

Communication as your most important skill at work and home:

Guidelines for improving communication and collaboration

by

Marius Meyer

Communication is the most important skill in business. It is also the most important skill at home. Also, it is the most important skill in relationships between family members, in marriages, and in all other relationships and interactions between people.

Our president has been excellent in his communication. Every Monday morning he communicates an official weekly message to the nation on Twitter. You can also receive it directly from him on @CyrilRamaphosa or from his office @PresidencyZA. Furthermore, he will then also use television to do national announcements such as the recent roll-out of mass screening and testing. Unlike his counterparts in other parts of the world, these public messages have been very well received by the media and public at large. The communication was clear, serious, inspirational and to the point. It was evident that certain points were factual, but they also encouraged a call for action and a clear way of moving forward together in implementing further actions. He follows a multi-channel communication strategy using different channels. Within minutes the full speech is available on social media and the Internet. Interestingly, with the occasional national announcement his approach has been to deliver the speech, and then not to take any questions, but to leave that for the responsible ministers the rest of the week.

President Trump's approach is different. He is using his task force to surround him and then let some of them answer the more technical questions. While dominating the answers himself, and often interrupting the other speakers and the media, these media briefings are chaotic and disorganised, and invariably results in at least one journalist being criticised or insulted when they pose uncomfortable questions. He does not follow a prepared speech, but rather rambles on and repeats the same phrases over and over. The next day, the exact same process is repeated with the same result. Thus, extremely high levels of anxiety, fear, uncertainty, panic and confusion of the American people is perpetuated and further exacerbated by social media as the level of infections and deaths are rising from day to day while the curve has been flattened in other countries.

Notwithstanding different approaches used by different Ministers in South Africa, some Ministers also communicate with confidence and clarity. For example, Ministers Mkhize, Mthembu, Dlamini-Zuma and Pandor have also been effective in their communication, including answering questions in appropriate and professional ways most of the time. Additionally, President Ramaphose is surrounded by high level communication specialists such as the Head of Digital Communications in the Presidency, Athi Geleba who has been very effective in supporting the president with social media communication reinforcing his key messages.

All of us in the private and public sectors are challenged to improve our communication in our organisations during this crisis period. While conventional principles of communication are still very relevant, it requires some refocus and reinforcement during times of high uncertainty, contradictions and confusion. Here are some guidelines for effective communication during the lockdown period:

- Show that you care in all your communications. We are all in this together, and we are all experiencing increased levels of inconvenience, uncertainty and anxiety.
- Decide on the most appropriate communication channel for the type of communication. For example, a new policy or strategy should be emailed, and added to the website, newspaper and information portal of the company. Bits and pieces of the strategy can be communicated as chunks of information in different digital or social media platforms and formats. Likewise, SMS and WhatsApp messages should only be used for quick questions and comments, and not to communicate comprehensive messages, unless if you use a proper attachment or attached article or notice. Limit the use of email for essential messages only, the inboxes of most people are already too full and the chances are good that they are already overwhelmed. Hence, select your communication channel and medium carefully. For instance, Microsoft Teams or Zoom are good platforms for meetings.
- Create awareness about the Covid-19 virus among all your employees, customers and other stakeholders relevant to your company.
- Always bear in mind that you are not communicating in a period of normal and stable business activity. This is a period of uncertainty, anxiety and abnormal levels of confusion and contradiction. Adapt your message to be sensitive, yet effective during this period of uncertainty.
- Plan your communication – the right things must happen at the right time.
- Make sure that your communication is clear and to the point in preventing misunderstanding.
- Official corporate communication from senior leaders containing formal updates about key information, progress, policy or planning should be screened and edited by professional communication and public relations experts.
- Tailor your communication to the needs of your target audience, for example customers have different needs than suppliers or employees.
- Ensure that you have proper communication protocols and policies in your organisation to prevent chaos, for example for public relations and stakeholder engagement, including social media.
- Prioritise the visibility of key stakeholders during the crisis and lockdown period, e.g. employee wellness and counselling services.
- Use credible sources of information, before you spread messages from other sources.
- Avoid getting involved in the spreading of any rumours containing inaccurate or contradictory messages. Be careful of not spreading inappropriate or unprofessional communication and fake news.
- Consider the impact of poor communication on different departments and stakeholders, it does have an unfortunate ripple effect that may be difficult to fix if it gets out of hand.
- Keep in touch with your stakeholders, but keep communication focused and to the point.
- Communicate with respect and dignity and avoid any stigmatisation of infected individuals.
- Prioritise communication as a key skill in all online learning sessions for managers and employees.

- Be cognisant of the fact that body language is less observable in Microsoft Teams, Zoom and other meetings, therefore be even more attentive and sensitive towards other people in these sessions.
- Always consider how people are likely to respond to your communication, adapt your draft message accordingly and start planning your responses.
- Share key lists of people, their roles and contact information inside and outside the organisation.
- Develop frequently asked questions (FAQs) and clear answers on typical questions received from customers and other stakeholders.
- Use professional language and avoid slang, sarcasm and humour that may be offensive or misinterpreted. Make the values of your company clear and visible, these values are not relaxed during the lockdown, but should be reinforced where possible. But be careful of not going into “preaching mode” given the fact that people are more tense during a lockdown.
- Balance a human touch with the seriousness of the situation.
- Listen and respond to questions you receive from employees, colleagues, suppliers, customers, government all other stakeholders. Rather speak the truth if you don’t know the answer than trying to have an answer ready. During uncertain times, most people may not have answers to all issues at hand.
- While the flow of information has become more sporadic and unorganised, try to organise the types of messages and channel it to the right people for follow-up.
- Ensure proper and regular feedback mechanisms.
- Get your communication balance right. During a pandemic and global crisis such as Covid-19 it is not easy to find the appropriate balance, given the risk of over-communication on the one hand, and under-communication on the other hand. Both these extreme strategies will increase confusion, levels of anxiety, fear and panic.
- If something goes wrong, be professional when you communicate. Losing your temper during good times may be forgiven, but in time of crisis will lead to resentment and even sabotage.
- Show that you care during all forms of communication, even if you need to remind employees to be more responsive to customers. Despite having less interruptions at home, the reality is that most employees are more stressed and they are distracted by different parties on a regular basis while trying to do their work.
- It is even more important to show regular appreciation and to provide positive feedback when employees work from home. Also, keep on spreading good news about the organisation when good things happen during this period of bad news dominating the headlines and the minds of people.
- Evaluate your learning and effectiveness of communication on a daily and weekly basis. You may require to implement improvements on a more regular basis than before.

While communication is key from a national perspective, and indeed in all organisations, we now need to think more holistically by using systems thinking and understanding the impact of our communication on other people and the organisation. Communication is not only important for business, it is also key in our households given the fact that non-essential employees now work from home. Getting communication right in your family, and also with children is now more important than ever before. In addition, for people who stay on their own, it is essential that you make contact with other people every day, so that you don’t feel isolated.

Getting our communication right is the most important skill in business and at home. Ultimately, we need to realise that we need to communicate and collaborate better than before. We are

communicating to sustain ourselves, our organisations and society for a bigger purpose and that is to win the war against the virus. Now is the time for exceptional levels of communication and collaboration. Says President Ramaphosa: “The global pandemic has exposed the fragility of inward-looking and insular product and service systems. It is leading some to call for ‘a new moral economy’ that has people and their welfare at its centre. Through deeper collaboration, we will turn the tide against this virus, region by region, country by country.” For the first time in the history of the modern world, almost all communications are about life and death, hence the need for all of us to step up and improve our communication.

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). For more information on the Coronavirus, visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za