Bridging Competing Tensions: Essential Business Communication During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Managing Communications for 4500 employees across manufacturing, field sales/service and remote work environments

A Crisis Communications Case Study by Beth A. Slavic
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Crisis communication typically focuses on managing information flow during disruption, but the COVID-19 pandemic created a more complex challenge: resolving competing tensions between stakeholder groups facing vastly different risks and uncertainties. As Communications Director for a 4,500-employee medical device manufacturer designated as an essential business, I led communications strategy for audiences with conflicting needs—manufacturing workers required to maintain onsite operations despite health risks, field service teams visiting COVID-treating hospitals, and office staff abruptly shifted to remote work. Rather than simply segmenting messages by audience, our approach systematically identified where stakeholder interests might conflict, then developed communications that bridged those gaps without sacrificing one group's needs for another's. The result: 98% approval ratings for leadership communications, record intranet engagement, and significantly reduced attrition despite requiring continued onsite work during the pandemic's most uncertain period.

Ortho Clinical Diagnostics develops and manufactures clinical laboratory and blood bank equipment and tests for hospitals and laboratories worldwide. Our essential business designation during COVID-19 wasn't simply about regulatory compliance—it reflected our role in maintaining critical healthcare infrastructure. While other companies could shift operations to protect employee safety, we faced a different imperative: keeping production lines running to supply hospitals treating COVID patients, while simultaneously developing new diagnostic testing capabilities to combat the pandemic itself. This dual responsibility—maintaining existing healthcare supply chains while innovating new solutions—required our workforce to continue high-risk activities that other industries could suspend.

This business imperative created unprecedented communications challenges across four distinct employee populations, each facing dramatically different risks and circumstances. Manufacturing and R&D teams were required to maintain normal onsite operations despite rising community transmission rates, and they were uncertain whether they might bring the virus home to their families. Field service personnel had to continue visiting hospitals actively treating COVID patients, often in areas with overwhelmed healthcare systems. Meanwhile, office-based employees were abruptly transitioned to remote work, managing professional responsibilities alongside sudden childcare and household disruptions. Sales teams found themselves in a hybrid situation—working remotely while still needing to support hospital customers facing life-and-death equipment needs.

Each group needed information, reassurance, and guidance, but their situations created inherent tensions: How could we acknowledge the sacrifice of onsite workers without

minimizing the efforts of remote employees? How could we maintain a unified company culture when work experiences had become fundamentally different? How could we provide transparency about safety risks without creating panic or legal complications?

Rather than treating these as separate communication challenges, I developed a systematic approach to identifying and bridging competing stakeholder tensions. This methodology relied on three core elements: leveraging personal experience across multiple employee roles, establishing real-time feedback mechanisms, and designing solutions that acknowledged conflicting needs without sacrificing any group's interests.

My own background working in office, manufacturing, and field-based roles provided initial insight into how different groups might experience the same corporate messages differently. However, personal experience alone wasn't sufficient for ongoing crisis management. I established multiple feedback channels—pulse interviews with key contacts in each stakeholder group, monitoring internal communication platforms for questions and concerns, and creating direct pathways for employees to surface issues anonymously. These systems enabled rapid identification of communication gaps or unintended consequences.

Most critically, when tensions emerged between stakeholder groups, our approach focused on transparency about constraints rather than choosing sides. Instead of simply accommodating the loudest voices or defaulting to compliance-driven messaging, we sought solutions that helped each group understand both their situation and others' circumstances.

Managing COVID Case Notifications: Balancing Transparency with Privacy

When our first on-site employee tested positive for COVID-19, we faced an immediate test of our communication approach. Employees demanded comprehensive information—who was infected, where they worked, when they were last onsite—while HIPAA regulations and privacy policies strictly limited what we could disclose. Our initial communication followed legal requirements, notifying potentially exposed individuals directly while providing general location information to others.

The response was swift and negative. Employees felt left in the dark about their personal safety, with some expressing anger at the perceived lack of transparency. Rather than defending our compliance-focused approach, we recognized that following the rules wasn't enough—we needed to help employees understand why those rules existed and how our approach actually protected their interests.

We redesigned our communication strategy to explain the reasoning behind our constraints, emphasizing that privacy protections benefited everyone and that direct notification ensured those actually at risk received specific guidance. This transparency about our limitations, rather than simply enforcing them, transformed employee acceptance of the process.

CEO Video Communications: Unifying Disparate Workforce Experiences

Six weeks into the pandemic, our executive team questioned the value of regular video communications, viewing them as potentially unnecessary given existing communication channels. However, our stakeholder feedback revealed growing demand for leadership visibility, particularly from employees feeling disconnected from company direction. The challenge was creating unified messaging for audiences facing fundamentally different pandemic experiences.

Manufacturing employees were shouldering health risks to maintain production, while remote workers struggled with isolation and work-life boundary challenges. A standard motivational message risked alienating one group or the other—celebrating remote work flexibility could minimize onsite workers' sacrifice, while focusing solely on essential worker heroism could make remote employees feel undervalued.

Our video strategy acknowledged both experiences explicitly, with leadership recognizing the different challenges each group faced while emphasizing shared purpose in supporting global healthcare needs. The tone was deliberately warm and personal—our CEO shared company updates alongside genuine concern for employees' wellbeing and their families' safety. This personal approach helped remote workers feel connected while making onsite workers feel valued rather than simply utilized. The 98% approval ratings reflected successful navigation of this tension, and the approach proved so effective that other leaders adopted similar video communications within their teams, creating additional audience segmentation opportunities.

Information Portal: Managing Access Across Different Work Styles

As COVID-related policies and procedures rapidly evolved, we faced a classic crisis communications dilemma: how to keep everyone informed without overwhelming them. Manufacturing employees spent limited time at computers and couldn't monitor email throughout their shifts, while office workers—now remote—were drowning in email communications as every department tried to keep their teams updated.

Traditional push communications through email would have created information overload for desk workers while missing manufacturing employees entirely. We needed a solution that respected different information consumption patterns while ensuring critical updates reached everyone who needed them.

Our intranet portal shifted the approach from push to pull communications, allowing employees to access exactly the information relevant to their situation when they could actually process it. Manufacturing workers could check site-specific safety updates during breaks, while remote employees could find detailed work-from-home guidance without sifting through irrelevant manufacturing protocols. The portal became our most-visited intranet section, demonstrating that employee-controlled information access was more effective than administrator-controlled information distribution.

Lessons Learned and Broader Applications

The COVID-19 communications challenges extended beyond these three primary examples. We managed supply chain communications to maintain customer confidence, developed protocols for notifying hospital clients when field employees tested positive, and navigated multiple false starts on return-to-office policies as community case numbers fluctuated—ultimately leading to a permanent work-from-anywhere policy.

Across all these challenges, the consistent theme was identifying where stakeholder interests might conflict and designing communications that bridged those gaps rather than choosing sides. This approach required systematic feedback mechanisms, willingness to adapt messaging based on real-time stakeholder response, and focus on helping audiences understand constraints rather than simply enforcing them.

The methodology proved scalable beyond crisis communications, informing our ongoing approach to organizational change management and stakeholder engagement. Most importantly, it demonstrated that effective crisis communications isn't just about managing information flow—it's about maintaining organizational cohesion when external pressures threaten to fragment stakeholder interests.