Return-to-Work Checklists for Employee Communicators

As organizations plan to return to the workplace, they must consider myriad factors unique to their geography, business, facilities and workers. As before the pandemic and even more so today, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. These checklists are intended to prompt thinking around some of the more universal employee-related considerations organizations will need to examine. As you review, it will become clear that the universe of "Employee Comms" today is more vast than many previously thought. The discipline is as much about solving logistical and procedural challenges as facilitating the flow of information. Counselors who can do all of the above will provide significant value to their organizations.

GOVERNANCE | PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

Many phrases will be used to give name to the return-to-work stage, but at its core, your organization is experiencing a **major business transformation** (albeit one that is affecting virtually every business on the planet). Because the best executed business transformations are driven by an effective transformation management organization (TMO), your return to the workplace should be no exception. Although you don't have to call your return-to-work lead team a TMO, you do need a collaborative, orchestrated effort, led by a multidisciplinary group with influence within your organization.

The good news: You probably already have a COVID-19 task force in place. Use the following checklist to ensure the team has the resources and support it needs to settle in for the long haul and navigate your organization through the transformation.

- ✓ **Ensure your team is cross-functional.** Every part of your business will be impacted by the effects of the pandemic, so your return-to-work team should feature a wide representation of your business functions. Communications – internal and external communications capabilities alike – will play a pivotal role. If yours is a global organization, advocate for a global representation on your team.

- ✓ **Enlist experts.** Prior to COVID-19, chief medical officers were found almost exclusively in healthcare organizations. But having an epidemiologist or infectious disease specialist available to consult with your team can help ensure you understand the risks and mitigating approaches to keep your people safe. Industrial hygienists can help with social distancing and disinfecting plans. And public affairs professionals can help you stay ahead of relevant decisions being made at all levels of government that will determine how quickly your return-to-work process can start humming to life.

- ✓ **Determine accountability.** Identify who will lead the team and to whom that person will be accountable. For the latter, give strong consideration to your CEO.

- ✓ **Establish ways of working.** Convene at least weekly, perhaps daily, especially as you approach key milestones, such as welcoming your first wave of employees back or when you are phasing into having everyone back in the workplace together at the same time. Schedule these meetings now for the foreseeable future to avoid obstacles to attendance. Establish an email distribution list or private workgroup on your internal collaboration platform to make communicating easier.

- ✓ **Formalize reporting.** Metrics matter and in a big way right now. Determine which key performance indicators (KPIs) are essential for your organization and your return-to-work efforts as well as the targets you need to hit. Identify the owners, process and frequency for tracking and reporting on those KPIs. Create templates to make reporting consistent and easy to understand across functions.

- ✓ **Be agile.** Anticipate bumps in the road as you attempt to return your employees to the workplace. While you will not know which particular surprise is coming next, you can mentally ready your team with scenario planning. Be prepared to adjust the team composition, meeting schedules, project milestones, targets and everything in between.

THE RETURN PROCESS

After several weeks away from the workplace (and amid swirling uncertainty), returning will be the source of excitement and anxiety for many of your employees. Across the board, they are counting on you to have a well-thought-out approach that prioritizes their safety and is easy for them to understand and implement. Follow these steps to develop and communicate an effective plan.

- ✓ **Establish criteria for the return.** Your employees already are wondering when they will be back in the workplace – some are eager to be there, while others are not. When you announce your plans to return, you will need to explain your decision. To avoid scrambling to articulate your reasoning, begin determining those criteria now, with the understanding that they may need to evolve along with the pandemic itself.

- ✓ **Ask for input.** Employees from different geographies, facilities, job types and demographic backgrounds will have different perspectives regarding the return-to-work effort. You may not be able to address everyone's feedback, but by conducting a survey or series of surveys now as you plan for the return, you have an opportunity to hear what's on their minds and give your workforce a voice, which can establish trust in your approach. Ask about their biggest concerns, their thoughts on timing or particular approaches you are considering, ideas they have to improve the process and questions that are keeping them up at night.

- ✓ **Build your detailed approach.** Returning to the workplace will not be a singular event. It will happen in phases, across geographies and facilities. Even as you reopen in phases, you may not be able to return your full workforce in each location to operations the way they existed pre-COVID-19. You may need to schedule different shifts – even in office environments not accustomed to shift work – that allow specific workers (and no one else) into a facility on a particular day. As you build your plan, don't forget to consult with key stakeholders, including local communications leads, facility managers, heads of security, construction/maintenance, custodial services/housekeeping and catering. These individuals not only will be significantly impacted by your plan; they can help review and likely improve it.

- ✓ **Communicate your plan.** When your return-to-work plan is developed, communicate it to your people so they know what to expect and – importantly – have an opportunity to ask questions, raise concerns and share other feedback. Where possible, incorporate their input and let them know they have been heard. When you are ready to re-open, be sure to give your employees a few days' notice, if possible, so they have time to get their affairs in order to rejoin you. If you have the resources, consider an overview video that _shows_ your people what they can expect when they return. Think carefully about the channels you will use to share this information, particularly if you have a population of employees who typically don't use corporate email to communicate; you may need to use social media or employee-alert channels to ensure everyone gets the news.

- ✓ **Expect resistance.** For some employees, you will not be returning to the workplace fast enough; for others, it will happen far too fast for their comfort level. Be prepared for opposition from both camps. Create scenario-based plans for workers who request to work remotely beyond the return-to-work date, giving consideration to how you will equip managers and your HR team to manage these requests, as well as which employee behaviors you will and will not allow. You also should have a plan for activist employees (and members of the public) who have grown impatient with your reopening plans (or disapprove of some other aspect of how you are managing through the pandemic) and have taken to social media to share their dissatisfaction in an attempt to influence change.

ENVIRONMENTAL | WORKSPACE

Marshall McLuhan famously said, "The medium is the message." Which means the workplace itself is now one of the most important channels in your employee communications ecosystem. How you augment your environment to promote the health and safety of your people – and communicate that you've done so – will send strong messages about your concern for their well-being. Your approach can have a big impact on employee engagement, not to mention your brand reputation once news of what you're doing finds its way to the outside world. Which will happen fast. Follow these steps to get it right.

✓ **Audit the workplace.** Your return-to-work plan should begin with an assessment of your facilities to determine the site-specific changes that need to occur for people to return. Working with your industrial hygienist or another expert, develop the criteria and guidelines to be used across sites, distribute these to your facility managers and direct them to schedule facility walk-throughs with their local leaders of internal communications, security, construction/maintenance, custodial services/housekeeping, catering and other relevant stakeholders who will implement the changes.

✓ **Determine entry criteria.** To gain entry to facilities, many organizations are mandating temperature checks, acknowledgement of exposure to the virus and other criteria. Once you set your standards, identify the stakeholders who need to be informed (employees and various segments of visitors: customers, suppliers, business partners and others) and the channels you'll use to reach them.

✓ **Decide PPE requirements and distribution.** Personal protective equipment requirements may vary from one organization or facility to the next – even from one role to the next – and the requirements likely will evolve with time. Conducting a detailed stakeholder analysis can help you identify the unique needs of your organization and people. You also will need to determine which PPE your organization will provide to employees and visitors (and how), the supplier relationships and procurement process needed to obtain those items, the disposal/cleaning protocol for used PPE, which substitutions may be allowed if your inventory is depleted and other considerations.

✓ **Facilitate social distancing everywhere,** but particularly in high-traffic or congested locations, whether those are reception areas, break rooms, meeting spaces, elevators, production lines … even bathrooms. Deploy environmental reminders, such as floor decals that tell people where to stand, table tents that remind people of per-table seating limits, posters, digital signs and other aids as appropriate for your workspace. Some parts of your facility may need to be augmented, with partitions for instance, to separate workers whose jobs require them to operate in close proximity to one another. You also may need to establish schedules for arrivals, breaks, departures and other activities, assigning employees to specific shifts in order to keep them properly distanced.

✓ **Develop strategies for meetings.** Many meetings will not happen the way they did previously. Instead of conference rooms or your typical huddle space in the production area, you may need to shift to larger areas, such as a cafeteria or auditorium. If you make such changes, think about a semi-permanent installation of A/V equipment in these makeshift areas so attendees can hear and see what you need them to; you will save significant time longer term if you don't have to set up this equipment before every meeting. Meeting space likely will be at a premium if you take smaller, confined areas out of the mix, so you may need to establish criteria for use of specific spaces. In office settings, you may need to have employees dial into meetings from their cubicles or offices even if everyone is in the same building and typically would meet together in the same room.

✓ **Establish cleaning protocols.** The facility should be disinfected regularly, as directed by the medical, industrial hygiene or custodial experts on your team. To build trust in your approach, communicate the cleaning schedule and standards. Employees will find relief knowing your plans to clean door handles, time clocks, elevator buttons, copy machines, microwaves and other high-touch surfaces.

POLICIES

Your organization and the needs of your workers are different today than they were before COVID-19, and your employee policies may need to be too. This checklist will help you consider what's changed in your workplace and in the lives of your employees – and how to align some of your business rules and standards accordingly.

- ✓ **Revisit your stakeholder map.** Your policies will have varying degrees of impact on your people, so you will benefit from understanding the different personal outcomes the pandemic may have had on your workers and the challenges they face as they return to work. Take another look at the stakeholder mapping you have done to date and update it to include a section that illuminates what your workers might be experiencing in their personal lives that may complicate, slow or prevent their immediate return to the workplace. Consider factors such as employees with compromised immune systems; lack of child or elder care; living with a vulnerable family member or roommate; reliance on public transportation; and other challenges … and then consider which policies you may need to adjust temporarily to accommodate your workers in these situations.

- ✓ **Offer flexibility.** For the reasons listed immediately above (among other factors), flexibility for employees will be a necessity. Examine your attendance/work-from-home, vacation, sick and family-leave policies to accommodate workers who may be challenged to return to in-person operations at full capacity. Re-evaluate these policies at regular intervals or in conjunction with key milestones, such as the introduction of new treatments or a vaccine.

- ✓ **Evaluate your performance management process.** To ensure your people experience an equitable performance review process this year, take a look at your review framework, including review timing and the evaluation criteria and language used in your materials, both for employees and managers. Pay close attention to requirements that may be out of sync with other policy updates you've made (for attendance or time off, for instance). If you make changes to your review framework or guidance, consider offering a webinar to highlight those changes to your people.

- ✓ **Revisit your travel policy.** Determine the conditions under which you will resume business travel, including whether your airlines, car rental agencies or hotels of choice need to change as a result of their own safeguards or availability (or lack thereof). Also consider whether you will let employees opt out of business trips if they are uncomfortable traveling.

- ✓ **Assess your vacation policy.** Your employees may be sitting on several unused vacation days, which could disrupt your business at the end of the year if everyone attempts to take time off for the holidays. Thinking through the business impact and developing a plan now will help you hone your strategy for communicating about changes to your vacation policy later if needed. Although making such changes may be necessary for the health of your business, it is likely to be an unpopular topic and will require smart communications.

- ✓ **Consider long-term policy revisions.** As you weigh the needs for short-term policy updates, don't miss an opportunity to make longer-term changes. For many businesses, COVID-19 will result in a scaling back of employee pay, benefits or other amenities. Policy revisions are one way you can offset some of those losses. Consider easy-to-implement, lower-cost changes, such as extending your work-from-home policy, introducing four-day (12-hours) work weeks, relaxing your dress code or allowing pets into the workplace.

EMPLOYEE SUPPORT

To quote Maya Angelou, "People will never forget how you made them feel." We've never been through anything like this before – as a society, industry, colleagues or individuals – which means we need each other more than ever, particularly after many of us have been isolated for several weeks. The following guidance will help you show strength, kindness and compassion as you welcome your employees back.

✓ **Promote wellness.** COVID-19 has had devastating effects on the health and wellbeing of people everywhere: from emotional distress and depression to lack of physical exercise and exacerbation of other conditions. Returning to work could compound stress employees already are experiencing, particularly if they return to a significantly transformed space or one they previously shared with a now deceased colleague. Continue to encourage use of the services offered by your EAP and other health and wellness benefits to support employees through this next stage of the transformation.

✓ **Maintain leader presence.** Just as employees have needed to hear from and see leaders – albeit virtually – while your facilities were closed, that need will continue when you are back in the workplace. Leaders should continue to communicate, showing empathy and encouragement and promoting resources to support teams as they settle back into their facilities. Face-to-face still rules the day, but if video has worked well during the shut-down, don't abandon it now, particularly if you have a dispersed workforce (or one that is difficult to engage in-person while socially distancing).

✓ **Listen.** One of the best – and easiest – ways to help employees feel supported is to take time to ask how they're doing, what's on their minds, what they need and how you can help. A Q&A session at a large employee gathering might not be in the cards in the near term, but executives can host virtual town halls or "Ask Me Anything" sessions on internal social channels. In addition, managers can have these 1:1 conversations with their direct reports and relay relevant feedback upward. Supplementing these discussions with surveys to gauge employee sentiment, confidence in the company's return-to-work efforts and other feedback will help determine what your people need more of … as long as you remember to act on what you hear, so that employees believe their voice matters (a key employee-engagement driver) and continue to stay engaged in the feedback process.

✓ **Build a community.** Work with the managers of your internal collaboration/social platform to launch a virtual community where employees can share experiences and solutions and support one another as they resume activities in the workplace. Such a community can spawn the creation of subgroups your employees may find helpful, such as communities for parents of young children or workers who care for older parents, which may help them find solutions to common challenges and build new relationships at work (another key driver of employee engagement). To forge stronger connections between leaders and employees, encourage executives to participate and share their own experiences, being careful that their contributions aren't tone-deaf to frontline workers who may have had to make bigger sacrifices at the hands of the pandemic.

✓ **Maintain amenities.** Protocols may prevent people from congregating around the water cooler or coffee station or using the gym in your facility. For every amenity you take away or change, try to find something new to offset the loss. This won't always be possible, especially as organizations struggle with tighter budgets as a result of the pandemic, but even the little things can help. If the gym is closed, for instance, schedule daily (socially distanced) walks outside. If you must temporarily disband your practice of inviting employees to the cafeteria for cake in honor of colleagues celebrating birthdays that month, instead do a desk-drop of individually packaged snacks.

✓ **Show gratitude.** Constantly seek out new ways to tell employees you value them and appreciate the sacrifices they have endured to move your business forward. Banners, personal notes of thanks and leaders making sacrifices of their own to support workers can underscore the sentiment.

COMMUNICATIONS

We know already that employee communication never has been more important. This will not be changing any time soon. In fact, you should prepare for a new world of communications and engagement challenges that may be more complex than what you have dealt with thus far. Use the channels at your disposal to provide clear, consistent information in language your employees understand. Recognize differences in how your people consume information and do not underestimate the importance of taking time to listen and recognize the work they are doing during difficult times.

- ✓ **Keep mapping your stakeholders and channels.** So much has changed so fast since the COVID-19 outbreak, and the pace of rapid transformation may continue for some time. As you encounter key milestones in your return to the workplace and introduce new communications strategies and tactics, revisit your stakeholder map and think about what's changed for your people: how are their needs different now, which behaviors are you seeing today that you hadn't anticipated, which of those behaviors do you want to promote and which need to shift in a different direction? Then be sure to evaluate whether you still have the right channels to reach all of your audiences.

- ✓ **Measure**. Check in with workers throughout the return process to see how they are doing and how your organization is meeting their needs. Pulse surveys, small-group skip-level meetings via web meeting, "Ask Me Anything" sessions and other approaches can help identify what's working and what needs to evolve. Establish your strategy now so you have a regular cadence of measurement touchpoints and a plan to track results over time to understand important trends and pivot points.

- ✓ **Consider creative.** Conventional wisdom might say not to develop a campaign-like identity for something as serious as a response to a pandemic. But much of society is overloaded with information right now, and your employees may benefit from a cohesive visual system that helps them understand which information they need to pay attention to regarding the return to the workplace. Consider developing a creative treatment you can apply to signs, floor clings, table tents, presentations and other communications vehicles so employees make no mistake about the source, intent or significance of the content they are seeing. Remember that it won't last forever, so it's ok if it sticks out like a sore thumb against the everyday branded materials. That's the point.

- ✓ **Develop a roadmap.** As you have an understanding of the key milestones that will guide the long-term return to new-normal operations, share a roadmap with your employees so they know what to expect. Update it along the way to help them know where they are on the journey.

- ✓ **Equip your managers with resources.** Managers are employees' most trusted source of information. In conjunction with updates from leaders or your corporate communications team, equip managers with resources and additional background to help them amplify communications and provide local context for their teams, and empower them to collect employee feedback and share it upward.

- ✓ **Use video.** Video communications can cut through the clutter and secure more eyes on the content you really need employees to see. Consider a series of onboarding videos to reintroduce employees to the workplace and your new policies and procedures to help that important information stick.

- ✓ **Translate.** Return-to-work communications should be considered priority information. Translate into local languages so all of your workers are appropriately informed and feel included.

- ✓ **Be authentic.** Keep your organization's values in the foreground of your mind. Use them as a filter to gauge the authenticity and appropriateness of all your plans, actions and communications. If something feels discordant, stop, evaluate why and make changes or discard it if necessary. Employee engagement, productivity, corporate reputation and the health of your business continue to depend on the manner in which you treat your people and live the values that define your brand.