

The Importance of Putting People First During COVID-19

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Recently, the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) and Peppercomm released a new e-book featuring 30 senior communication executives discussing how they are handling COVID-19 and looking ahead to the future. Of the 30 executives, one common theme emerged from the pages: people should always come first. While this may appear to be an obvious theme, this has not been a theme championed by some companies in the past, or even by some current government leaders responding to the pandemic.

During this pandemic, the focus for most companies we interviewed was on people. The communication function has been instrumental in helping employees, customers, and suppliers.

Geoff Curtis, executive vice president of corporate affairs and chief communications officer at Horizon Therapeutics, said, “The communication function helped to make sure employees feel supported and know they are in safe, good hands.”

According to Dominic Pendry, head of corporate communications at Bed Bath & Beyond, safety must come first every time.



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“The implications of our business were clear, but all decisions were made with one priority above all else—the safety and well-being of our people, customers, and the communities we serve,” said Pendry.

For some companies, helping people and keeping them safe is part of their organization’s purpose.

Moyra Knight, vice president of corporate communications at Astellas US and president of the Astellas Global Health Foundation, said, “As a purpose-driven organization rooted in CSR-based management, responding to global health crises locally and globally and working to ensure access to health is at the heart of what we do.”

IPR and Peppercomm have published three studies focused on COVID-19. In the second study released in April, we found 81% of communication functions have been *very involved* in communicating internally about COVID-19.

Paul Gennaro, senior vice president and chief brand and communications officer at Voya Financial, said, “Our communications have been frequent, proactive, and transparent, with an emphasis on taking actions and making decisions based on the health and safety of employees (and contractors) and their families and loved ones.”

Jennifer Mauer, vice president of corporate communications at Merck, outlined three behaviors that are critical for communicators during COVID-19. One of those she said is the importance of empathy, which she defines as “the ability to care deeply for our fellow humans.”

This ability to care defines what Carol Gilligan, an ethicist and psychologist, calls an “ethics of care” philosophy. In this, moral action is centered on care or benevolence as a virtue. Acting from this perspective focuses on respect and responsiveness to others.

Putting people first is a game-changer for many companies with more companies embracing “stakeholder capitalism.” According to the World Economic Forum, companies are focusing more on stewardship and non-shareholders, integrating stakeholder capitalism within their corporate governance structure and elevating its role in relation to the company’s financial performance. Issues that were previously considered secondary are now important determinants for success.

However, this is not something that companies can build internally overnight.

“Culture cannot be built during a crisis,” said Catherine Hernandez-Blades, senior vice president and chief ESG and communications officer at Aflac.

Hernandez-Blades emphasizes how critical stakeholders’ needs, such as physical, mental, and financial well-being, must be supported during this time.

“This is a once-in-the-century pandemic, meaning it’s an opportunity for companies to have a once-in-a-century social impact,” said Hernandez-Blades. “No function plays a more critical role in determining a company’s post-pandemic success than communications—the conscience of the company.”

These stories are just some that comprise the new IPR and Peppercomm e-book, ***“Leadership Perspectives: Leading and Looking Ahead Through COVID-19.”***

Topics included in this new e-book focus on the impact of COVID-19; the increased importance of internal communication; return to work; future of business and the industry; diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; impact of the Black Lives Matter protests; and corporate purpose.

To download the e-book, please click **here**.

On August 6, IPR and Peppercomm are co-hosting a webinar

featuring three executives talking about their contributions to the e-book: Moyra Knight of Astellas and the Astellas Global Health Foundation, Jennefer Witter of The Boreland Group Inc., and Jill Carapellotti at Macy's. **Please register here to attend.**