

How to talk to essential employees during the COVID-19 crisis

By Hinda Mitchell, President Inspire PR Group

Even as America presses “pause” on traditional workplace environments, many in our nation’s workforce are still headed out every day to keep essential services, like healthcare, and supplies, like food, operating as smoothly as possible. For employers and employees, these are unique times. Keeping a team engaged that is concerned about their own health, and the health of their loved ones, while they also are fearful of the economic volatility, is incredibly difficult. Emotions may run anywhere from gratitude for being employed to frustration for having to work, and those emotions may change hour by hour.

There are a few things smart business leaders can do with communications to help their teams during this time:

- **Over-communicate.** But do it in short, measured bursts. There’s fatigue with the amount of information people are receiving from so many sources. To be most effective, keep it simple and direct. Incorporate both a “push” strategy (distributing information proactively) and a “pull” strategy (providing resource locations for employees to access when needed).
- **Incorporate new platforms.** Text messaging apps may be the easiest way to reach a lot of hourly workers quickly. Another way to quickly reach employees is to set up a private page on your website where people can go for information.
- **Provide extra support.** Consider their special circumstances and identify resources to support them. Perhaps they have a loved one with a compromised immune system. Maybe they’re struggling to find childcare. Share resources and support them to help navigate their unique challenges.
- **Clarity is critical.** Be crystal clear on your employee expectations, benefits and other personnel matters during this time. What are they supposed to do if they or a loved one falls ill? What is your PTO, sick time and absentee policy? What have you done to change or enhance benefits to address this unique time? Now is not the time for rigidity; flexibility should drive as much of human resources decision-making as possible.
- **Little things mean the most.** Bring in lunch for your team. Send everyone home with a grocery gift card. Perhaps you establish an employee “crisis bonus” that will be granted at the end of the pandemic. The extras don’t need to be extravagant; meaningful small gestures will have value at this time.
- **Focus on health and safety.** Let your team know that even as they come to work, you’re putting extra precautions in place to keep your workplace safe. And then actually do it. Encourage them to assist in this effort as well and to identify ways for further health and safety improvements. They need to know that not only their work has value to you, but that they as individuals have value, and that you want to assure their well-being.
- **Lean in on your values.** Ultimately, everything that employers do right now is about caring for those for whom they have responsibility. That means both their physical well-being, as well as their mental

health. Remind them that they are a treasured and valued part of your company, and remind them that their role during this time is particularly critical. Connect what they're doing to the "greater good", e.g., feeding people, keeping the supply chain going, assuring open transportation channels, providing healthcare to those who need it.

- ***Do what's right.*** Follow the rules established by local, state or federal government orders. Be patient with your team. Remember that the same fears that you and your own family are experiencing are the ones that your employees are also experiencing. Reassurance, when possible, about your industry, your company, and their jobs will be welcomed.
- ***Help them see that the other side of this uncertain time will come.*** For many the situation right now feels like forever. They're working long hours while dealing with an emotional roller coaster in their personal lives. Being a strong leader means helping the team see that the future remains firmly in focus. Reinforce the company's long-term vision.

The bottom line: employers need to step up their communicating and engaging like never before. These recommendations will help make sure that engagement is as effective as it can be and position your company to transition well through and to the end of this crisis.

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