

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

Handle With Care: Delivering Tough Messages in the Workplace

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Return to office mandates. Historic increases in healthcare costs. New eligibility requirements for GLP-1 medication coverage. For many employers, there seems to be an ever-growing roster of tough messages they need to deliver to their workforce.

So, how can an organization most effectively guide their people through challenging total rewards changes, while maintaining employee engagement? Whatever topic an employer is faced with, we see consistent success when these five communication strategies are in place.

1. Lead with Empathy

The social and political climate across the country has led to heightened stress and tension, which can ripple into the workplace. According to the American Psychological Association, the average level of stress across adults in the U.S. is 5 out of 10, with U.S. politics (62%), healthcare (55%) and violence and crime (54%) being the top stressors.¹ For this reason, what may seem like a relatively minor change—such as a modest medical premium increase—may be met with an outsized reaction.

Employers must therefore acknowledge the emotional weight that employees carry, and exercise heightened sensitivity with how messaging is framed and delivered. When communicating change, make it clear that you understand the potential impacts, acknowledge concerns and fears and are committed to providing as much support as possible to help employees navigate the change.

STRESS LEVELS

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TOP STRESSORS

62%

U.S.
Politics

55%

Healthcare

54%

Violence
and Crime



34X
MORE SUCCESSFUL

Data shows that face-to-face communication is 34 times more successful than email when it comes to getting a message across effectively.

2. Choose Your Platform

According to MetLife, approximately 50% of employees want to receive information through emails, websites, video, social media and talking with someone in person—in other words, they want communication everywhere.² For this reason, a multi-media campaign that enables you to reach a diverse audience with different preferences and learning styles will increase the reach and impact of your messaging.

However, while sending a message from an automated mailbox may be the simplest communication tactic for timely updates and quick-hit information, it may not be the most effective path for sharing difficult messages or complex changes. In fact, data shows that face-to-face communication is 34 times more successful than email when it comes to getting a message across effectively.³ This is due to factors like body language, perceived authenticity and honesty and other attributes that are lost through digital and online channels. For this reason, consider live town halls and other in-person opportunities for effective engagement with your workforce.

3. Consider Your Messenger

Whether it is an all-employee town hall or a small team huddle, research continues to show that both senior leaders and direct managers can be powerful change agents. The personal delivery of difficult messages to tee up (or reinforce) written communication adds an element of authenticity and trust that improves how information is received.

Live discussions can also facilitate healthy, two-way dialogue that makes employees feel engaged in the changes. 92% of HR leaders say a culture of listening is crucial for building a positive company culture.⁴ And, according to Gallup, when employees agree they have opportunities to provide honest feedback about organizational changes, they are 7.4 times as likely to have confidence in their leaders to successfully manage emerging challenges.⁵



4. Provide the Context

Simple and clear communication is key, but that does not mean you should gloss over the “why.” While it is important to lead with the headline and be direct about a difficult message, follow through with rationale. Share why you are making the change, why you chose the specific timing and why it matters to both your business and your people. When managers explain the rationale behind decisions, trust increases by 28% and acceptance of the message increases by 31%.⁶

5. Be Careful with Timing

There’s a fine line between rushed communication and over-communication. It is important to give your workforce sufficient time to learn about a change, understand the change, ask questions about the change and then finally act on the change. At the same time, providing information too early, such as before employees are able to learn more or take action, can cause additional stress.

A Blueprint for Difficult Communications

Tying this all together, an effective communication plan that activates these strategies will include the following activities:

Executive Briefing

Share with senior leaders a few weeks prior to employee announcements, to align your leadership with key messages and prepare them to field questions. Give them the opportunity to ask questions and pressure test employee reaction.

Manager Preview

Offer to people managers and human resources business partners to empower confidence and consistency in your messaging strategy. Give them talk points and walking decks to arm them with a ready-made approach.

Employee Communication

Deliver through email, intranet postings, town halls and webinars, manager-led team meetings, videos, posters and other channels available within your organization to reach employees wherever they are.

Across all of these activities, be sure to **maintain transparency** and **empathy**, **promote the support available** to guide employees through the change and **be clear about any actions** employees need to take.

¹ <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/stress-in-america/2024>

² <https://www.metlife.com/workforce-insights/employee-benefit-trends/>

³ <https://hbr.org/2017/04/a-face-to-face-request-is-34-times-more-successful-than-an-email>

⁴ *89% of US. HR leaders report more influence than ever before*

⁵ <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/473738/why-trust-leaders-faltering-gain-back.aspx>

⁶ <https://hbr.org/2015/03/how-to-deliver-bad-news-to-your-employees>



About the Author



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Erika is a Managing Partner and Communication Practice Leader with Brown & Brown. In her role, she guides client strategy and relationships and develops intellectual capital and thought leadership in the areas of communication, change management and the employee experience. Erika helps her clients address a full spectrum of employee communication, with a particular focus on employment value proposition (EVP) and branding, total rewards and total well-being. Prior to joining Brown & Brown, Erika spent 20 years in the Consumer Experience and Communication businesses at Alight Solutions, Aon and Hewitt Associates, including six years as a Partner. Erika graduated from the University of Rochester with a BA in English and Political Science. She also received her MBA in Organization Studies and Business Law from Boston College and her Leading Diversity, Equity and Inclusion certification from Northwestern University.



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