

How to lead in a crisis? Communication is everything

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19 January 2022



While no one in a position of leadership welcomes crisis in the workplace, it's been inescapable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lisa Pierce knows that better than most, as vice-president, Canada & USA sales for Air Canada.

“Our world turned upside down in the blink of an eye both at work and at home,” says Ms. Pierce of early pandemic days in 2020.

Having spent more than three decades in the airline industry, Ms. Pierce says she has learned the best way to survive crisis at work is a constant exchange of information with company partners, internal departments and team members.

For example, reopening after the initial government-mandated grounding of flights was a multi-layered situation, says Ms. Pierce. Continuous communication with partners was key – airlines, border security officials, grounds crews, air crews – in order to get planes back in the air.

“Communication was and still is absolutely key especially during this particular situation given the pace and level of complexity,” she says. “It creates certainty in uncertain times.”

Persevering through dark days

For Sarah Van Lange, vice-president of communications, content marketing and social media for Cineplex, the endless bursts of information from government and media flooding her social media feeds at the beginning of the pandemic was overwhelming.

“I had never seen that happen before,” Ms. Van Lange says.

Those were dark days, she says, with her team pulling many all-nighters before closing the doors on the country’s largest theatre chain, not knowing when they would reopen.

Like Ms. Pierce at Air Canada, Ms. Van Lange says increasing internal communications was essential at Cineplex to ensure employees knew what was happening. “Our CEO began sending out weekly emails to staff,” she says. Cineplex’s communications and social media teams united into one group as did their internal and external communicators, bolstering each other as they kept information flowing.

During Cineplex’s reopening in July 2020, Ms. Van Lange remembers doing 15+ media interviews a day and responding to an endless line of questions from journalists across Canada. It was particularly challenging since there was no consistency between regulations at a national or provincial level and health and safety protocols were typically based on local guidelines.

“It was very complicated and I was very focused on details,” she says. “One negative headline could spark a skepticism about our entire theatre circuit.”

Ms. Van Lange says one of the company’s best decisions was to empower local general managers by giving them the training and support to speak to the media.

“We’d been dealing with lots of misinformation – but putting our general managers in the spotlight was an ‘aha’ moment,” she says.

Reassurance through expert voices

Both Ms. Pierce and Ms. Van Lange say subject matter experts have been a key part of their communications plan, particularly in providing scientific information to consumers about COVID-19. Dr. Jim Chung, Air Canada’s chief medical officer of health, provided consumer information through on-board videos and television interviews. The Cineplex pre-show, usually filled with film trivia and movie previews, was revised to include an information video from infection diseases physician Dr. Isaac Bogoch.

In addition, Air Canada created the Travel Ready program to provide information on travel and testing requirements for Canadians, as well as a partnership with Switch Health to offer mobile testing kits. At Cineplex, the VenueSafe program allows patrons to research any of their theatres to find out entry requirements and safety protocols.

Both Ms. Pierce and Ms. Van Lange say they learned a lot about their professional strengths through the pandemic. For example, Ms. Van Lange says she realized that she thrived during the unpredictability that's been a constant over the past two years.

Ms. Pierce adds that while navigating through the pandemic has been difficult, it isn't forever. And there are positives that can come from times of crisis.

“It makes us stronger, and often creates opportunities to innovate.”

Ask Women and Work

Have a question about your work life? E-mail us at GWC@globeandmail.com.

Question: I saw your article about menopause and I agree it's important to talk about in the workplace. But I fear being placed in a box surrounded by stereotypes about women being overly emotional or hysterical, and being disrespected or treated differently as a result. How can you bring up peri- or menopausal issues with a manager who you don't think will be supportive? And are there resources available for menopause-related discrimination in the workplace?

We asked Lisa Taylor, founder and president of Toronto-based workplace consultancy Challenge Factory to field this one. Ms. Taylor is also an associate fellow at the National Institute on Ageing and author of The Talent Revolution: Longevity and the Future of Work.

When deciding how to approach this with your employer, it's important to first consider what kind of workplace you are in. Some organizations have fostered cultures where you can have all kinds of open conversations. Other organizations don't have that type of open culture, so when you encounter an issue – whether it's menopause or another wellness-related health issue – those conversations can become really difficult.

The best way to prepare for a conversation in that kind of workplace is to really think about why you want to talk about menopause with your manager and what you want to get out of it. If menopause is affecting your productivity, be really clear about that. Focus on saying: This is what I need in order to be able to continue to do my work, so how can we make that happen?

It's important to note that menopause can be a challenging topic because most people don't know a whole lot about it. It might actually be the very first time your manager has ever had a conversation about it. So while their reaction may seem unsupportive or lacking at first, it could be that they're uncomfortable because they're on completely unknown ground.

Regarding resources surrounding discrimination in the workplace, you need to think about whether you are struggling with a relationship in the workplace or whether you're actually experiencing discrimination because of gender, sexual identity or another of the standard categories that are protected by law. If you're going to put forward a claim of discrimination, it needs to have a very specific meaning.

Having said that, if your company has an employee resource group (ERG) for women or older workers, that's one place you can go for support. If your workplace has an employee assistance program (EAP), they can provide you with information on a wide range of work-related health and wellness topics. And you can always reach out to your human resources department on issues related to workplace culture and relationships.

In a smaller workplace where there is no HR department, it's important to recognize that your boss may have no training in human resources or employee management. I've put together small business resources designed exactly for situations where managers just don't know what to do. Nobody wakes up in the morning saying, 'How can I make life harder or more uncomfortable for my staff?' People often just don't have the skills, the time or even the awareness.