

# Don't neglect employee engagement during #Covid-19

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During the Covid-19 pandemic, brands worldwide are doing their best to assure customers that they're there for them. Brand communications teams are working hard to reaffirm that their brand is "here to help", "take care of people", and, my personal favourite, "we're in this together."



That's a great sentiment and something that could potentially offer hope to millions of customers looking to their favourite brands to make a real difference during this challenging time.

While there are many brands genuinely trying to make a positive impact, there are others that jump on the pandemic bandwagon by putting out communication without substance. They want to be seen as a brand that's worthy of continued loyalty and support and, therefore, revenue but don't walk the talk.

It has been said that a crisis like this brings out people's true characters and, by the end, you'll know who's in your corner and who's not. The same goes for brands; did the brands that you approached for a payment holiday or some form of financial relief during this time have your back? Did they demonstrate empathy and care?

Did the company you work for do as much for you, are they committed to offering their customers? How much did they show care and concern for your wellbeing during this unprecedented time?

A brand is built through many things, but culture is at the core. The famous Neil Patel shares on his blog: "When you put a focus on culture, you'll have guiding principles. People will know you for this. Employees will live by it. It'll help get you through difficult times."

Furthermore, Richard Mulholland of Missing Link recently shared a video about the need for "your people to have something to believe in." The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown implications provide an opportunity for business leaders to bring staff together, to discuss and address concerns or challenges and opportunities. It also serves as a platform to encourage staff to offer possible solutions and feels part of the process. Ideally, they need to believe that they still have a purpose and have something that they can work towards through collaboration with management.

I recently learnt that a well-established private company only communicated with their staff on the day of the South African lockdown (26 March 2020) to inform employees of the need to work from home. There was no further communication until

17 April 2020 stating that, amongst other things, employees have a voluntary option to leave the company as full salaries could not be paid out. Staff had no understanding as to exactly what they would be paid at month-end, nor did they have details of the protocol for questions.

While depleting cashflow and salary cuts are harsh realities for many people worldwide right now, this business communication approach has caused distress, anger and resentment amongst the staff, especially for those who have gone above and beyond; those who bought into the business purpose and were working towards something they believed in.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has set an excellent example of how to engage and communicate with people during a crisis. He has set a communication blueprint for business leaders who don't know how to handle this situation. He communicates regularly, clearly explains his reasoning to motivate for the decisions he later unpacks, shares facts and stats to support these decisions and demonstrates empathy as to how challenging it may be for the people of South Africa. In one instance, he dressed in an SANDF uniform to show unity as he addressed the nation. As a consequence of his overall approach, President Ramaphosa has reassured South Africans that he has things under control and inspires the majority of the nation to work together to get through this. Moreover, he offers hope.

Without authentically demonstrating how the business is “there to help” and “take care” of its people, the existence of the company may very well be short-lived. Here are some considerations to help business leaders engage with their greatest asset during stressful times such as these:

### **Silence isn't golden**

Employees don't expect business leaders to have all the solutions immediately. Still, it is vital to communicate quickly in response to changes, even if it's to manage expectations around when and how updates will be delivered. Staff crave information and guidance from their leadership team. There is no such thing as over-communicating in a situation such as this.

### **Messaging is key**

Don't leave employees defining their own narrative, fuelling rumours and doubt. Create a platform or regular communiqué to acknowledge what's happening, outline what the company has already done to address/solve immediate disruptions in the business, highlight what the company's plans are to mitigate risks to the job and company security further and when they can expect the next update. Consider developing an information hub for employees so that they can access policies, FAQs, all correspondence on the matter to date, and resources for financial aid etc.

### **Employees are human**

Recognise that they have bills to pay and families to feed. As business leaders, you should communicate with compassion and empathy. Tone, timing and assurance of some sort will help settle employees' anxiety. While we may all be in lockdown together, context and perspectives are different for everyone. Don't assume that as a highly-paid business leader that you can relate to what the staff are going through.

### **Leadership must step up**

Management has a role to play in seriously considering the impact on the people who make up the business. Employee's need to have faith in the ability of the company they work for to “take care of them”, “be there for them” and demonstrate that “you're all in this together.” Remind them of their purpose and motivate them to still believe in what they were working towards, or to work together to pivot the business to survive.

A crisis is an opportunity. It puts the spotlight on a brand or company leadership to do the right thing. Handled well, a crisis can grow brand equity and nurture employee loyalty.

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