



Addressing the impact of COVID-19 Crisis communications and stakeholder management

When an organization is confronted with the consequences of COVID-19, speed is of the essence. It is essential to establish control over management of the issue. One of the key aspects to control is crisis communications and stakeholder engagement. The situation may put the organization under intense stakeholder, public, and media scrutiny. And it is not only the communications function that feels the heat. Chairs, chief executives, heads of business and others are thrust into the spotlight, while internal and external audiences look to a range of people for information and guidance. The way that the organization communicates and engages with its stakeholders and tells them what it is doing to make things right, really matters. Imprecise, inconsistent and delayed communications and engagement creates additional uncertainty and kills trust quickly.

We are already seeing inaccurate and mixed messaging that contradicts statements presented by public health experts about the virus's spread, response measures launched, and the effectiveness of the actions put in place. Mixed messaging can be a problem because it communicates that people who are providing guidance aren't on the same page. Therefore, it is key that an organization addresses the challenge with good situational awareness and clear communication channels and starts working within a communication cadence which engages key internal and external stakeholders frequently.

A crisis communication strategy and stakeholder management approach

It is vital to keep key internal and external stakeholders informed of the unfolding situation, its impact and response measures initiated. It is important to be transparent and open about decisions being made and how these fit into the overall response and recovery plan. Stakeholders should be aware of the channels of information through which updates are available. Stakeholders should not learn new information via the media; it is vital to disseminate consistent, accurate and timely information via dedicated communication channels and spokespersons. Key questions for consideration in this context are:

- Do you have the capacity in place to understand your reputation risk exposure?
- Do you know your stakeholder groups and what they think and feel about the situation? Do you know their information requirements?
- Do you have clear and attainable communication and stakeholder management objectives and outcomes?
- Are communications roles and responsibilities clear and confirmed?

Practical next steps

- **Assemble a cross-function crisis-response and communication team.** Set up an integrated and cross-functional crisis response team that is supported by sub-teams to manage specific work streams such as communications, legal, finance or operations. Create clear roles and responsibilities for the communications function and establish a protocol outlining what information needs to be communicated to whom and by what means. Appoint spokespersons. Develop a crisis communication strategy, outlining communication and stakeholder management objectives. Create an overview of key internal and external stakeholders, their information requirements and proposed means of communications. Be ready to respond effectively and efficiently to surges in stakeholder queries; create crisis communication scenarios and template holding statements in anticipation of risk escalation.
- **Communicate with your employees early and often.** Employees will rightly be concerned about the latest developments and will expect organizations to provide accurate, authoritative information. You can build pandemic awareness into business-as-usual internal communications: share information and infographics from authorities; educate business travellers on measures to take and symptoms to look out for; and encourage functions and teams to review their pandemic arrangements.
- **Engage with your critical suppliers.** Businesses should have sight of their critical suppliers' pandemic preparedness measures and encourage ongoing dialogue on current-state readiness should the threat materialize.
- **Remain in contact with key stakeholders.** You may need to coordinate with local and national public authorities as part of regional preparedness activity. Communicating with other stakeholders, including investors and customers, will be key to maintaining stakeholder confidence.

For more information on how to respond, recover and thrive:

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