Reflections from our Webinar: Responding to Burnout during COVID-19

I ran the last in a series of COVID-19 related webinars today, for members in various countries around the world, to talk about some of our insights relating to managing staff burnout in these unprecedented times of high-activity and high-stress.

In that environment, rapid-fire communication from multiple sources can contain conflicting (mis)information and cause all sorts of other problems.

A few of the people who dialled in came from the HR and Communications worlds, so we acknowledged that they understand these issues. But my suggestion to them was to share this slide with execs and managers to show how important, yet easily forgettable, strong communication and staff engagement are right now.

Legacy communication missteps

Overwhelming amount

Staff already inundated with information; overly abundant change communication just compounds sense of "noise"

Excessive urgency

Difficult for staff to distinguish the truly important if too many messages marked as urgent

Unclear action steps

Messages focusing on big picture give requisite context, but lack critical details staff need about next steps

Communication challenges during acute crisis

- Increased stress and emotional pressure on staff responding to outbreak
- Potential for misinformation from external communication channels
- Difficult to convene frontline staff to deliver messages

Source: Advisory Board interview and analysis.

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I mentioned that we'd created a toolkit to support managers in communicating through disruptive times and it probably won't surprise you to know that a lot of the post-webinar requests we've received were from people asking for that toolkit in light of the challenging time frontline managers in particular are facing. They are, of course, communication conduits, both up and down the system, who themselves have frustrations and fears in light of COVID-19.

But given our belief that strong and frequent communication – managed well – can be the best defence against burnout, the main focus of the webinar was to deep-dive into the ideas that could support the five communication best practices I describe on the right of this page and the next.

Five communication best practices for executives

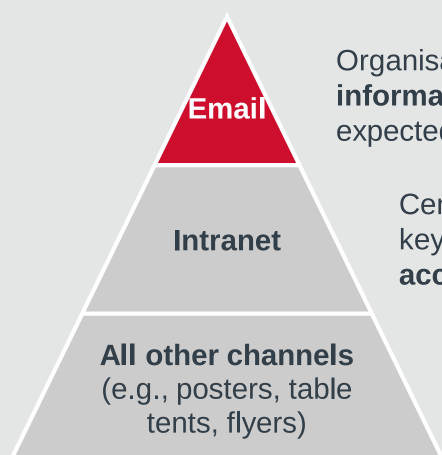
1 Give staff a consistent source of COVID-19 truth

*Create a **'single point of access'** approach to staff communication, and develop a regular cadence of communications from the same source so staff know what messages to prioritise and trust, thanks to clear signposting.*

2 Minimise non-essential emails

*Implement some kind of structure that provides guidance to **creators** of information as well as **receivers** of information. See an example below.*

Tiered communication hierarchy



Organisation sends **only most important information** via mass email; in turn, staff is expected to check email as regular part of job

Centralised intranet hub captures and stores key information for **quick, on-demand staff access**; many emails link back to intranet

Other channels used to **reinforce key messages** ensure widespread staff awareness

Source: Advisory Board interview and analysis.

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I then double-clicked on best practice number three (field and respond to rumours). We've seen organisations set-up Virtual Buzz Committees, which yes is yet another meeting, but one that we argue leads to some of the most valuable insights into what's being said and shared; how people are feeling; and what questions people have.

On best practice number four (make yourself accessible virtually), I spoke about both setting up virtual office hours and providing some 'starter questions' to whoever on the leadership team is willing to play this 'starter' role, such as:

- What's effective about our COVID-19 response? What's not effective?
- What are you most worried about?

Five communication best practices for executives (cont'd)

3 Field and respond to rumours

*Develop a **Virtual Buzz Committee**. The idea here is to pull in staff who are likely to hear the questions circulating because they interact with a wide number of staff (float pool nurses, social workers, environmental services staff) even if just a handful have time for a quick standing virtual meeting – or even be given access to a unique email or intranet site to 'report back'.*

4 Make yourself accessible virtually

*Consider setting **up virtual office hours** that open a regular, 'same time same place' platform where staff can use to share and ask questions.*

5 Share your gratitude personally and often

Keep your team motivated by recognising them. I talked about ways we've seen people both celebrate great contributions and also help people see what models of great work look like so they can learn and copy –thus leveraging the power of show and tell.

Source: Advisory Board interview and analysis.

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I hope there might be some food for thought in these ideas and if you'd like to hear more to help support your COVID-19 engagement and communication efforts we'll be repeating this webinar next week so please get in touch with me and I can register you so you can hear the content first hand and participate in Q&A.

Finally, If you haven't seen it yet, the Advisory Board is working to collate all of our best-in-class research and tools to support members and non-members alike in tackling COVID-19 and all of its consequences. Click on the link on the right to access our resources.

Bec Richmond
Managing Director,
International Research

> *"During a time of crisis, leadership is a matter of having people look at you and gain confidence; seeing what you do and how you react. If you are in control; they are in control."*
>
> Tom Landry
>
> First head coach of the Dallas Cowboys, NFL

For more resources on COVID-19, please visit the Advisory Board COVID-19 Resources page.

Source: Advisory Board interview and analysis.