

# THE AGENDA®

Japan's first bilingual HR magazine published by The Japan HR Society (JHRS)



MagCloud

9TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

## New Ways of Working, Leading & Winning in Turbulent Times



Building Anew: Designing New Work Styles 6

Positive Distancing: Combining Social Distancing and Mental-Emotional Distancing 8

Communication & Connection: Best Practices for Newly Remote Workforces 18

# Communication & Connection

## Best Practices for Newly Remote Workforces

Valerie M. Grubb

Principal, Val Grubb & Associates, Ltd.

*Originally written in English*

*Under normal circumstances, good communication is key to an organization's success. During a crisis, good communication is key to an organization's very survival.*

As COVID-19 turns the world on its head, employees are looking to their leaders for guidance on how to manage the disruption to their lives. Clear and effective communication helps provide much-needed stability amid uncertainty that's exacerbated by the fact that many companies are now suddenly — and, in many cases, for the first time — doing their work online. Managing a newly remote workforce is never easy, and it's even more challenging during a pandemic, when there is zero possibility of even occasional in-person check-ins. Fortunately, we have at our disposal communication tools that can mitigate those shortcomings.

Email remains the most ubiquitous of those tools (along with its cousins, texting and chat applications such as Slack). Its asynchronous nature is both one of its strengths and one of its weaknesses. On one hand, the ability for participants to communicate with each other without having to be online “together” at the same time can expedite some processes and improve efficiencies. On the other hand, this same lack of “togetherness” can make it difficult to have clear interpersonal interactions.

## The 3 Cs of Effective Communication

Be Consistent	Leaders and HR must constantly push managers to give precise and detailed instructions, because employees can't successfully deliver on ambiguous requests. Train your managers to describe their expectations in such a way that the employee can "see, feel and taste" what they are asked to do and don't waste precious time pursuing the wrong end game.
Be Clear	Whether you're assigning work, offering feedback, following up on projects or disciplining employees, all communications with employees must be timely, equal and fair to everyone, and consistent. Consistency helps provide and reinforce stability and direction, both of which are needed more than ever these days.
Be Compassionate	With the world turned upside down and full of uncertainty, it's critical that leaders lead with compassion. Everyone is wrestling with anxiety and stress, and many people are also juggling care for family members, homeschooling their children, and facing their own health issues as well — and any of those factors can affect employees' ability to focus and get their work done effectively. Remind managers to check in with their direct reports not just about their work but about their personal lives as well. By treating employees compassionately, you build trust and loyalty that will endure even after the crisis passes.

If you've ever been on either end of a misinterpreted email, you know how difficult it can be to convey nuance in that medium and how easily misunderstandings ("That isn't at all what I meant!") can creep in there. In the business world, there's no room for interpretation: instructions need to be very clear. When everyone is working together in the office, in-person meetings — both scheduled ones (such as group sessions in reserved meeting rooms or one-on-one appointments) and ad hoc ones (such as impromptu hallway chats) — function as opportunities for sharing important information. But what happens when managers, employees and colleagues are no longer working in close physical proximity to each other?

In light of email's inability to incorporate body language, tone of voice, and other audiovisual cues that signal meaning, today's leaders are leaning heavily on video chats to facilitate the kind of manager-employee communication needed to keep companies going strong. One useful strategy is to use video meetings as the main vectors for distributing assignments and going over progress reports. In this version of a "face-to-face" meeting, participants have access to more social cues than email alone permits, which makes it easier for all participants to be sure that any information that needs to be shared has been understood accurately. (Though every meeting, whether by video or in person, should still be followed up with an email summary so everyone is on the same page about plans and key points raised).

The ability to ask questions in "real time" is also a huge boon to comprehension, and can even lead to innovation as people bounce ideas off each other and respond to each others' energy. Just think about how exciting an in-person brainstorming session can be! Now think about how difficult it is to convey that same energy and spontaneity in an email.

Communication isn't essential only for professional accountability, though. Companies certainly do want their employees to be productive and to fulfill their assignments. But good managers not only guide their employees' work lives but also care about them as individuals. Especially in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, when people are wrestling with physical isolation and the stress of living with so many unknowns, managers need to use their communication skills to build and sustain connections among team members who are geographically dispersed and may be struggling to cope in both their professional and their personal lives.

This is another area in which video chats outshine email, which not only limits the expression of nuance and emotion but can come across as impersonal (just ask anyone who's ever received or sent "cc" or "bcc" messages). But because video meetings enable managers to communicate more effectively and sincerely with their employees when in-person meetings aren't possible, they're vital tools that all leaders should use as they reach across the line dividing the professional from the personal and check in regularly with their employees.

Now is the time for leaders to step up and exhibit true leadership.

If you want your organization to emerge on the other side of the pandemic healthy and intact, you need to focus on the people who are its foundation, because no work gets done without them. More than ever, this means communicating with employees clearly, consistently and compassionately. "Business as usual" isn't achievable under current conditions, so leaders must rise to the challenge and provide the support, flexibility and understanding needed to shepherd their employees through this crisis. 🍷



*Valerie M. Grubb is a keynote speaker, executive coach and corporate trainer with over two decades of leadership experience in senior leadership roles within major corporations including NBC Universal, Oxygen Media, InterActiveCorp (IAC) and Rolls-Royce. She graduated with a mechanical engineering degree from Kettering University and obtained her MBA from the Indiana University Kelley School of Business. Valerie has published two books: *Planes, Canes, and Automobiles: Connecting with Your Aging Parents through Travel* (Greenleaf) and *Clash of the Generations: Managing in the New Workplace Reality* (Wiley).*