



GUEST COMMENTARY

PROGRESS OVER PERFECTION

Communication is key in uncertain times

BY DEE BROWN
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“WHEN UNCERTAIN TIMES HIT, EMPLOYEES NATURALLY LOOK TO LEADERS FOR GUIDANCE AS THEY TRY TO MAKE SENSE OF THE NEW SITUATION.”

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Leading organizations during times of uncertainty has been highlighted by the challenges of COVID-19. Effective leadership is always a top priority to an organization, but when things are not predictable, responding instinctively can be unproductive. How you communicate with employees and other stakeholders is key to managing and getting through uncertain times.

Employing the right communication strategy unifies and reassures employees and other stakeholders that the organization has the proper leadership and strategy to navigate the uncertainty. Communication must be early, open, honest and clear, acknowledging the uncertainty of the situation while also remaining focused and on task, regardless of the obstacles that present themselves.

When uncertain times hit, employees naturally look to leaders for guidance as they try to make sense of the new situation. It is important that leaders not delay communicating with employees, as the beginning stage is likely when employees will be most hungry for information. Leader reactions can make or break the spirits of employees, which is directly related to productivity.

As management consulting firm RHR International states, “Seizing early opportunities to share available information can have a greater impact than waiting to deliver ‘perfect’ news at a later date.” RHR International also advises leaders to “embrace humility,” be truthful, and “emphasize that recovery is a marathon, not a sprint.”

During times of uncertainty, employees need compassion and empathy. These times can cause stress and anxiety while being physically, mentally, and emotionally challenging. Therefore, it’s imperative that leaders consider the impact of their decisions on their employees and stakeholders.

During uncertain times, leaders may be tempted to downplay the situation and project strength. However, leaders should not feel like they need to have all the answers. Pretending that they do often backfires when employees realize they are being misinformed.

According to Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, during unprecedented periods, “leaders must shift from a ‘know it all’ to [a] ‘learn it all’ mindset.” By doing so, they can relieve

the pressure on themselves and focus on developing and implementing a strategy tailored to the particular situation. It also allows leaders to convey humility, to communicate that they, too, are affected. Employees are more likely to respond positively to the open and honest communication.

According to an article published by the Harvard Business Review, a complicated situation is one where the problem can be broken down and simplified. Through consultation with experts, a solution can then be found.

A complex situation, meanwhile, features interdependent elements, some of which may be unknown, and any action or change can have several unpredictable or disproportionate outcomes.

Typically, uncertainty falls into the complex basket, where solutions “emerge through trial and error and require the willingness, humility, and ability to act, learn, and adapt.” Leaders should aim for progress rather than a perfect solution and be willing to communicate that mistakes will be made.

It is also important to remember the stakeholders. A significant part of an organization surviving uncertainty is making sure customers, shareholders and the community remain supportive of the organization and its leadership.

Finally, leaders are encouraged not to go it alone. During uncertain times, it is common for leaders to feel isolated, often due to a belief that they need to solve all of the problems themselves. When facing uncertainty, “leaders will benefit from reaching out to their network and beyond for insight and perspective.” There is significant benefit in hearing different points of view and information from a variety of sources.



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