this crisis, you should be sure to focus your communications on providing the information that matters most in articulating and explaining the organization's positions, and that is most important to building the necessary organizational consensus for your actions. Also, managers should be sure to communicate broadly and repeatedly. Effective leaders appreciate that their audiences receive information in a variety of ways, so they adapt their communications to be sure that their messages are heard by everyone throughout the organization. From a practical standpoint, this approach may mean moving beyond the typical manager press release-like announcements to an approach that involves employing multiple media formats, including regularly scheduled virtual conference calls or town hall meetings, or internal video posts. Effective managers also should take the initiative to proactively provide information that addresses questions or concerns that are likely already on the minds of their teams. This technique requires managers to be thoughtful and collaborative so that they are just as familiar with the issues that keep their audiences up at night as they are with their own concerns. Finally, effective leaders are able to communicate in ways

that demonstrate their own vulnerabilities—managers should not be afraid to be transparent about the things that they simply do not know. In addition, managers can demonstrate vulnerability by explaining how the situation is affecting them personally. Both the transparency to acknowledge that you may not have all the answers and to share that you too are being affected—in a relatable way—helps to build trust throughout organizations in challenging times.

Throughout this pandemic and in the foreseeable future, we will continue to hear messages about the need for professional flexibility. Flexibility is often talked about in business circles to focus on workforce management issues, including the availability of remote working environments. To be clear, flexibility in managing working locations will continue to be a pressing issue for managers. Recent data from a report prepared by the IT security firm Tessian showed that only 11 percent of employees said they wanted to work exclusively from their offices post-pandemic, with the remaining 89 percent favoring some degree of a partial remote environment. Significantly, 35 percent of employees indicated they would not work for a company without flexible working options.

Undoubtedly managers will need to take full consideration of this dynamic attitude toward working environments and, to the extent possible, remain



flexible in their approach to ensure they remain winners in the talent wars. However, beyond simply taking a flexible view of work sites, effective managers will have to continue to exercise significant flexibility in their overall styles and approaches to best serve their organizations. Many managers will need to stretch beyond their own comfort zones (generational or otherwise) to embrace communication styles and techniques that they may have previously actively avoided in order to be sure that they are effectively connecting with staff and customers to

achieve the organization's goals. This willingness and ability to demonstrate personal and organizational flexibility will be invaluable in the post-pandemic world.

As Charles Darwin said in 1809, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change." Darwin's observation remains useful to us in this post-pandemic world, and that ability to adapt and survive lies within the individual managers and leaders of our business organizations.

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