



**COMMANDING
CONVERSATIONS**

Leadership Perspectives from the COVID-19 pandemic

**A review from Sophy Norris and
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Flagship PR

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Leadership Perspectives from the COVID-19 pandemic – a review

This year has presented some unprecedented challenges to businesses and individuals alike. Any sense of normalcy has been upended and we have all had to hear the dreaded phrase “new normal” enough times to last a lifetime. But amidst the turbulence, we have seen the emergence of innovative and inspirational leadership across almost every industry – from retail to education.

To document how the world of public relations has responded to this unique moment, Flagship's close agency partner Peppercomm and the Institute for Public Relations have produced three co-branded research reports, detailing initial reactions, ongoing strategies, mistakes and successes, and crucial pivots. While the first two reports were quantitative (links are at the end of this article), this final instalment, an e-book titled Leadership Perspectives, draws on the experiences of 30 senior communications executives, offering a rare – almost documentary-like - snapshot into the thoughts, feelings and actions of America's top communicators as they face the coronavirus pandemic head-on.

“This is the third in a series of research reports that has shed light on the thoughts, feelings and actions of the most senior communications professionals as they help steer organizations through the uncharted waters of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

Dr. Tina McCorkindale, President and CEO of the Institute for Public Relations

The e-book can be downloaded here: [Leadership Perspectives](#). The 114 page report contains in-depth interviews with in-house and agency leaders from brands that include Hotwire, Macy's, Southwest Airlines and Hewlett Packard. The Flagship team has extracted key findings from the 30 interviews in this article, giving you a snapshot of five of the key issues we see facing comms leaders today.

Employee communication is critical

For most people, the past few months have been a real challenge to contend with. Not only have we been faced with daunting health risks, but we have also had to work, learn, and live in a completely new way. To add to our overload, our concerns have been compounded by complicated, contradictory – at times, even conspiratorial - news and advice at every turn.

As a result, the information individuals receive from our own organisations has become more important than ever. According to Jennifer Mauer, ex-Head of Global Corporate Communications at pharmaceutical company Merck, the majority of employees “*trust communications from their own organization more than other sources*”. Business leaders have shifted their internal communications strategies accordingly, **prioritising providing accessible, trustworthy information over producing new and unique content**. The role of internal communications has never been more important: a **central touchstone not only for productivity and engagement, but also for the physical health and wellbeing of employees**.

This has catapulted in importance the role of the Chief Communications Officer (CCO), whose crucial input, on the frontline of business and brand, has never been more necessary. *“Throughout the crisis, CCOs have carefully crafted the messaging, tone, stances and responses to events as they unfolded, changing direction in real time whilst ensuring communications stay on-brand”* says Steve Cody, Founder and CEO of Peppercomm. *“Renewed recognition of communications’ intrinsic role in the success of an organization means that the future of the CCO specifically – and PR in general – has never been brighter.”*

“In the coming months, we will of course see the slow swing back to “normal” promotion and campaigns for many clients, but we believe this pandemic has shown the necessity of effective internal and crisis communications for an organization – and why these solutions should remain part of a company’s engagement strategy in the years to come.”

Barbara Bates, Global CEO - Hotwire

A human senior team, on the front foot

Alongside this, communications leaders found that, when it comes to internal communications, it is not just about what’s being said, but also who’s saying it. **Increased visibility of executives and other C-suite leaders is crucial, allowing employees – some of whom may be completely socially isolated – to put a human face to corporate messages.** While previously, CEOs may have tried to cultivate a strong, polished image, the priorities for management have shifted: **it is now more important to lead with empathy and compassion in an authentic way.** Before COVID-19, many CEOs and boards positioned shareholders or customers as their primary focus, but the pandemic has shown that success is directly tied to the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of employees. Showing vulnerability and imperfection when delivering messages – by discussing personal work-from-home struggles or not editing out interruptions from family members – lets employees know that they are not alone in experiencing difficulties. **Connecting personally with business leaders keeps individuals engaged and driven, as they feel more like a part of the team.**

“Collectively, we are all in the trenches, and our C-suite leaders are together with us on the front lines to help make decisions and drive change.”

Jill Carapellotti, Group Vice President, Corporate Communications, Macy’s Inc.

Be prepared

Another common theme throughout the study showed the importance of preparedness and proactivity in the face of paradigm-shifting challenges.

Steve Cody adds: *“The scale of the pandemic caught nearly every organization across the world unaware with many thinking “this could never happen here”. Dangerous thinking in today’s world.”*

Those companies which already had comprehensive work from home policies or well thought-out crisis strategies in place were able to react more quickly and with more success. Similarly, those who acted quickly when they saw the initial signs of crisis and proactively engaged with employees to begin preparations have fared far better, in terms of both productivity and engagement.

This isn't just about speed, however, there's also an element of attitude. **Organisations which have looked for ways to patch problems in the short-term, plastering over cracks as they appear, have struggled to keep people working at their best, and overcome obstacles. Meanwhile those who have embraced the change as a complete adjustment of company culture have been able to thrive.**

"Each time we've faced a new crisis, we pulled on our previous knowledge, lessons learned and robust emergency planning contingencies and checklists to help us address the new crisis we're facing."

Linda Rutherford, Senior Vice President, Chief Communications Officer – Southwest Airlines

Reframing work-life balance

Part of this adjustment has been considering the effects of working from home on employees – mentally, physically, and emotionally. Although working from home is often heralded as a boost for work-life balance, this has not proved to be the case. Increasing numbers of leaders are concerned about the extra hours their employees are putting in while working remotely. There is no longer a physical boundary between work and home, making it easier to work late into the evenings and during weekends, which means that individuals may not be getting the 'off' time they need. **Work-life balance now needs intentionality, and leaders are responding to this by introducing strategies to help employees manage their time. In general, this crisis has put a spotlight on employee wellbeing and companies are – overall – responding compassionately.**

"When we thought about how to approach communications around COVID-19, we wanted to make sure that we kept our 4,000 global employees well-informed, that we supported them and their families through a difficult time with engaging communications that spoke to both their heads and hearts, and that we celebrated the work they were doing with our customers and in our communities."

Catherine Mathis, Chief Communications Officer McGraw-Hill

Authentic social purpose and responsibility drive engagement

This compassion, however, is not only important internally. **Both the coronavirus pandemic and police brutality have brought renewed attention to social purpose, and we have seen that this needs to be at the very heart of a company, rather than on the periphery.**

Cody continues: *"Centring purpose has been critical for CCOs too, with many reporting that the overarching purpose helped guide their decision-making, stances and communications tone from the start of the pandemic and thereafter."*

Organisations need to actively respond to social issues that arise in their communities locally, nationally, and internationally to maintain a good reputation and keep employees engaged. It is crucial that this is authentic, with companies carefully considering where help is most needed, and what help they are best positioned to provide. **Social responsibility should start from the inside out – supporting employees first with diversity policies, clear accountability, and wellbeing resources - while also allowing organisations to pivot or extend their social purpose efforts to include those who will benefit most.**

"This crisis requires us to strike a balance between a call to remain calm and a sense of urgency emphasizing the need to change behaviors to protect others, especially the most vulnerable members of our community. Clear policies, processes, and procedures, combined with agility and flexibility to address circumstances we cannot predict, reflect a sense of control and intentionality when anxieties are running high."

**Professor Juan-Carlos Molleda, Dean,
School of Journalism and Communication,
University of Oregon**

Current demands on organisations – from employees and consumers alike – are not what they were a year ago. The shift to home working, alongside health-related fears, has pushed for greater compassion from business leaders, who have shown their own vulnerabilities in response. Internal communications are more important than ever, with widespread misinformation and heightened employee trust placing a greater responsibility on companies to provide clear, accurate guidance.

Reactions to this crisis will impact business reputations for years – if not decades – to come, and those who have responded thoughtfully and proactively will benefit from loyal, engaged employees. The coronavirus pandemic has been a unique challenge – unlike anything businesses have experienced in living memory – and leaders have conquered what previously seemed impossible. Learning from this year will pose no shortage of lessons, but if we can remember them, we may find better ways of doing business than ever before.

Steve Cody ends with this: *"As global leaders struggle to stay a step ahead of this current pandemic, it is up to us as individuals, communities and businesses, to ensure we are prepared for the unforeseen in an uncertain future. How well prepared are we personally and as businesses and brands and do we feel confident in our ability to contend with the future challenges our best minds have yet to expect?"*

Preparedness, as ever, is everything. Our team would love to talk to you about being on the right foot if and when the next crisis hits.

Get in touch



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