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3 Tips for Talking to Your Team Amidst COVID-19

Mary Westbrook, Society of American Florists

During a recent webinar, human resources consultant Glenna Hecht of Humanist Consulting based in Dallas, Texas, shared these tips for leading your team in the coming weeks, as you communicate news about the prospect of staff cutbacks and navigate other organizational changes:

Be direct, honest, compassionate—and vulnerable. Don't try to soften the blow; just deal with people straight up. Give people the opportunity to hear the news and go home and absorb and deal with it. Acknowledge the uncertainty and stress of the current situation, that everyone is concerned about our health, well-being and financial situation. Let your team know that, while nobody knows exactly how all of this will play out, you're trying to deal with it as it comes and to the best of your ability.

Recognize that every business is going to have to go through a metamorphosis—some may have to close doors and wait out this crisis, others may be able to keep operations open.

Be consistent with your communications. Consistency is key when you think about how, when and who is talking to your team. At a time when people are afraid, they read something into everything that is said, whether you intended it or not. Establish a regular time and cadence for communications with your team through this crisis – whether daily, twice daily, every other day. It should be the same person communicating, whether the CEO, manager, etc. If the messenger is different, for whatever reason, let your team know ahead of time: "Today, John from shipping is going to update us on XX." Consistency is also important when it comes to the form of communication—whether you use email, an in-person meeting, videoconference or phone call. Some companies are using their payroll system to blast info out to employees at the same time of day.

Use "intros" and "outros" when communicating business status: Say, "As of this morning" this is what we know about what we're doing. And then, as you finish your comments: If anything changes between today and our next meeting, I'll let you know.

Most important, share the same message with the entire group—even if it doesn't apply to everyone there. For instance, if you know that one aspect of your business—processing—is going on an abbreviated schedule, share that with the entire group, and then have individual meetings with those in processing, so you can take into account the individual reactions and give them the ability to respond in private if appropriate.

Remember: You're not the only one dealing with this. Everyone is going through the same thing. People are being downsized, schedules are being changed, businesses are having to do things they've never had to do

before—you’re not the only one. And your employees realize this. It doesn’t make it less sad or devastating for them, but to a certain extent, your employees know that change is coming. Explain that you are actively engaged in mapping out the future of your business, even if that future isn’t quite what you thought it would be a month ago.

Watch Glenna Hecht's webinar: HR Strategies for Navigating a Crisis.