



# Toward a Brave New World

REBOARDING YOUR WORKFORCE IN THE NEW NORMAL



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“Look closely at the  
present you are constructing.  
It should look like the future  
you are dreaming.”

– Alice Walker



# Introduction

More than a health crisis, COVID-19 is a human, economic and social crisis which has fundamentally changed our societies and business environments within a matter of weeks. It took organizations by surprise and shook them to their core. There was little time to react and the stakes were – and still are – high.

Leaders were expected to mount an effective crisis response while keeping the day-to-day business going. Employees, on the other hand, were expected to stay focused and productive in hastily installed, often shared home-working spaces while many were also home-schooling kids. With an estimated 2.6 billion people (one third of the world's population) in some kind of lockdown or quarantine, the World Health Organization calls this the 'largest psychological experiment ever conducted'.

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Some months later, as several countries have begun to ease out of lockdown and organizations contemplate how to bring employees back into the office (if at all), the situation continues to evolve daily and the full ramifications of the virus on our societies and workforces will not be realized for some time to come.

This guide looks at the 'people-side' of bringing employees back into an onsite working environment. For many businesses, this will mean implementing a phased approach, establishing rotation systems and exploring what the future of the workplace looks like – whether this is on-site, remote or a hybrid environment which is more flexible, safer and critically sustainable. It offers an overview of the critical elements organizations must consider bringing people forward into the new normal in an engaging, constructive and focused manner that serves the business, and also remains mindful and supportive of individual needs during a testing time for all.

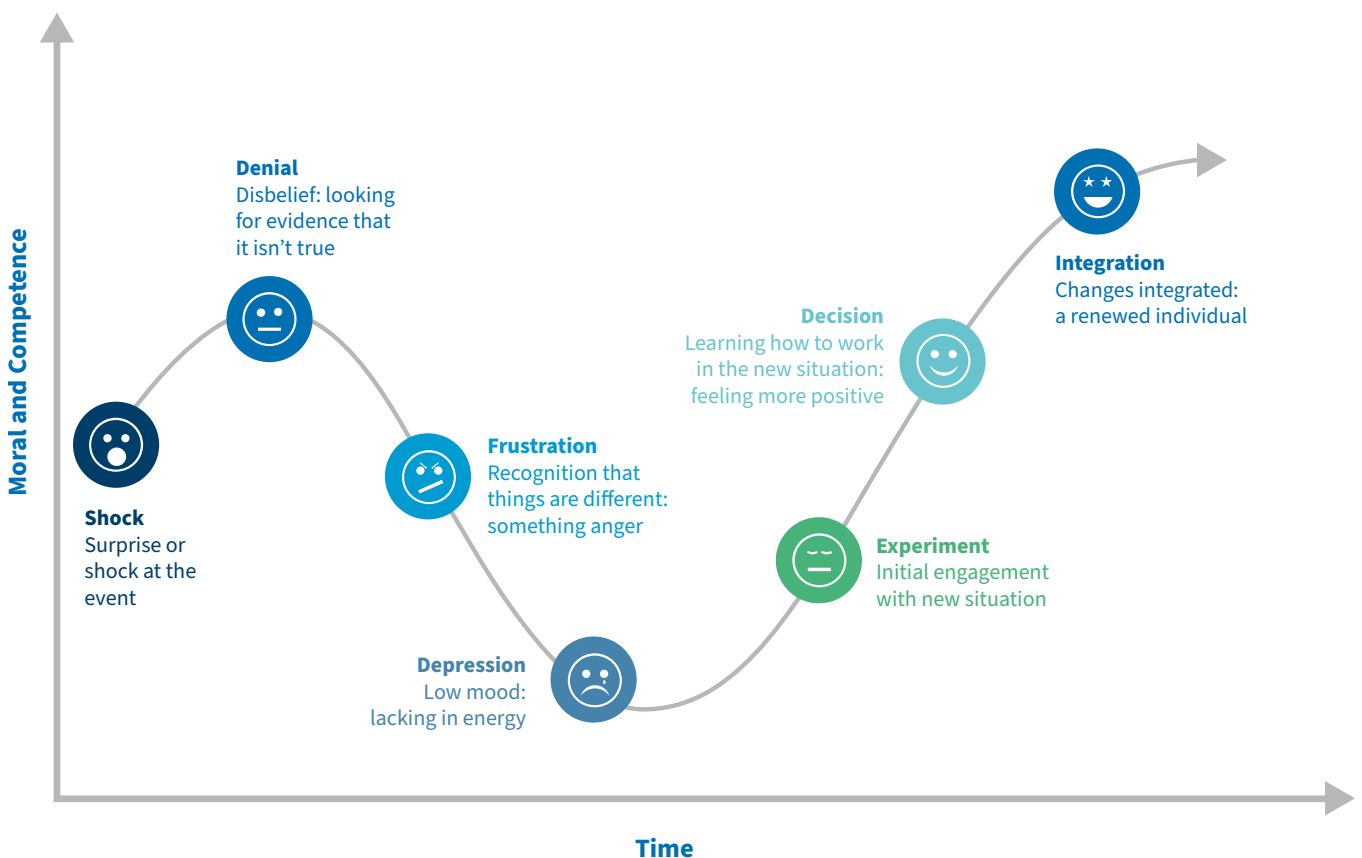


# How do people go through change?

As organizations begin to bring people forward toward a new, sustainable model of working and collaborating in times of a pandemic, it is important that leaders be mindful of how people process change and the effects that the lockdown has had on the mental health and wellbeing of their employees and organizations. Social isolation, fear of contagion, and loss of family members is compounded by the distress of possible loss of income or fear of unemployment. Employees' mental health needs should therefore be treated as a core element of an organization's 'post-lockdown' business strategy and planning.

The psychological impact of COVID-19 – a problem for which there is no solution – on people is far-reaching. It can best be looked at through the lens of the Kübler-Ross 'change curve', which describes the internal journey that people typically go through when dealing with loss or change. This journey consists of several stages: shock and denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. It is also important to note that people do not necessarily go through these stages in a linear manner but may in fact 'loop back' several times throughout the process of change.

## The Kübler-Ross change curve



Adapted from: Change Curve, from On Death and Dying by Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (Routledge, 1969).  
For more information please go to [www.EKRFoundation.org](http://www.EKRFoundation.org). Used with permission.

# What can companies learn from this crisis?

As companies cautiously move out of lockdown, we are witnessing three broad phases in how organizations have reacted and adapted to the COVID-19 crisis:



## Respond

Organizations largely responded effectively and adapted quickly to the devastating and sudden impact of COVID-19 on their business. They've prepared their people, and often their entire workforce, to work differently in a virtual environment; they've enabled their leaders to lead through uncertainty; and they've made some very difficult people-related decisions on furloughing, technical unemployment and layoffs.



## Reboard

Many organizations are now at the point where they need to re-engage and reboard their people in order to operate effectively in the new 'imposed' normal, while others have continued to operate without interruption but still need to bring employees back to the workplace. In the near-term, companies will need to reconfigure their working environment to ensure it's safe and COVID-secure and define what the 'new normal' means to their organization.



## Reimagine

COVID-19 has accelerated change in 'where' and 'how' people and organizations work. Once people have been reboarded effectively, there is the opportunity to rethink and reimagine 'how' people carry out their work in the new post-pandemic reality and create a very different way of working and working environment.



“COVID-19 has brought many ‘unknown unknowns’ into our lives and working environments which put the agility and resilience of the markets, our businesses and our employees to the test. Business leaders must navigate many competing challenges in uncharted waters to guide their organizations toward the next normal and secure business continuity. It will be of paramount importance that they focus on transforming value chains and develop agile workforce strategies to establish both a resilient workforce and business.”

– Leslie Benson, Senior Managing Director (UK)



# Why is reboarding so important?

As we write this guide, many organizations have begun to implement plans that return their employees to an office environment in the new 1,5-meter economy. Some companies after closing their doors for several weeks, others after many weeks of homeworking as the norm. Either way, reboarding employees in a safe and engaging way is a pivotal moment that should not be under-estimated or wasted.

The face of an organization toward its employees during this period is critical as it speaks volumes about corporate character, and companies do not want to be seen lacking. Most importantly, thoughtful reboarding can help create a context in which both people and the business can flourish in the new normal.



# The Way Forward





# Bringing people back

As employees return to the workplace, they are required to fundamentally change how they work, how they interact with colleagues and, in many respects, how they live their day-to-day lives.

Maintaining trust during this crucial time is essential – and that requires employers to confidentially communicate a path forward while also being honest that plans will adapt and evolve over time. Return-to-work communications are essential, but even more important is creating a steady cadence of ongoing updates to keep policies top-of-mind and involve employees in the ongoing process of refinement.



## Do

- Continue to run a proactive multidisciplinary COVID taskforce that can help guide your organization through the evolving situation.
- Have your action plans ready: one for reboarding your people and another for a second peak/lockdown. Don't postpone it. Employees will expect things to go smoothly the second time round.
- Have a central point of contact or group with a dedicated email address for employees with questions on COVID-19 related topics and policies so your communication is centralised and efficient. Ensure clarity around confidentiality where relevant.
- Define the new rules of engagement, being clear about:
  - expectations for attendance onsite,
  - options around continuing to work remotely,
  - hand washing and other personal safety precautions,
  - workspace sanitation,
  - physical distancing,
  - travel and visits to client sites.
- Demonstrate your commitment to a safe work environment with clearly posted policies, visual reminders of appropriate safety precautions and reiterations of your company's expectations.
- Acknowledge that bringing people back won't necessarily look the same as what it was before. In fact, there will likely be some kind of hybrid approach where some continue to work remotely, rotation systems may be in place and distancing within the workplace will be required.
- Understand that lockdowns and new policies affect employees differently and, in some instances, have created fundamental unfairness across the organization. Be sensitive to these distinctions and help the organization to heal where needed.
- Welcome feedback and new ideas from employees through a dedicated email address or digital feedback form, pulse surveys or other channels.
- Support and enable people managers to manage employee expectations, wellbeing and performance during the transition back to the workplace.



### Don't

- Assume that early adoption of new policies is the same as a sustained shift in behaviours. Employees must be continually reminded of policies – and why they're important – in new and creative ways to keep them top-of-mind.
- Pretend to have all the answers or convey inflexibility. The reality is that leaders and organizations will need to remain nimble as circumstances shift and new prevention, testing and treatment protocols are required.
- Forget to acknowledge other variables affecting employees' personal budgets. These include things such as the continued availability of onsite benefits (e.g., food and beverage, child care and gyms as well as reimbursements for personal protective equipment), daily commutes, childcare while schools and day-care centres are still closed, and other needs directly linked to COVID-19 in your policies and communication.



“Employers have worked diligently to keep people safe throughout the pandemic, sacrificing business and profits in the interest of public health. It’s inspiring, and yet the work has only just begun. As individuals we are making compromises every day in pursuit of a new normal, and companies must determine how to unite those personal interests with business objectives in pursuit of the common good. Effective communication and change management will be essential to ensuring business continuity.”

– Shannon Stucky Pritchett,  
Senior Managing Director (USA)



# Focus the business forward

Business leaders face a daunting task in this time of ‘unknown unknowns’. Employees and other stakeholders expect them to lean into the challenge, tracking the business closely to do what is necessary to keep it going short-term, whilst having a clear medium-term perspective on the market and where their business is heading.



## Do

- Continue to spend sufficient time on business planning and strategy, tracking the business closely and distinguishing between the short and longer-term perspectives for your business and the sectors in which you operate.
- Share your perspective on the market, where the business is going and what your organization’s response is to that with your employees. Don’t pursue or continue to communicate plans that are outdated or no longer relevant.
- Enter into dialog about the state of the market and where your business is at. Don’t hide from what’s happening. Be clear about how business priorities have changed over the past months and what the focus must be today.
- Acknowledge how individuals, teams and the business have fared throughout the recent months, and the effort and resilience employees have demonstrated to enable the business to keep moving forward.
- Encourage business- and functional leaders to re-examine their business plans.
- Keep everyone focused by having a clear and compelling ‘why?’ (vision) and narrative to help your team commit to changed priorities.
- Communicate proactively and frequently. Be authentic: appropriate transparency is key in leadership communication during this time.



## Don't

- Assume everyone knows where the business is heading and what the focus is. Communicate it. Frequently. (Remember the golden rule of advertising: people need to hear a message at least three times to remember it.)
- Commit to a ‘business as usual’ strategy if the ability to deliver or pursue that is in doubt.
- Make promises you can’t keep or allow it to become all about the money.
- Categorise some topics as ‘too difficult’ and avoid addressing them. This may heighten employees’ sense of uncertainty and may lead to distrust. Be appropriately transparent focussing on telling employees what they need to understand and know.





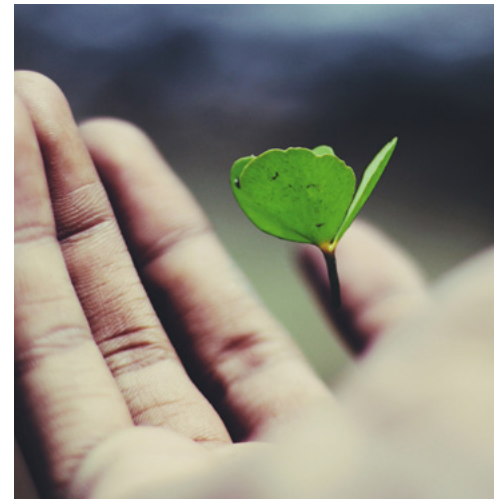
# Leading into the next normal

The post-COVID economy will require courageous new leaders: leaders who can hold the space to carve a path in times of chaos and uncertainty, who can harness diversity of opinion, friction, independence and decentralisation to catalyse the collective wisdom of the organization, and throughout all this, chart the way forward.



## Do

- Be conscious and intentional about the leadership qualities you want to bring to your team.
- Slow down to take stock of your own stress levels and triggers to understand what is causing an emotional reaction. Even when facing the demands of a high-profile crisis, leaders must take breaks to reset and refocus.
- Acknowledge that change is the new constant. There will be many transitions to navigate throughout the rest of this year and in the future. Focus on becoming adaptable and responsive to change and enable your people to do the same.
- Display the key qualities people want to see in leaders in times of uncertainty: being trustful, caring, stable, positively focused and resourceful. Consider which of these qualities are already a strength, and which you can develop further. Reflect on which quality your team needs most from you in the return to work phase.
- Be open and authentic about your own journey and challenges during this time.
- Let people know you're there for them. Offer employees the opportunity to raise personal challenges or issues resulting from COVID-19 and offer to help where possible.
- Remember that there is no one right style of leadership. The leadership style you use should depend on the needs of the person you are leading and the situation or environment.
- Be clear about how role expectations for each employee have changed over the past months. Move up mid-year and annual review processes to help employees be clear about expectations and be successful through this pandemic; adapt objectives where relevant.



*“Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.”*

*– Jack Welch*



### Don't

- Become entangled in a role you 'should play'. Leave room to explore what the organization needs from you as a leader going forward.
- Don't go radio silent. Drop the corporate script and speak to people as people, sharing first-hand experiences as you navigate the uncertain terrain together.
- Think you need to go it alone. No leader should be without a coach or mentor with whom they can spar, be open, honest and vulnerable about their leadership journey.
- Just give feedback to others. Also ask for open, honest feedback on how you're performing as a leader in this new normal, as it will help you strengthen your leadership style.



**"We are all in this together. As leaders, being strategic, intentional and mindful in all our interactions, large and small, is what will make our businesses thrive. If we can bring authenticity, positive focus and (when appropriate) vulnerability in as part of how we lead in these uncertain times, we can deepen relationships and forge connections that will help our teams and organizations endure beyond any passing crisis."**

– Victoria Strachwitz,  
Senior Managing Director, (Germany)

# Collaborate to thrive

The hard reset of recent weeks offers us the valuable opportunity to reflect on what we've learnt and how we can turn collaboration in the new hybrid working environment into a competitive advantage. In order to thrive, organizations will need to focus on enabling more and better collaboration within and across teams.



## Do

- Question whether your mindset as a leader supports or hinders collaboration in remote and hybrid teams: what blocking assumptions do you have about your colleagues and their way of working that can hinder collaboration?
- Recognize that there will be a period of transition. It is likely that there will be rotation systems and social distancing in place for some time so the return to the office will not be instantaneous resulting in hybrid teams where some are onsite and some are remote.
- Review existing team structures, routines and ways of working to understand how they support or hinder collaboration in hybrid teams working from various locations onsite and offsite.
- Involve people in thinking, planning, decisions and actions that will help you move forward after lockdown to deliberately build a stronger sense of teamwork.
- Set shared objectives that promote inter-team collaborations to reach business-wide goals, both in the near- and medium term. Review achievements (both formal and informal) together, regularly – both as a team and as an organization.
- Provide training to people leaders so they can successfully role-model and encourage collaboration in the teams they supervise.
- Promote greater diversity within your teams and organization to generate optimal creativity and innovation in this time when you need it most. Encourage different perspectives, mix backgrounds, generations and skillsets and emphasize the value of collaborative thinking over individual achievement.
- Recognize those who make distinctive efforts to encourage and facilitate collaboration.
- Adopt practices that allow team members to raise and resolve tensions quickly and make coordinated decisions.
- Emphasize the value of teamwork by implementing a reward system that doesn't reward the individual but instead, the entire team.





### Don't

- Expect people to be great collaborators if you don't role model teamwork and collaboration as leader or leadership team.
- Refuse to be flexible. Give people the freedom to operate independently and collaborate with colleagues without interrupting them every five minutes for a status update.
- Default back to old pre-COVID processes just because they are known and understood if they don't serve the business in the best possible way anymore.
- Overdo meetings, either face-to-face or virtual. Meetings do not equal collaboration. While (some) meetings remain essential, carefully consider which ones truly serve collaboration and which deliver no real added value to the team or the project.



**“Physical distance makes it more difficult to manage teams. Alignment and engagement become crucial for coordinating teams split across different working environments. Truly collaborative teams must break down silos, instil a culture of authenticity and support a sense of openness in their teams so people feel free to share their thoughts, ideas and feelings.”**

– Sabine Clappaert, Senior Director (Belgium)

# Mental health matters

*'If the company looks after its people, people will look after the company' – a truism that has profound relevance in the current crisis. And people do need looking after.*

More than 80 percent of adults responding to a recent survey<sup>1</sup> said that the coronavirus crisis had negatively affected their wellbeing. Individuals have had to adapt rapidly to radical, disruptive and far-reaching change. Unsurprisingly, mental health has risen to the top of the leadership agenda. Supporting your people as they navigate through the challenging landscape created by the crisis is a duty of care that falls to every leader and manager.



## Do

- Recognize the scale, scope and impact of the dislocation in people's personal and professional lives.
- Provide personalized leadership to each individual. There has been one global pandemic and countless different journeys through the crisis and the lockdown.
- Accept that you might not always be the best placed person to have conversations with individuals about specific challenges around wellbeing or mental health. Sometimes enabling them to have conversations with others is just as helpful if not more so. Validate the different experiences people have had and their responses to those experiences – from fears about their personal safety to feeling isolated or demotivated in their role.
- Encourage people to create a clear boundary between being on and off duty. Lockdown has dissolved the distinction between work and home. People need guilt-free down time.
- Help people recover a sense of influence and control. The lockdown has deprived people of agency, autonomy and freedom in an unprecedented way – regaining a measure of those things at work is a powerful contributor to wellbeing.
- Reinforce a sense of urgency – but not panic. Engaging people in tasks and initiatives that are collaborative, challenging and rewarding will restore a sense of purpose.
- Meet the deep human need for affirmation, recognition and validation by frequent, authentic, evidence-based feedback highlighting both positive.



<sup>1</sup>Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 7 May 2020





### Don't

- Evade realities – in place of speaking the truth and confronting realities.
- Place some conversations in the 'too difficult or sensitive' box – instead of asking people openly and directly about their wellbeing and mental health.
- Ignore signals and signs that may indicate someone is 'not OK' – such as withdrawal, decreased motivation or heightened emotional responses to trivial events. Ensure you make it clear that it is ok not to be okay right now. Everyone is going through their own journey and there are lots of places where support can be found.
- Stop investing time and effort in people's personal and professional development – by being too immersed in pressing and immediate demands. Now is a good time to refocus objective and development opportunities to support the transition into the new normal.
- Underestimate the impact of your own mood and behaviour – being a positive role model has never been more important.
- Ignore your own wellbeing and state of mind – instead, 'treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping' (Professor Jordan B Peterson).
- Lose sight of this reality. The quality of leadership you provide now will build your reputation and leadership capital for years to come.



**“Given the enormous uncertainty people are facing – economically, personally and often professionally, it is not surprising that their mental health is declining. As leaders we have a responsibility to care about our people’s mental health and to check how they are doing – not just once but on an ongoing basis. In fact, research shows that employees whose manager is not good at communicating are 23 percent more likely to experience a decline in mental health.”**

– Bobby Chatterjee, Managing Director, (UK)



# Why culture matters (even more)

A strong, healthy corporate culture has always been critical for establishing a successful business. With the impact of COVID-19, and more recently the public denunciation of racial injustice through the Black Lives Matter movement, organizations will more than ever be called to foster an inclusive, healthy culture that takes care not just of the business, but also of its people. Companies will need to actively utilize and shape their cultural foundation; and many may even need to rewire the DNA of the organization to meet emerging and future demands and create a more resilient business.



## Do

- Invest time and effort during this transition to a new way of working to ensure consistency in how people experience the culture, both working remotely and onsite. Survey how they have experienced the culture over the past months to get a clear understanding of what needs to be addressed.
- Have courageous, open conversations. Encourage leaders and teams to have critical conversations and open dialog about what's working and what's not. Include less 'visible' culture aspects such as competitiveness, collaboration, diversity and inclusion or understanding how COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted people from BAME backgrounds.
- Challenge the old and probe the new. With every business decision to be made, be bold about what this means in terms of mindsets and behaviors: ask radical questions, probe barriers and be courageous when it comes to defining solutions. Encourage a mindset that looks to find the opportunities within challenges.
- Address systemic issues that can hinder your culture. No amount of leadership role modelling or unconscious bias trainings will be impactful if policies, procedures, and practices that foster silo-thinking or inequality are not addressed.
- Understand and bridge the remote working cultural divide. Understand how a crisis has a unique way of bringing teams together; but it can also push them apart. This is relevant not only in addressing the health pandemic, but in the fight against social injustice. Be mindful of social and cultural differences. Harness the diversity of your organization by discovering and emphasizing common values and beliefs, be they new ones or those that have proven a good fit for your organization.
- Involve people in the solution. The nature of teamwork is changing. We're seeing people rise to the occasion during challenging conditions by being nimble, offering creative solutions, blending skills and leading laterally. Encourage and reward this behaviour. Actively seek out the "employee voice" in decision making and implementation.
- Recognize employees for living the values. Reward those employees that are role models for the company culture you want to foster: talk about them, write about them, create videos and podcasts about what they do that makes your company great.

## Why culture matters (even more)



### Don't

- Assume that current events and recent trends and developments won't influence your organizational culture. Those that prioritize culture in the coming weeks and months will be better prepared to adapt and thrive in the future world of work.
- Talk about your values unless your company is prepared to walk the talk of those values across all facets of the business. The disruption being wrought by COVID-19 and the impact of the racial inequality discussion runs deep. This is no time for platitudes or 'brand activism'. Employees will have little tolerance for superficial conversations or one-off actions and will expect their organizations to 'own up' to their culture.
- Allow a culture "by default" to be created and embedded over time; rather, be deliberate in creating a culture "by design." Organizations with strong, intentional cultures build lasting relationships with customers, employees, partners and investors – they are more resilient.
- Expect employees to intuitively know what is expected of them in the new normal. Organizations must proactively communicate and demonstrate what is expected of employees and reinforce new ways of working and mindsets.



**"The time is now. COVID-19 has put company structures, processes and organizational cultures to the test, and there is an opportunity to use it as a springboard to develop a robust, adaptable and more sustainable culture for long-term success. Building and maintaining a culture that can bridge the barriers of a remote and blended workforce is no small feat. It requires the courage to challenge long-held assumptions, people to boldly embrace change and a commitment from all to build a better future. As mindsets begin to shift, leaders will want to set a clear direction and encourage the ongoing transformation of the corporate culture to serve both the business and their people wisely."**

**– Angie Gorman, Managing Director  
(USA)**

# Communication is key

One of the biggest challenges in communicating during a crisis is resisting the urge to wait until there is clarity about the situation. Businesses of all sizes are now called to explain to employees how the pandemic will affect business viability overall—and by extension the livelihood of employees, without having full clarity or certainty on it.

Regardless of the uncertainty wrought by COVID-19, businesses that are communicating proactively and thoughtfully right now are speaking frequently, with urgency, empathy and clarity. Uncertainty and ongoing evolution will continue to mark this worldwide crisis and adopting an agile approach to communications is essential to fostering dialog and trust between an organization and its staff.



## Do

- Consider the information needs of all stakeholders including your employees, customers and suppliers. Finding the right messages, tone of voice and timing for ‘business as usual’ communications is a tricky balancing act. Critically reflect on this and involve communication experts to help where needed.
- Effective communication starts by listening. Start by asking your employees what they need from you right now.
- Be clear on what you can do as a business and what you can’t do. Having clear expectations and communicating these will help everyone understand how to prioritize.
- Develop and deploy the messaging based on the predicted ‘hierarchy of concerns.’ You must address concerns about safety before you can engage with your people on business delivery.
- Don’t see employees as a captive audience (or your least important stakeholder) and try to ‘sell’ them on everything. Instead, engage them in the facts and generate a strong dialogue, discussion and debate to reach a potential decision.
- ‘Read the room.’ Every morning brings new headlines that are troubling. Your communications need to reflect the events in the world that may be shaping your employees’ perspectives and priorities.
- Keep employees, customers and suppliers updated on the performance of the business. They need to understand the current situation of the business if they are to be engaged around actions that may be needed to help it navigate choppy waters or recover from a downturn.







### Don't

- Assume one-size fits all in reboarding communication. Some employees may have been essential and deployed in a workplace setting all along, some may need to continue to work remotely, some may have been furloughed, or there may be only a small portion of original staff coming back into the workplace. Your communication needs to reflect the needs of all segments.
- Default to email for all communication. Choose the right channels for the right message to help create unity as employees return to a shared physical space. Ensure you can reach all employees quickly and efficiently if a second lockdown becomes necessary. Consider an app or text messaging system.
- Miss this opportunity to add or improve communications channels to reach employees if locations close again. Most employees were understanding of gaps in information during this first closure period, but they are not likely to be as understanding a second time round and will expect you to have learnt from and refined your processes.



**“During this unusual time, it is critical for organizations to recognize both the extraordinary efforts and the everyday business wins. While we need stories about heroic efforts and people to ensure the delivery of business priorities, it is also a time when attention to the everyday brings another kind of reassurance and stability. Ensure your company celebrates both regularly.”**

**– Lucy Phillips, Managing Director (UK)**

# About FTI Consulting's People & Change team

## How we can help

Organizations today must manage a multitude of business, economic and political risks. The People & Change practice at FTI Consulting enables and supports organizations, its leaders and employees to successfully navigate moments of transformation to deliver on the goals of the business and thrive in today's world of constant change and disruption.

The core offerings of our People & Change team are: HR Consulting, Culture and Organizational Development, Leadership Consulting, Learning & Development, Change Management and Change Communications. We have profound experience, research-backed methodologies and pragmatic tools that helps organizations with the people-side of business change.

Every company is unique. That's why we co-create, together with our clients, the strategic foundation for the change and stay the course to help successfully implement it. Our programs enable leaders to drive change, become strong and authentic communicators, and enable them to lead and engage their teams in a manner appropriate for the time and place and become strong communicators. We help ensure that employees are engaged for the future vision of the organization and we support them in changing their behaviors and adapting to new roles, competencies and ways of working to deliver on the goals of the organization.

[www.ftipeopleandchange.com](http://www.ftipeopleandchange.com)

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**FTI Consulting** is an independent global business advisory firm dedicated to helping organizations manage change, mitigate risk and resolve disputes: financial, legal, operational, political & regulatory, reputational and transactional. FTI Consulting professionals, located in all major business centres throughout the world, work closely with clients to anticipate, illuminate and overcome complex business challenges and opportunities. For more information, visit [www.fticonsulting.com](http://www.fticonsulting.com) and connect with us on Twitter (@FTIConsulting), Facebook and LinkedIn.

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