



# Communicating in the “New Normal”



**Sue Heuman** ABC, MC  
Principal at Focus Communications

Most everyone is struggling with how to return to work, and what that “new normal” will look like. For some, it will mean continuing to work from home. For others, it’s back to the office ... and a whole set of health protocols and rules to follow to keep everyone safe.

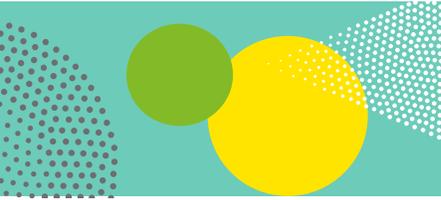
*(This post is not about health protocols, by the way – there are way smarter people than me giving advice on how to prep your workplace.)*

## This is about how to communicate with staff.

At the beginning of this lockdown, we were all in crisis mode. Communication flew quickly, with any errors or omissions corrected in the next bulletin. Speed was of the essence as we scrambled to close worksites, transition people to home-offices, and hunker down. For many, sadly, this also meant being laid off or otherwise out of work – and a whole new reality to deal with.

We’re now eight or so weeks into this, and the fight-or-flight crisis response has waned. We’re settling in to this new normal and, dangerously, now is the time complacency can start to bubble up. Complacency, not only in following all the health protocols, but also in effective communication with employees, customers and suppliers.





## Now is not the time to take the foot off the gas.

Over the next couple of weeks, more and more jurisdictions will be reopening their economies. How do we connect with all our audiences effectively?

Some basic rules to guide your ongoing communication efforts:

- » **Transparency and honesty** are even more critical as we navigate these uncertain times. Staff want to know how COVID has affected the business, are their jobs secure (and for how long), and with whom they can speak if they are worried. Be honest and open with people so they can plan accordingly.
- » **Frequent communication is a must.** Even if you think you're repeating yourself, staff need to hear from management regularly - daily if possible.
- » **Flexibility** is the keyword for 2020. Flexibility in schedules, duties and tasks, locations, responsibilities and more will be needed at all levels in the organization. This is particularly important to working parents as they also deal with their children's needs, as they continue to be out of school/daycare.
- » **Communicate only what you know**, and point people to expert resources when needed. Be sure to tell staff about the important rules to follow when at work, and make sure they're posted and available throughout the workplace...
- » **But, leave the advice about health protocols to the health professionals.** Don't try to interpret instructions from the Chief Medical Officer of Health, the government health department or other authorities. Let people read, see and hear these messages directly. Remember that when we pass on a message, our inherent biases may colour how the message is delivered – and received. This is also very important for organizations with locations in different jurisdictions. Each workplace must adhere to the rules and protocols in their respective geographic locations.
- » Workplaces may open – and then may close again, depending on the circumstances and **changing instructions from government.** Staff will have to be nimble with their workdays, and employers must have a way to get important information to all staff on an immediate basis. Email, Yammer, Slack, Zoom... there are dozens of tools out there, so prepare now for the possibility everything may change yet again.
- » **Be compassionate.** If your workplace experienced layoffs, be sensitive to those left behind who may feel angry, sad or lonely if their friends are no longer there. Be gentle with staff, respect their feelings and support them.



Finally, keep your ear to the ground and listen. How are people feeling? What are they saying? Be sure to raise concerns with management, and have management address them promptly.