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high concern communication –
key issues to consider

what is high-concern communication?

Quite simply, high concern communication is any communication you know is going to have a significant personal impact on the recipients and those communicating the changes, including line managers. Usually this means when people could see the change as threatening because it puts an individual's job and financial security at risk..

Minimising the business risk, ensuring customer service doesn't suffer and maintaining employee motivation are all major challenges that result from high concern situations. Communicators need to understand the psychology behind this type of change, and call upon a specialist set of high concern communication skills as early on in the change process as possible.

This document outlines the key issues and learning points from other people to consider when you are dealing with high-concern communication.

Key issues to consider

It's important for the business/HR and communication to agree (and follow!) a common set of principles for **how** high concern communication will be handled especially when redundancies are involved. This needs to include tone of voice, the support people will receive, etc.

If these are not agreed (and followed) then the people affected will receive differing treatment and conflicting messages. This can then fundamentally undermine credibility and trust.

HR, internal and external communication all need to work effectively together and clearly understand each others roles, responsibilities and perspectives. In the run up to any announcements, things can get frantic and if roles and responsibilities are not clear, mistakes are more likely to happen. It is also critical that only one or two people have ultimate responsibility for decisions/sign off.

If managers are delivering difficult messages they need to understand how best to communicate them as well as the psychological implications – both for those who leave and those who stay. They need to be trained on **how** to deliver the messages rather than just briefed on the **what**. The training needs to reflect the agreed set of principles for communicating high concern messages – which means HR and communication teams may need similar training.

Senior managers need to make time to support those delivering the difficult messages. If they are not directly involved in communicating, they need to actively support those members of their team who are – it may just be a phone call to find out how things went.

In high concern situations, one of the hardest things for people to cope with is the feeling of not being in control and that someone else is making decisions about their future. Communicating the process and approach helps them to feel more secure.

It's a legal requirement (and professional practice) to consult with employees when a number are affected by a business decision or announcement.

If job selection is involved, then it is vital that everyone understands how the process will work and the timescales. Communication materials that make it easier for people to explain what is happening to their families helps make the situation a little less stressful.

It is a natural inclination to reassure people when they are worried or concerned. Managers therefore need to understand why telling people 'you'll be OK' is unhelpful. They also need to understand how they will feel delivering the messages and the challenges this creates.

If people are being given a number of options, then they need full access to any information that will help them make the right decision. E.g. if people are being offered voluntary severance, they need to know the implications for the pension or if relocation is an option they need to know on what basis. Not providing this information creates frustration and anxiety.

Allow people space to deal with things in their own way. Managers need to understand that people react differently and that is OK.

The speed of modern communication means that as soon as announcement is made in one location, everyone will know. A rapid means of keeping everyone up to speed is therefore essential.

Putting in place an effective feedback loop enables you to keep track of how people are reacting and where they are in the change curve.

When it comes to difficult messages, there is the tendency to become overly rational and logical. Make sure the right emotional dimensions are built in.

Things to ask yourself

Are there agreed principles for communicating high concern communication that the business, HR and communication are all signed-up to and following?

Are the roles and responsibilities of managers, HR, communications, staff, etc. clear to everyone?

How experienced are the managers who will be delivering the difficult messages? Have they done it before? If yes, how well did it go? If no, where is improvement needed?

Knowing the managers involved are there any that you are concerned will not be able to deliver high concern messages well even after training? How high a risk does this pose – to people and the business? What alternatives are there?

How many will have to deliver the really tough messages e.g. make someone redundant? Is it worth considering offering different training support according to how high concern the messages are they have to deliver?

Are managers responsible for preparing their own materials or are they being provided with briefing packs? If it's the former do they need a template to follow?

The most effective way to train people is just before they need to put new skills into practice. What is the best way to link the training with the actual announcements that have to be made?

Do HR and communication also need training on how to handle high concern communication? Is it enough for them to be involved in the managers training?

What support will HR and communication provide? How does that fit with the training?

Do you want to build the internal capability to deliver this training in future?

How will this training taking place be perceived by the rest of the organisation?
How does it need to be positioned to managers and staff?

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