Practical ways to communicate with, support and motivate your people through coronavirus and beyond

People with a voice power performance
The evidence

The findings and best practice in this paper are based on data from...

2.3 million employees who participated in company surveys from Q1 2018 into Q1 2020.

Predominantly in UK, Europe, North America and Asia

12 years of analysis and insight in some of the world’s most successful businesses

With key sectors including Financial Services, Retail, Oil & Gas / Mining, Telecommunications, FMCG

March 2020
The only thing we have to fear is fear itself

President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933
The big questions: a world in crisis

A big crisis asks big questions of organisations. We’re seeing the exponential spread of a previously unknown contagious disease that is disrupting life as we know it, and will continue to do so for months and years to come.

Many businesses, small and large, are facing an existential threat. People are finding themselves ill and isolated at home, everyday cycles of supply and demand are disintegrating and there is growing turmoil in global markets.

How organisations respond to the global health crisis of a century will determine their very survival, but also their ongoing relationships with the people that power their performance.

What’s your organisation’s answer to the big questions?

This paper draws on research with millions of people worldwide to pinpoint the answers to the big questions organisations are facing. This is a guide on what to do, now and next, to ensure your organisation effectively tackles the immediate impact on your people and comes out of this crisis stronger and more resilient.

The fundamental questions organisations need to ask themselves are outlined below, with the answers addressed over the subsequent pages.

How can we best care for our people – and show that we care?  page 7

How can we listen effectively to people’s concerns?  page 11

How do we enable our people to continue to perform?  page 15

How can we motivate people despite massive disruption and uncertainty?  page 20

How do we communicate effectively throughout this crisis?  page 23

How do we learn lessons to become more resilient in the future?  page 25

March 2020
Our research shows that psychological safety – the extent to which people feel secure at work, in teams they belong to, with colleagues and leaders they trust – is at the root of strong cultures of employee engagement and performance. But that sense of psychological safety is exactly what is being challenged right now.

People don’t know if their health and that of their loved ones is safe, or if their jobs are secure – not just today but in the months and years to come, as the economic impact of the coronavirus disruption plays out.

Furthermore, the fundamental drivers of psychological safety – trusted leadership and positive team relationships – are also being threatened by the ongoing disruption to workplaces and normal working practices.

This paper addresses the core people challenges we are all facing by focusing on how you can protect and build psychological safety in the current context.

By looking after your people, listening to what they think and enabling them to work smarter, you can build real motivation and make sure they are engaged, equipped and empowered to meet this crisis.

“The most fundamental, powerful and enduring fuel for performance is a feeling of safety and trust.”

Bob Chapman, Author of ‘Everybody Matters’ (2015)
Executive summary: what do we do, when, and how?

This is the time to take decisive, immediate action, but it is important to balance that urgency with a need to be considered and strategic, and to think ahead about what will most benefit your organisation in the longer term.

This checklist covers the top ten essential actions your organisation should take now, next and later to protect and enhance the psychological safety of your people.

Top ten actions for your organisation:

**Now:**

**Urgent actions**

1. More than ever, employees want strong, visible leadership and regular, empathetic communications. Taking action to show you are prioritising people’s wellbeing is also critical.

2. Listen to your people. Use continuous listening insight to find out what they’re thinking and feeling, and use it to inform and test your evolving response to the crisis.

3. Enable people to work smarter and safer. Provide the tech but also share smart home-working hacks focused on protecting people’s physical and mental wellbeing to help them feel supported even when working remotely.

4. Support those who can’t work from home by safeguarding their welfare and refocusing leadership priorities on what matters most for them.

5. Offer leaders the right guidance and tools to help them protect and enhance the psychological safety of their teams.

**Next:**

**Medium-term priorities**

6. Prioritise and protect your people’s mental wellbeing.

7. Build a holistic listening strategy that enables you to stay connected to people.

8. Grab the opportunity to reboot your organisation’s engagement approach. Build psychological safety into your people strategy and leadership priorities.

9. Adapt as the situation evolves. Get ready to learn lessons from the early phase and its impact on your people and business.

**Later:**

**Taking the long-term view**

10. Embrace the new world as an opportunity to learn lessons, innovate as an organisation and embed a strong change mindset throughout your business.
Looking after your people through adversity is the right and smart thing to do – but you have to show, transparently and unambiguously, that you have people’s best interests at heart.
Looking after your people: what to do now

Fundamentally, looking after your people during a crisis is rooted in clear, empathetic, two-way communication.

This is not just about sharing timely information transparently, but being clear about the decision-making process you’re going through – and involving people where you can so they feel consulted, not commanded.

How to help your people feel safe and supported

- **Provide strong, involving leadership.** This is the time for your CEO and other senior leaders to step up and lead a transparent, empathetic and authentic conversation with your people, and to be seen as taking decisive action that safeguards people’s health and jobs.

- **Provide a single source of regular information and guidance for the organisation.** Let people know when they can expect decisions or updates and use trusted sources to inform what you say, such as the NHS, WHO and Public Health England.

- **You don’t need to provide all the answers, but you need to be transparent about what’s going on** – or the rumour mill will fill the vacuum. Provide clear opportunities for people to ask questions and see the questions others are asking.

- **Support people through actions as well as words.** Look across all your people policies and identify what you need to change or clarify to show solidarity and help people deal with the challenges they’re facing in their personal lives – like caring for children or elderly relatives.

- **Build helping networks** that enable people to connect with others, both within your organisation and beyond. Having a larger purpose in a crisis like this – for instance, encouraging people at lower risk to help those at greater risk in their community – can increase people’s resilience.

- **Be inventive, even funny.** The website washmylyrics.com matches a best-practice hand-washing graphic to the lyrics of any song in the world – a great example of how a creative idea can get traction and influence behaviour, helping people to look after their health.
Roger Whiteside, CEO of Greggs, got ahead of the public debate and announced before anyone else that the business would pay workers who have to self-isolate due to coronavirus infection. This kind of iconic action shows people that you really do have their backs and care about them. Likewise, Microsoft has pledged to pay full wages to 4,500 service providers, regardless of hours worked. But watch out – if what you’re saying is a token gesture, or it contradicts another part of your response, or you don’t deliver on your promise, you run the risk of appearing manipulative and dishonest.
Looking after your people: what to do next

We’re in this for the long term. Many people are facing extended periods away from their desks and colleagues.

You can use virtual tools to make the vital human connection between the scattered members of your business, creating a sense of community and social intimacy and looking after people’s wellbeing.

1. **Hardwire habits:** mandate leaders to start every meeting with a ‘how are you doing?’ question that gets people talking about what matters to them – and enables leaders to spot anyone who might be struggling.

2. **Make it fun:** you could schedule virtual team lunches or dinners or pair people up for getting-to-know-you-better ‘speed dates’.

3. **Hold people accountable:** make sure your leaders understand what drives better wellbeing, and are actively driving this – it won’t come automatically. A buddy system will make sure no one slips through the net.

4. **Measure it:** set up a simple anonymous survey asking people how their week is going, on a scale of 1–5 – and track how your organisation is doing over time.

Wellbeing is written into our business plan and our annual reporting. It has become a strategic boardroom issue. Employees should be on the balance sheet in the same way as you account for cash.

Peter Simpson, Chief Executive, Anglian Water

Employees who feel stressed/under strain are 20% less likely to recommend their company as a place to work.
Listening to your people during a crisis

You need to know that your approach is giving people the facts and the reassurance they need, and that they have faith in your approach.
Listening to your people: what to do now

Listening effectively to your people in a crisis matters: it helps you identify the real people-related issues that you need to tackle, and it is a visible and meaningful way of involving people in your response.

Careful listening also acts as a vital temperature check on your organisation. You need to know that your approach is giving people the facts and the reassurance they need, and that they have faith in your approach.

Regular listening lets you see if your approach is building confidence and trust – and, if not, what you need to change.

The fundamentals of an effective listening strategy during periods of crisis

There are five areas of focus for organisational listening at a time of crisis.

What are people thinking and feeling about coronavirus?

Our people feel...

- Informed about your response to the crisis
- Confident in your action and response
- Concerned about the future
- Prepared for changes they and the business needs to make
- Cared for and supported by leaders
Listening to your people: what to do next

In the longer term, a holistic listening strategy enables the business to secure the people insight it needs to make effective decisions and guide engagement activity. It will enable you to draw on and integrate multiple data sets and mine the people analytics that can inform your strategy, planning and action.

Fundamentals of a crisis listening strategy

There are five essential ways in which organisations can listen to their people. Having some or all of these in place will prepare you for any future crisis – and give you the mechanisms in place to listen proactively to your people, instead of playing catch up.

1. Track engagement: use a robust metric that measures employee emotional buy-in, pride, commitment, motivation and, critically, employee recommendation (of their employer).


3. Amplify the employee voice: provide a bottom-up route for employees to share their mood, concerns or areas for leaders to take action on – and for leaders to understand and consider action on the related themes.

4. Seek ‘hot topic’ input: proactively ask for employee input and feedback on specific ‘hot topic’ issues – in order to inform future leadership decisions and business action.

5. Measure crisis behaviours: use analytics and insight to identify the behaviours driving specific performance outcomes.
BP’s new CEO Bernard Looney wanted to get closer to the organisation and understand employee views on key topics ‘in the moment’.

In addition to using Yammer, LinkedIn and other routes to connect with employees and BP’s wider communities, every week the CEO uses a listening programme that provides thousands of employees with the opportunity to feed back and input on business priority topics. These have, so far, focused on BP’s new net zero ambition, its organisational changes, and, yes, crises like coronavirus.

Results and ‘smart’ insight reporting goes to the CEO and other senior stakeholders. A live dashboard enables a realtime view of results and comments.

This is complemented by a weekly one-page report that gives Looney and his leadership team the most actionable insights into what employees have been saying, feeling and doing over the previous week. The insight informs the communications and business planning process for the following week at a time when BP’s operating environment (and that of their employees) is changing virtually daily.

For confidentiality, no BP data or representations of data are presented in this image.
Enabling your people to work safer and smarter

For colleagues working in operational, manufacturing or ‘frontline’ retail, the reality will differ greatly from employees who are able to work from home.
Enabling your people to work smarter: what to do now

You’ve got a flexible working policy. You’ve invested in technology. You’re used to agile teams. But now huge chunks of your organisation are working remotely for several weeks at very short notice. Don’t just focus on the practicalities, like tech infrastructure. The real risk here is the disruption to team dynamics and line manager support that underpins psychological safety.

For example, many of the physical cues that we give each other do not translate well across email or virtual messenger.

There’s also a real threat to people feeling comfortable to speak up and share their ideas – and that could reduce the diversity of thought you need to drive innovative solutions and maintain performance. But by defining virtual team working norms, rituals and practices you can mitigate this risk and protect trust within teams.

How to enable people to work smarter

• **Choose your tools:** tech is definitely our friend these days. Tools like Microsoft Teams, Google Hangout, Trello, and WhatsApp make it easy. But you will need to go further and define clear rules for making the most of these tools.

• **Define a shared rhythm:** make it clear what your shared ‘online’ hours are and build in a routine of daily stand-ups and end-of-week calls to keep people in the loop. Agree common standards for responding to messages and emails from others.

• **Prioritise quality team interactions and rituals:** mandate leaders to maintain ‘normal’ team meeting rhythms, insist on full attendance and use video to enable face-to-face interaction.

• **Monitor collaboration between teams:** forming group identities in times of stress is a natural human process – watch out for us-vs-them tensions developing between teams.

• **Prioritise development in downtime:** if you are facing reduced workload due to disruption, use this time to upskill your people, to focus on product / service innovation projects or give people time to work on social impact / volunteering projects.

55% boost in psychological safety where teams meet regularly with their manager and have transparent discussions on their priorities.
Enabling your people to work smarter: how to support employees during crises

You’ve successfully put guidelines in place to safeguard colleagues, listening continuously and keeping spirits high within the organisation. But have you considered what implementing smarter working looks like across your workforce?

For colleagues working in operational, manufacturing or ‘frontline’ retail the reality will differ greatly from employees who are able to work from home. There is a real threat to organisations of an ‘us-versus-them’ mentality emerging.

How to help workers who can’t simply work from home is a problem that needs real attention.

Frontline employees who can’t work from home may already be feeling the strain of a reduced workforce, heightened delivery expectations and personal anxiety about their own health – all very real threats to the wellbeing levels of these workers. The guidance on page 18 provides tips to help address these concerns and combat against a fracturing of your workforce.
Enabling your people to work smarter: provide the right conditions

There is clear evidence that access to paid sick leave reduces the spread of illness. But this is not the reality for a lot of service industry and manufacturing workers who need to be physically present. Make it clear that you’re taking their welfare seriously.

- **Introduce robust health and safety practices.** Appoint a champion for good hygiene, increase access to hand-washing stations (where possible) and clearly advise on any changes to best practice delivered by WHO.

- Physical hygiene is only part of the puzzle. Ensure that workers have **access to a support network** that can address any immediate mental health concerns and offer a Samaritan service to unburden workers.

- **Frontline staff need to feel physically safe** in times of disorder. They may be exposed to panic-buying or be isolated with fewer people around as they make their way home from work. Ensure these staff are well versed on company security arrangements and that they understand their role.

- **Leaders have a huge role to play.** They need to provide everything from contingency planning for workers stranded because of public transport restrictions to making sure employees feel they can call in ill should they feel unwell. Operational workers need to feel reassurances.

- Leadership communications are key to **combating uncertainty.** The tone, clarity of information and frequency of comms are crucial, as is the choice of delivery. There is often a feeling, from non-head office employees, that they are after-thoughts of senior leadership. The executive team must figure out how to reach those hard-to-reach workers and be very mindful of how they communicate.

- **Refocus on what is important.** Many store managers – particularly in retail – are used to working to hourly KPIs focused on commercial output. This must change. Leaders need to review what the balance between productivity focus and employee welfare is.

These are workplace practices that may well outlast the current pandemic and ensure your organisation is safeguarded for the future.
Enabling your people to work smarter: home-working hacks

Share these tips with your people to help them meet the challenge of working from home. Start a discussion about what good looks like – and get people to share their own tips.

1. **Nail the basics**
   - Find a workspace that works for you and allows you to stay mentally engaged while ensuring your wellbeing doesn’t suffer (think about natural lighting, access to fresh air and a comfortable sitting position)
   - Carve out a rhythm for working. Make it personal, own it. Ensure that your calendar is updated. You could even fake your commute into work with a walk around the block. Remember to disassociate your workspace from your living space. Don’t let the two merge.
   - Take regular breaks; a great technique being shared (by successful home workers) is the Pomodoro technique, you concentrate for 25 minutes and then break for 5.
   - Make sure to prepare for the day the same as you would if you were physically going to work. This means waking up at the right time, dressing for work and taking a lunch break.

2. **Home-working doesn’t mean you’re on your own – it’s still about teamwork**
   - Most of all, don’t be too hard on yourself. There will be distractions and there will be ebbs-and-flows to your productivity. It’s a unique challenge working from home at the best of times, let alone during a time of such uncertainty.
   - Remember it’s much more difficult to stay on the same page when we’re not physically congregated around the same laptop or screen. So ensure that you schedule catch-ups, reviews, 1-2-1s and regular updates, as you normally would. Pay extra attention to details, be clear in the expected output and be patient with one another.
   - Tone matters. Remember it’s easy to misinterpret the tone of written messages. Be mindful of this.
   - Pick your channel to reflect your desired output: we have plenty to choose from, from team messenger, video calls, phone calls, WhatsApp, Workplace and screen sharing. And remember, if you are having a Teams call with someone – show your face!

3. **Remain calm and carry on**
   - Be mindful of your wellbeing. This means focusing on staying hydrated, exercising regularly and – ultimately – not letting work seep into your private life.
   - Plan as much as you can. Being in control of a situation makes people feel calmer; if you’ve committed to a deadline or need to forecast work in, make sure that you respect the individuals involved enough to hold up your end of the deal.
   - Don’t neglect your normal activities. If you have 1-2-1s planned, attend them. When we weather the storm there’ll be new opportunities in a brave new world.
   - Remember to be secure when you’re accessing data records from home and ensure you log on via your company’s accredited VPN link.
Our research shows that one of the core drivers of psychological safety is the relationship employees have with leaders and line managers.

Motivating your people during a crisis
Motivating your people: what to do now

What’s one of the top drivers of increased understanding and engagement, across our research with millions of employees? Interactive, face-to-face leadership. What just got a lot more difficult? Interactive, face-to-face leadership.

Finding ways to get your senior leaders interacting with your people despite the current obstacles – and ensuring they are being seen to do that – shows empathy, transparency and makes your people feel part of the broader business reaction to the crisis. Especially as our research suggests employees are much less likely to trust leaders with whom they only communicate digitally, compared to those with whom they have face-to-face interactions.

It’s not just senior leaders. Our research shows that one of the core drivers of psychological safety is the relationship employees have with their line manager. This is under threat, right now. Ensuring that regular, good-quality team conversations happen despite the disruption is more important than ever. To do that, you need managers who are fully briefed to answer key questions and support the broader business messaging.

Employees who see or hear from senior leaders monthly or more often are

2x

more likely to trust leaders than those who see them bi-annually

Employees who see or hear from senior leaders monthly or more often are

Fewer than

45%

of employees who only receive digital communications from their leaders trust them

vs.

More than

75%

of employees who only receive face-to-face communications from their leaders trust them
With the future of the Co-op at risk, following the near collapse of the Co-op Bank, change was needed to replace a well-publicised culture of secrecy, with direct and open communications. Underpinning regular communications to all colleagues were weekly two-way leadership briefings from the CEO, providing a short update, with emphasis on a refreshingly transparent Q&A. This not only equipped leaders to talk confidently to their people about what was going on, but helped to draw out and tackle the rumours that were circulating. Following the crisis, communications moved swiftly into a simple, yet visionary narrative about how they would rebuild the Co-op – they didn’t have all the answers or a developed strategy from day one, but the narrative mapped out how they would get to that point to give people confidence there was a plan.
Motivating your people: what to do now

Beyond having a strong and empathetic leadership team who are visible throughout a crisis period, what hacks are there to help you motivate your people? Here you will find a starter-for-ten. Importantly, these should act as a platform to improve on and inform what good looks like in your organisation.

Create a sense of collective purpose
This is all to do with involving your workforce in your decisions. People will be at their best and feel most secure if you can actively engage them in the efforts you’re taking to mitigate a crisis. Where possible, this can be empowering individuals or teams to act and contribute to activities which will have the biggest impact. As colleagues see their efforts rewarded, organisations may see the benefits of collaboration for many years to come.

Transparency
In challenging times, organisations need to take a strong, visionary line in order to provide stability and confidence. But there is merit in being transparent with your workforce and providing reasons for the decisions you’re taking. Providing regular, open communications and clarity will drive an increased sense of security among workers, who crave as much assurance as possible at a time when there is so little certainty in their lives.

Show that you care
Show your people that the work you’re all doing is benefiting society more broadly – highlight actions and decisions that you’re taking outside of what’s being done to drive your own business forward. At a time of crisis, employees will want evidence that not only is their employer protecting its own people, but is also considering those in a less fortunate position. Consider the products and services you have and that you can use to collectively benefit others.

Let line managers and leaders lead
While easier said than done, make sure your key people leaders have the freedom to devote additional time and focus to managing their people. Whether people are working remotely, or continuing to come into their place of work, their need for regular contact and leadership from others will be greater than normal.

Show appreciation
Take time out of your day to acknowledge the efforts of the workforce. Whether that’s continuing to turn up in a front-line facing role or maintaining a sense of BAU while juggling children, leaders must recognise the emotional strain this may take. A little appreciation will go a long way.
If riding out this crisis enables you to build trust among employees, why stop there? While psychological safety will look different in every sector and organisation, even in every team, there are common components that define progressively stronger levels of psychological safety.

Critically, using this as an opportunity to reboot your engagement strategy and to strengthen psychological safety will enable you to build the organisational resilience to cope better with future crises like the coronavirus outbreak – when established security, belonging and trust will count in your favour, mitigate risk and enable your organisation to react faster and more effectively to serious disruption.

Again, leadership is a key lever that will enable your organisation to climb through the stages. Work with senior leaders to develop Personal Engagement Plans (PEPs) that give a strategic focus to their engagement activities. Coach frontline leaders to lead and motivate in times of crisis and change. Establish a culture where people feel that leaders have their back and are empowering them to make a real difference.

The psychological safety hierarchy of needs

As with Maslow’s famous ‘hierarchy of needs’ model, there is a similar multi-layer hierarchy of behaviours and needs relating specifically to psychological safety.

Source: Karian and Box psychological safety study, 2019
“Never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that is it’s an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before.”

Rahm Emanuel, Former Mayor of Chicago
The disruptive impact of the coronavirus pandemic will undoubtedly affect global organisations for many years to come. But there are positives to embrace.

Global organisations are highly likely to learn from positive crisis behaviours that allow us to collectively increase the resilience of our daily practices to weather future crises. How well your business copes will say a lot about your existing culture and how well psychological safety is embedded throughout the company.

So, how to look ahead and ensure that you embed a culture of change mentality to your workforce even when the waters have settled? It starts with empowering your workforce to think of innovation as part of their daily routine. Crisis situations will force people to be innovative in their approach and seek solutions quicker.

It is imperative that these innovations are captured and documented, however big or small. There is little benefit in reverting to BAU if your workforce has unlocked new efficiencies. So ensure that there is a culture of embedding change for the long-term.
What this will look like long-term is still undefined. It’s fluid. But our best guess is that many organisations will:

• Address their stance on business travel. What will define essential and non-essential travel?

• In turn, this will have an environmental footprint impact. How do companies change how they measure their CSR after a period of (hopefully successful) isolation?

• Make the shift away from presenteeism. This will change how office-environment workers schedule their working lives. For employees who are required to be physically present, what is their impact?

• Maintain the new empowerment dynamics. Let’s look at working parents. Previously, childcare cover and juggling domestic responsibilities could divide parents’ attentions. New lessons will be learned on how that may look in a model of future-proofed, remote working.

• Enable greater collaboration. Individuals who work remotely can feel ostracised from their teams. Now, in a period of decentralisation, we will all find a way of improving our social connectivity with our colleagues – regardless of their location. Other social cues should also improve, such as increased levels of patience, greater communicative skills and a workforce that supports each other.

Best practice

Netflix have developed their learning culture as an organisation through the ‘Oops Project’, an initiative that encourages people to record ‘sub-optimal outcomes’ – when things didn’t go quite right – and investigate the root causes.

The governing principle for the project is the idea that ‘human error is a symptom, not a cause’: where people blame each other (or themselves), there is usually an underlying systemic issue, often hidden from sight, that led to the ‘mistake’. This approach encourages teams to dig deep into the real root causes, diagnose problems and fix issues that have a broader relevance to the whole organisation, not just that one local team.
We’re all stepping into a new world. The rulebook has well and truly been torn up.