COVID-19 Communications

Best Practices and
How to Prepare for What's Next

COVID-19 is reshaping the healthcare industry as we know it.

Every healthcare organization is being impacted by the pandemic. Some are treating COVID-19 patients today, all are experiencing the operational, financial and emotional disruption of preparing for this unprecedented moment. Every facility is managing the current situation while trying to prepare for the future. Necessary measures include everything from changes to visitor rules to reallocation of resources and even facility closure.

With such rapid disruption, smart communication is imperative. Just how should provider organizations communicate efficiently with patients, staff, the media and the community at large? During a stressful time, how do leaders present the right tone to go with the right message, delivering it through the right channels so they can build trust and demonstrate support for their staff?

This document offers a set of communications best practices for crisis situations. Though focused on COVID-19, the principles apply to any crisis and are informed by real-world experience of healthcare provider organizations.

Throughout this moment, the question is not "Will this information be shared" but "Who will share this information?" As you consider whether to publish specific data or put out a press release about a situation, know that there is value in being proactive. People in your community – your staff, the media and the public – will be talking about what's happening. And in the absence of good information, that talk may not be accurate. If you aren't part of the conversation, others will be speaking into the vacuum. So, the choice isn't whether to communicate, it's whether you're going to join the conversation with a voice of authority and credibility.

That is the opportunity and the challenge in this high-stakes moment.
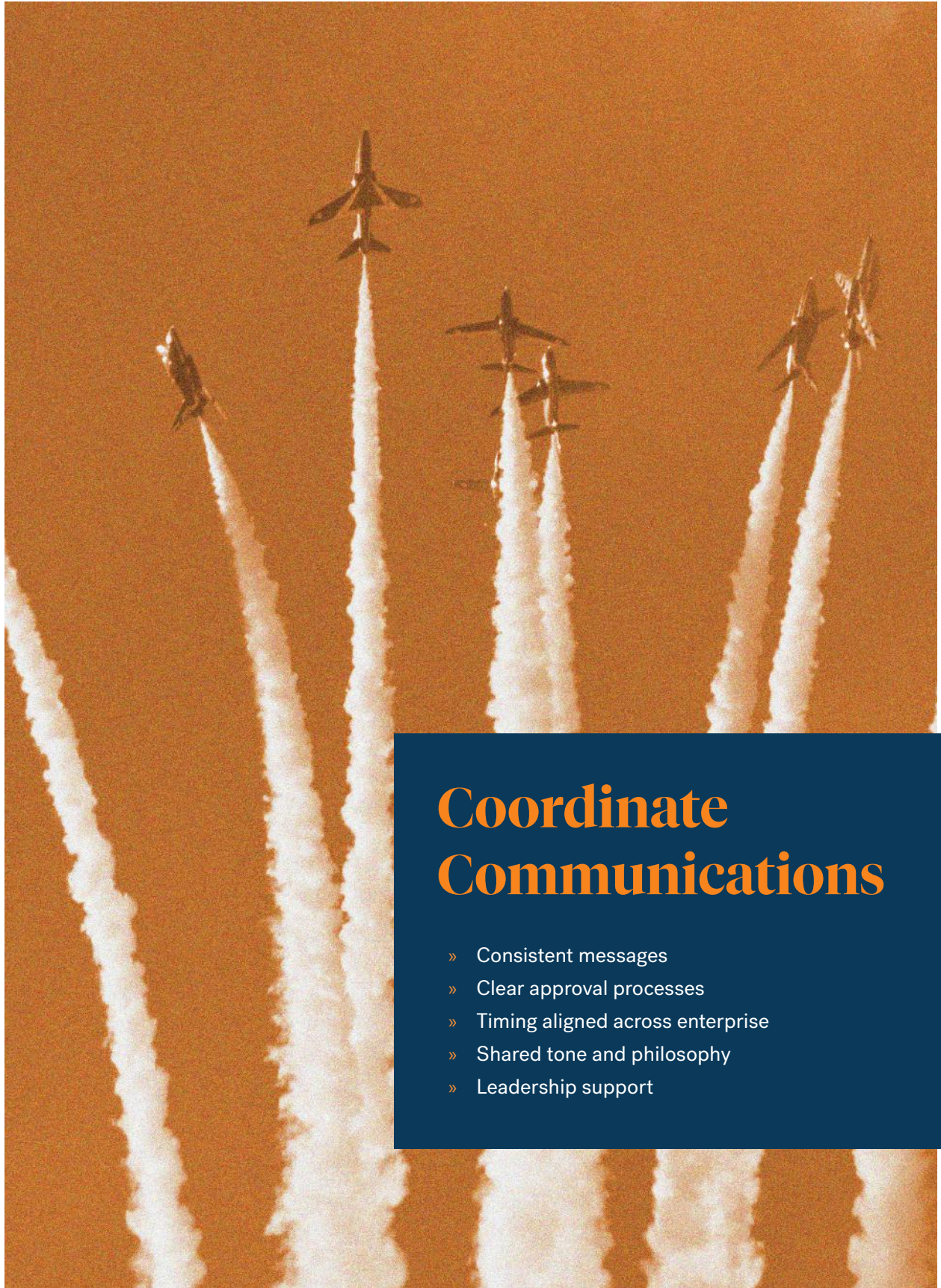
Coordinate Communications

» Consistent messages

» Clear approval processes

» Timing aligned across enterprise

» Shared tone and philosophy

» Leadership support

Successful crisis communications can be greatly accelerated not only by having messages prepared and approved in advance, but also by having a timeline for rolling those messages out to the relevant audience(s). That remains true today. However, the global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has created an information overload. It is now more important than ever to streamline communications.

To do this:

» Create a system for cascading information from leaders to team members

» Ensure that all communications are consistent – in tone, in message, in level of urgency

» Reduce or eliminate non-essential communications – if it's not timely in the moment, push pause, even if that decision ruffles some strategic feathers

Consider these examples from three health systems.

EXAMPLE

Team members at a health system were used to receiving updates through a variety of newsletters and emails. Given the need to provide focus on COVID-19 updates, leadership halted all other communications and instead condensed all updates into a single email focused on the current situation. The approach was decisive yet thoughtful, rolling out an important change without appearing as heavy-handed.

EXAMPLE

A health system convenes a 15-minute standing meeting every Monday, Wednesday and Friday where the chief medial officer provides a briefing on the state of the system's response to the pandemic and on those few priorities that required employees' focus that day.

EXAMPLE

A health system records two versions of a video update – one for team members and one for community partners like the chamber of commerce and the local YMCA. The update includes the current local situation, the organization's response, and ways for the community to help.

Tip:

Consider adopting the "Five for Five" model where appropriate. In each huddle or daily rounding, provide five things that the participants – whether nurses or operational leaders – need to remember. This helps provide clarity and knowledge in the midst of the cloud of information, ensuring the right message will get through and relieving the team's stress.
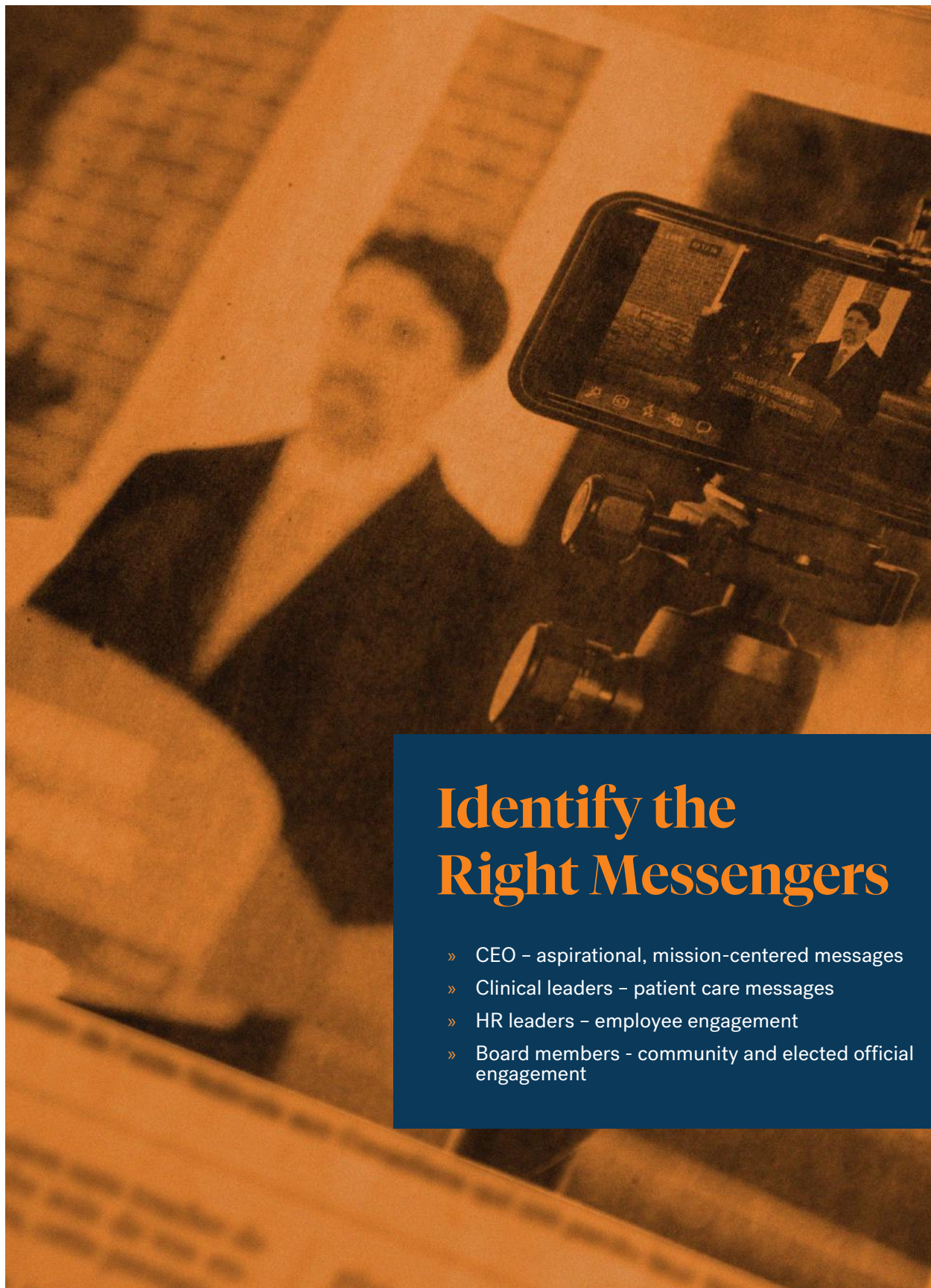
Identify the Right Messengers

» CEO – aspirational, mission-centered messages

» Clinical leaders – patient care messages

» HR leaders – employee engagement

» Board members - community and elected official engagement

In all communications, the messenger is just as important as the message. In times of crisis, it is vital to identify which individual should be delivering which message.

Tip:

Start internally. Employees are your most important audience. They are stressed and will continue to feel stressed. Help relieve the tension by:

» Providing timely, transparent updates

» Personally engaging employees

» Taking quick action to address concerns

For example:

THE CEO

Is responsible for the organization's mission and should therefore be offering inspirational messages centered on the big-picture mission, vision and values. Encourage team members by talking about "our calling as caregivers" and how "we're all in this together."

THE CLINICIAN

Clinical leaders are the most credible leaders when it comes to medical issues and questions about patient care – and even team member safety. Equip an individual or small group of physician and nurse leaders to be the voice for clinical issues.

HUMAN RESOURCES

We know that this current situation will unfold over the course of months, not days or weeks. As such, taking care of employees' mental and emotional health is critical. Bring HR leaders to the table and use them to help determine how to communicate best with staff and identify resources needed to prepare and sustain them.

One Health System's Perspective:

"We're using a couple of tried-and-true channels. If your co-workers and physicians are comfortable using certain channels, leverage those. However, sometimes you need to be creative. We're using a COVID-19 command center to serve as the single source of information across our organization. We've opened up our daily briefing call to our approximately 400 leaders, allowing them to listen in and ask questions in real time."

Remember: Responsible Transparency Builds Trust

» Share information at appropriate times to bring a sense of purpose and confidence

» Responsibly share information to limit panic and confusion

» Match the messenger with the message

In times of crisis, it's important to share information that is truthful and transparent but doesn't cause chaos. Providers may be forced to plan for the worst-case scenario, including resource shortages and capacity issues. At the same time, they need to build confidence among team members and reduce fear within the community at large. Bring a sense of purpose and confidence to communications by being proactive. Foreshadow potential scenarios and related planning efforts. While doing so, be targeted in the information you share and its timing. It may not be necessary – or even possible – to present every detail. But a word of caution: Don't mistake the need to be transparent with creating information overload.

What about the numbers?

There may be no greater example of the transparency challenge than data on testing and COVID-19-related patient census. Reporters are asking these questions daily. To handle that tense situation, share the facts. Provide the number of people your organization has tested and how many of those are positive. Share the number of people affected (following all HIPAA and other privacy considerations, of course).

Tip:

Partner with local or state departments of health, or a consortium of providers in your community, to distribute data about the number of sick patients and the number of people tested. Your organization should be sharing what is appropriate. But as the numbers continue to grow, it may be useful to have an agency to help manage requests for data.

ONE HEALTH SYSTEM'S PERSPECTIVE

"The command center approach has helped us. We were notified about our first COVID-19 patient at midnight. With the command center team together on the phone, we were quickly able to make tough decisions about transparency. For example, we knew that our patient had been in two of our walk-in clinics the week before. We were able to activate plans to inform staff and clean those buildings. We made a decision about transparency, and we feel we made the right one."

MORE THAN COMMUNICATIONS

Transparency applies to communications but is really about leadership. As a leader goes, so goes the rest of the team. Leading with confidence and clarity about what you know – and don't know – gives your team the opportunity to be confident. Chaotic communications and unfocused messaging, though, can result in chaotic and unfocused staff.

Have a Plan to Communicate the Most-Likely Covid-19 Scenarios.

» Patient/employee infection

» Patient/employee death

» Capacity issues

It's critical to have a strategy for when and how you're going to communicate major milestones. Whether you've yet to see your first COVID-19 positive test or you're already struggling with capacity issues, develop a set of core messages that will guide individual communications.

To streamline that process, focus on:

» The main issues (high level concerns and potential scenarios)

» How your organization is preparing

» The audiences that need to hear each message

» The tools needed to reach each audience

» The timing for each message

» The role of your team in addressing the issues

Creating core messages and even draft communications materials in advance will help your organization be ready to respond. Further, it will help ensure that everyone involved is prepared and stays on message. Preparation reduces the chance that someone will go off script and inadvertently create an unnecessary problem.

Tip:

Start with what you know, be creative when necessary. If there are communications channels, whether internal or external, that work well for your organization, continue to leverage them as much as possible. If Facebook has been a valuable tool for communicating with your community, keep it going. Don't feel obligated to start pumping out information on every other social media platform.

COVID-19 has obviously placed some restrictions on how people gather and communicate. Therefore, some mechanisms like a townhall meeting aren't available. You may need to adjust the cadence of other channels accordingly. Instead of sending a weekly newsletter and hosting a quarterly townhall, the speed with which the situation is changing may mean you shift to a twice-weekly newsletter. Or, a weekly newsletter with a weekly call for people to listen in on. No matter what you land on, make as many of these operational decisions in advance so that your team is able to activate the right channels and present the right message at the right time.

Highlight the positive

It can be easy to get lost in the challenging and the negative during a crisis, especially one of this magnitude with no clear end in sight. But finding the roses among the thorns is critical to push through the difficult situation and prepare for what comes after it.

INFUSE GRATITUDE

Every message shared with your team should come with an acknowledgment of and thanks for the work they are doing. Doctors, nurses and support staff and everyone else – leadership included – are stressed and fearful. As you communicate, take a moment to consider whether you've conveyed your appreciation. This is a time when everyone needs it.

EASE THE BURDEN

Pair your words of gratitude with actions to demonstrate it. It starts with the communications tips presented throughout this paper. Show steadiness and consistency and preparedness by proactively offering information at regular intervals and in ways that connect with the people receiving it. But alleviating the burden on caregivers goes far beyond communications. We have heard from providers that are:

» Converting unused facilities into childcare centers because schools are closed

» Offering recliners, pillows and blankets in command centers

» Providing meals for employees

» Advising team members to look into employee assistance resources

Not sure where to begin?

Simply start asking people, **"What do you need?"** Ask directly. Then work with HR to build mechanisms to collect answers so that you can quickly target the best ways to make an impact and demonstrate your support for your team's incredible work.

A note on media relations

The media is pursuing stories about COVID-19 rapidly. Provider organizations are inundated with requests. The importance of transparency does not mean an organization must answer every media question; it means sharing as much as is appropriate and being authentic about what you are or are not ready to share.

QUESTIONS ABOUT CAPACITY

As the pandemic grows, so do questions about testing, hospital preparedness, capacity issues and workforce concerns. Here, as in "what about the numbers" above, it is important to be cautiously confident. Don't overstate your organization's ability, but use the position of authority and trust to reassure the public that you are doing all you can to provide care to all who need it.

HIGHLIGHT INNOVATION

COVID-19 will be a major story with a long shelf life. This creates the opportunity for providers to showcase innovation. For example, it's no secret that the use of telehealth is accelerating rapidly in this moment of social distancing and quarantine. Talk to the media about how your organization is delivering outstanding care through different methods and describe how that could set the stage for a post-COVID-19 world.

EMPHASIZE THE HEROES

Now that the stories have mostly moved past the "firsts" – first COVID-19 positive patient, first infected employee – there is an opportunity to highlight patient stories and celebrate caregivers. This will reinforce the outstanding care your organization is delivering, while also boosting morale during a challenging time.

ONE HEALTH SYSTEM'S PERSPECTIVE

"We are shifting into a different type of message. If you have a positive story to tell related to COVID-19, now is a great time to do it. For example, we are taking unused areas at some of our hospitals and making them into negative-pressure isolation rooms to prepare for a potential surge. That's a message that is reassuring to the community, but it's also a physical place we can safely bring the media into because it's not a patient area."

Look towards the future. The crisis isn't over when it's over.

The long-term financial effects of the pandemic won't be clear for a long time. But significant disruption across the industry is inevitable. And, with the recently passed stimulus including $100 billion in relief for hospitals, now is the time to start laying the groundwork for your organization's financial future. Be in conversation with your elected officials and policy makers today about resources that are on the way soon, as well as long-term plans and needs for your organization and the industry. Additionally, engage your staff and community stakeholders when the time is right, so they understand the great pressures your organization is facing and the challenges ahead. Work to make them all partners with you for what may be the difficult journey to come.

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