
THE BRAVE FACE OF IC

In the next phase of Covid-19,
how does internal comms
build on the trust it has gained
with leaders and employees?

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CONTENTS

INCREASED TRUST 03

BEING THE BRIDGE 04

GETTING THE BLEND RIGHT 05

BEING EQUIPPED 06

A new era for IC?

IoIC's recent Covid-19 survey demonstrates that while workloads have rocketed (71% of the 483 respondents report a "significant increase"), so has understanding of internal communication adding value to the organisation.

Almost two-thirds (65%) report that leaders are looking to internal communication more for guidance. As one respondent says: "For the first time, the organisation is seeing just what internal communication can do."

It's a double-edged sword given the pace at which many IC professionals are working (stress and burnout are the most frequently cited survey concerns), but now is the time to consolidate that position and be brave in the advice and support you are giving.

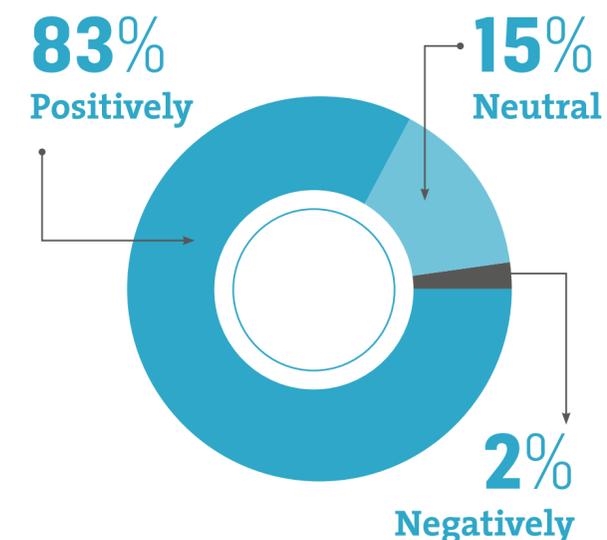
INCREASED TRUST

The survey shows that 83% of respondents believe that trust in communication has increased, and 76% consider that there has been a positive impact on trust in leadership. The survey took place early in the crisis. Trust shifts with changing circumstances, and the findings captured internal communication respondents' views, rather than asking employees directly.

However, it's fair to conclude that alongside the difficulties that the crisis has brought, initial responses included an increased preparedness to trust.

Part of this may be due to the speed with which initial changes were introduced. Much management theory discusses the difference between more autocratic and participative

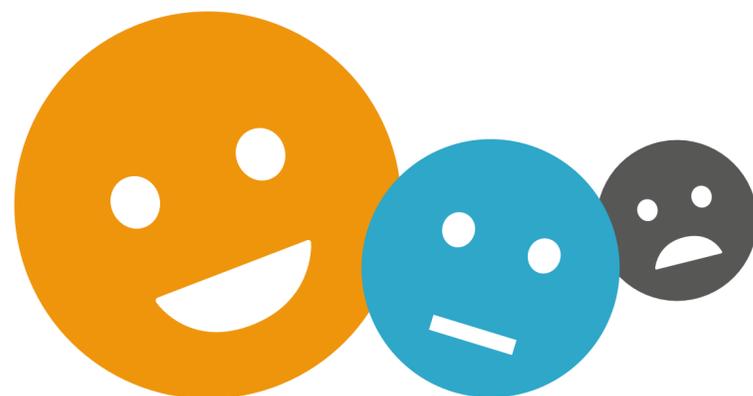
How internal communicators see the impact of Covid-19 on trust in communication



management styles – and in times of urgency, leading from the front can be an appropriate approach. There's no time for consultation when there's a fire raging. Maslow's oft-cited "hierarchy of needs" places safety as a basic human requirement, and the survey indicates that employees responded positively to decisive action to protect them and their families.



IoIC's survey indicates that employees responded positively to decisive action to protect them.



BEING THE BRIDGE

Now there's a different set of challenges. Leaders are struggling with managing a potentially phased return to work, and the need to ensure organisational survival. That's going to take up a lot of their headspace. Meanwhile, adherence to the original government guidelines shows how people generally have internalised messaging about personal safety and staying home.



Percentage of managers who report using line managers as the primary way of listening to employees, with 20% citing social media. Actually, a mix of methods is best.

There's never been a more important time for internal communication to be the "bridge" for the organisation: building mutual understanding and consolidating trust where immediate priorities may differ. Do we have the tools in our armoury for doing that?

Listening heads the list. Make sure channels are in place so that you can sense the pulse of the organisation – and its constituent parts – and reflect that to senior leadership. The survey shows that 47% of respondents are using line managers as a primary way to listen, with 20% citing internal social media. Both can be great, but have limitations. A mix of methods, making sure you get the fullest range of views, is best.



Stress to senior leaders the importance of considering people's concerns and tapping into local knowledge as part of the decision-making process.

It's going to be important to show that the organisation is listening to different populations – and their representatives – about their questions and concerns, and what will be needed to make their parts of the workplace safe to return to. People know their own local environments best, and needs are likely to differ. Stress to senior leaders the importance of considering people's concerns and tapping into local knowledge as part of the decision-making process. Demonstrating that everyone has a 'part to play' in the challenge of returning to the workplace

(to borrow from William Bridge's excellent book, *Managing Transitions*) can help to build a sense of shared purpose. The lessons of (true) employee engagement have never been more important.

Don't just listen – make sure the organisation demonstrates how it is responding. That includes having the infrastructure in place to get questions and feedback considered, and to show how people have been heard and respected – making sure responses are available to all.

GETTING THE BLEND RIGHT



Another positive point to emerge from the survey is the emphasis on driving positivity in uncertain times: a priority for 61%.

While there is no room for “false” positivity (“lies” or “unfounded hopes” to give technical terms), hopefully this reflects an awareness of the value of combining rational, factual messaging with empathy. The principles of rhetoric emphasise the importance of combining logos (logic), pathos (stirring emotion) and ethos (making a connection) in messaging – while high on the list of good change management is the importance of getting the right balance between explaining the need (and non-negotiability) of a decision, and having a compassionate response

to how people are thinking and feeling, including reactions that appear irrational.

Moving forward, this means supporting leaders to make sure that messaging gets the blend right between the organisational survival messages that may well be top of leaders’ priority lists right now, and the empathy needed to respond to people’s concerns and fears.

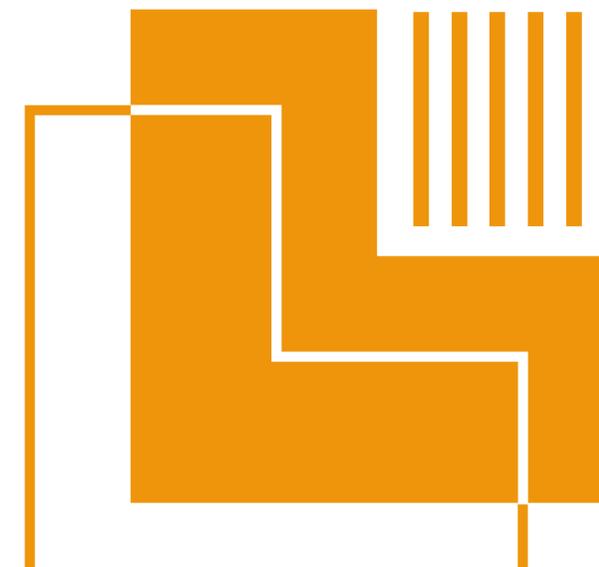


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Encouraging leadership visibility (virtually or face to face when the time comes) is important too – tough given the pressure, but building those connections is an investment. As long as leaders are being consistent in how they are interpreting what the organisation is planning, of course. Another need to add to the to-do list – sorry!

61%

of respondents say that driving positivity in uncertain times is a key message going out to employees.



BEING EQUIPPED



Making sure that you are equipped with the principles of good change management will be invaluable given the road ahead. This is going to be a long haul, and the decisive style required for phase 1 of the Covid-19 crisis is unlikely to be the method that is going to work as things get more complex.

We're moving into a phase that combines a multitude of challenges. Leaders are going to need support in ensuring complex messages can be conveyed clearly, and to demonstrate how fairness (which psychology studies show is another core human driver) can be demonstrated where arrangements may differ for different groups.

Forging strong connections with other key "people functions" within the organisation will pay dividends. That includes HR change specialists, and corporate communication to ensure alignment of messages internally and externally (33% of respondents felt they "could do better" here). But at the heart

is our role as the organisational "bridge" between people and decision makers. That's never been more needed, and there's never been a better time to prove our worth and professional value.



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