

## Are you planning for economic recovery?

The World Bank predicts that global GDP growth will contract this year according to its Global Economic Prospects update and says that economic distress will remain acute for the next two years.

The challenges facing business leaders are as complex and tough as they have ever been - for some a fight for survival - for many a time of insecurity in the face of mergers, acquisitions and restructuring - for all, a ruthless focus on cutting costs and improving efficiency. But how many leaders are concerned with their organisation's internal communication?

Employee communication is arguably even more important during periods of economic instability and organisational change than at any other time. Employees who are worried about their own futures will not be fully productive; those who can jump ship to a seemingly more secure job will do so. And don't be lulled into complacency by low staff turnover figures - those who remain will be preoccupied by anxiety, speculation and rumour.

The organisations that will survive, and indeed flourish when the economy recovers, will be those with confident, motivated and loyal employees.

Employees are loyal to people not organisations and senior management **behaviour** has a profound effect on employee confidence and culture. Powerful leaders understand that effective internal communication is not just about the latest webinar, rather it is the sum of everything that the management team does and, just as important, **how** it does it.

Sustaining an aligned, visible and accessible leadership requires careful coaching and management by communications professionals as part of a structured and co-ordinated internal communication plan; this article discusses the strategy and plans which must be put in place now to ensure employees remain engaged and focused on the future.

Communication is not just about information, it is about influencing behaviour through the transfer of understanding and emotion and internal communication is about creating outcomes, not just producing outputs.

There are a number of elements critical to an effective internal communication plan:

- clarity of purpose and clear objectives
- a defined strategy and framework
- the selection of appropriate channels
- relevant and consistent messaging
- confident and competent internal spokespeople
- accessible and trusted feedback mechanisms

### Clarity of purpose and clear objectives

Internal communication must always be focused on the organisation's broader goals and, during times of uncertainty and change, the specific objectives should include:

- retaining key talent
- maintaining external stakeholder confidence
- minimising disruption and cost
- maximising commitment and revenues
- minimising rumour and misinformation

Clarity of purpose and clear, business-focused objectives will help to keep the internal communication plan on track,



adequately resourced, and positioned as a priority in the context of the organisation's goals.

### A defined strategy and framework

Maintaining employee trust is critical so consistency and alignment of both internal and external communication will be key. A carefully designed plan - often developed working closely with other functions such as HR and legal where a proposed re-organisation requires formal consultation - should include defined measurement criteria, a timetable, core and audience-specific messaging, and clear roles for all internal spokespeople.

### Confident and competent internal spokespeople

Face-to-face communication is the most powerful means of connecting with people. Whether it is senior management Town Hall Q&As, middle management 'walking the floor', or peer-to-peer briefing sessions, your internal spokespeople need to be confident and competent. And that means more than just being familiar with the key messages - critical though that is. The reality of any communication effort is that people will only recall about 10 per cent of what they hear; and of that 10 per cent the majority of what they remember will be related to the speaker's body language and tone of voice. Non-verbal communication speaks volumes so appropriate coaching and training is vital to ensure your spokespeople are well prepared.

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### The selection of appropriate channels

Think carefully about your choice of communication channel - does it reinforce your message? Communicating about the importance of change but using your familiar old 'newsletter' format will totally undermine your efforts; similarly, telling employees that their views are important via a one-way webcast will not be convincing. Also make sure you are using the right medium for the behaviour you are seeking to generate - the more active engagement you are seeking, the more participative the forum needs to be. And, international organisations need to be particularly mindful of scheduling, ensuring that local markets have time to translate and localise 'global' messaging.

### Relevant and consistent messaging

Any audience's default response to any 'corporate' message will be "what does that mean for me?" For a variety of commercial and legal reasons you might be restricted in terms of what you can say, and when you can say it, but care must always be taken to ensure honesty and consistency to retain trust, and core messages must always be refined to ensure they are relevant to your audience.

### Accessible and trusted feedback mechanisms

Communication is two-way. It is not just about telling, it is about listening too. Ensuring that your internal communication infrastructure makes it easy for employees to raise any questions or concerns has powerful benefits, both in terms of reinforcing a sense of openness and trust among your staff, and providing you with an early warning mechanism which enables you to identify and address any potential issues quickly.

### Planning for recovery ...

Now more than ever it is vital that your organisation's leadership is accessible and aligned behind a consistent vision and values.

Whilst The World Bank says prospects for economic growth remain unusually uncertain, there is no doubt about the critical importance of retaining and motivating your organisation's key talent through a carefully managed internal communication strategy and plan led by a strong, visible leadership team.

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