



COMMUNICATION & COVID-19

Getting the right message and channel for real connection

COVID-19 has interrupted the way many of us communicate and engage at work. As restrictions across Australia are lifted local government leaders will be challenged to communicate effectively with their people and communities.

COVID-19 COMMUNICATION DISRUPTION

In March 2020 COVID-19 restrictions were implemented daily, rapidly changing the way that local governments worked across Western Australia. Many community services and facilities were closed, staff started working from home and the way that leaders connected with their teams changed. To stay connected we quickly adapted how we communicate embracing video conferencing and clogging up email inboxes.

For many the load of email and video conference meetings has sometimes been overwhelming with numerous sources competing for our attention. People have suffered information overload and anxiety making it difficult to access, digest and use the information that's needed.

In mid May the WA State Government announced an easing of restrictions. To forge a way forward leaders must bring their people and communities with them, engaging stakeholders with their vision and clearly communicating their plan to manage the 'new' COVID-19 normal. In this context, our leaders will need strategies, and clarity to drive their vision and voice forward.

LEADERS STEP UP

COVID-19 presents evolving organisational and human resources risks and opportunities. A recent example of this is Fair Work Australia's decision which highlighted that whilst workplaces now have greater powers to direct workers in relation to matters such as using their accumulated annual leave, there remains the fundamental need to ensure effective consultation occurs. This means that there must be engagement and two way communication between decision makers and staff.

Leaders need to get the messaging on these and a multitude of necessary changes – any of which can be emotionally loaded at this time – right. They also need to grab the attention of their workforces to promote and steer others towards a shared future perspective by choosing the most effective communication channels.

4 KEYS TO ENGAGEMENT

An understanding of **four different approaches** can assist leaders as they plan to communicate for connection and consultation. A compelling “why” and clear “when” are an essential place to start when we need people to come on-board in a committed and timely manner.

1. Encouraging strategic thinking;
2. Understanding the hierarchy of needs;
3. Engaging in “Big Talk” to build empathy; and
4. Choosing the right communication medium for the right purpose.

Get people thinking strategically

If your staff think strategically they'll have a better understanding of why you're doing what you're doing, but how can leaders develop strategic thinking in their people? Firstly managers should encourage strategic thinking in their teams then they will help pass it on to other natural leaders within your workplace's ranks.

There are five areas to think about to encourage strategic thinking. A key one for senior leaders is to promote a "future perspective" in your organisation. If a manager suggests a course of action ask them two questions: first, what underlying strategic goal does this action serve, and why? And second, what kind of impact will this have on internal and external stakeholders? Consistently asking these two questions whenever action is considered will go a long way towards developing strategic leaders.

Five tips to encourage your employees to think strategically

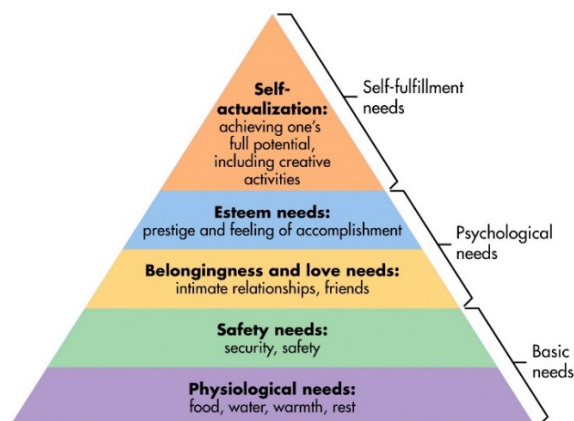
- Ask "why" and "when."
- Create a philosophy.
- Dish out information.
- Reward thinking, not reaction.
- Create a mentor program.

UNDERSTANDING NEEDS

Successful leaders aim to align the attention, efforts and achievements of others to meet organisational objectives. Ideally this enables people to make their contribution whilst being the very best that they can.

COVID-19, however, has disrupted every individuals comfort level and 'higher order' motivations won't be a focus for the staff member who is worried about more basic concerns such as their personal or family safety, finances and job security.

Maslow's classic needs analysis model is a helpful reminder of what staff need to perform at work. Staff need to be mentally well and optimistic; and feel confident and supported, especially during periods of uncertainty when there is rapid change. Leaders need to be willing and able to pick up the signs that someone is struggling and be prepared to engage in conversations to respond accordingly.



'Big Talk' to connect at work

The human need that we all have for connection has become crystal clear over recent weeks. Many of us are engaging in more 'small talk' than ever, as we attempt to share and calibrate how we and others are coping.

COVID-19 has also caused many of us to stop and think about the 'bigger things' in life and this is something that leaders can harness to engage with their teams. "Big Talk" enables everyone to connect through deeper conversations right away by using "universal life questions". When we ask and then actively listen to someone's response to these questions, we develop a greater understanding of what is important to that person, what challenges they are facing, and what ideas and resources they are likely to be willing to bring forward. This way of communicating presents opportunities to demonstrate our empathy and to connect in more satisfying and meaningful ways

'Big talk' to connect at work

- What do you spend too much of your working time doing?
- What is a new habit you want to form?
- How do we have meaningful connections using new technologies?
- How can you take what you have learned and apply it to improve your work?

The channel that suits the message

Face to face communication is made up of three things – body language, words and tone of voice. Of the three body language dominates the communication delivering 55% of the meaning of the message. It's important to keep this in mind when leaders are considering how they want to communicate their message.

Clearly deep and potentially complex messages need the most suitable type of media so that we can effectively read all the cues and accurately interpret what is really going on for the other person. It's important to use the right communication medium for the right purpose.



Different communication media vary in their 'richness'; from the richest (face to face) to videoconferencing (e.g. Zoom), to audio (telephone), to computer-mediated communications such as chat rooms, online discussion, and then to email. Face to face is always best for any interpersonally-complex communication, such as negotiating, influencing, dealing with disagreements or conflict, giving bad news (such as firing someone), performance management and solving highly complex

problems. Plus the evidence also shows that face to face communication enhances cohesion, so it's preferred when you want to build commitment to a way forward.

Unfortunately face to face is not an option for many of us right now, and we are having to rely instead on video conferencing (Zoom and Skype). As the next richest medium, video conferencing is preferred for any more complex communication.

However, Zoom and Skype are still less rich than face to face communications. We can't see people's body language, we're not in the same physical space so we don't know what is happening for them, it's challenging to work out when to speak, and our peripheral awareness is reduced. Sometimes we can't even hear people properly. And this is one powerful reason why it's so tiring – in order to navigate the interpersonal dynamics, we have to concentrate intensely to compensate for the impaired social and physical cues relative to face to face communication.

It's best to plan your message for maximum effectiveness (whether for engagement, connection or consultation) and ensure that you are using the right communication medium for the right purpose.

This is especially important when you may be struggling to gain the attention of others, where the challenges ahead are momentous, and where everyone's precious energy has been somewhat tested.

INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

For more information and support contact the LGIS Human Resources Risk Team or call Renee Wockner, WorkCare Services Manager on 0427 617 646 or email renee.wockner@lgiswa.com.au