

Communication - how business success will be determined in 2021

 By [Annelize van Rensburg](#)

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The speed with which the C-suite was tasked with managing monumental change as the Covid-19 pandemic took hold is unprecedented. However, one thing is becoming clear: no "new normal" is possible without robust new communication skills.



One of the most important trends for 2021 is communication, which will inform every other strategy implemented on the long road to recovery in the new year.

Navigating the impacts of Covid-19 on business has been likened to building the airplane as we're flying it. Senior managers are using knowledge passed on from medical and business experts to determine their potential next move - but the catch with a "novel" virus that there are no absolutes.

The only thing anyone can be sure of at this stage is the importance of communications, and mastering the art of distance management. A recent Conference Board survey polled 1,100 workers in the USA and determined that only 28% expect returning to the workplace by the end of 2020, and 38% expect to return "at some point in 2021 or beyond".

In South Africa, *BusinessInsider* reports that large corporates - including Dimension Data, Shoprite and RMB - are looking at longer-term "blended" options of allowing staff to work from home at least part of the time.

Trust and the long-distance relationship

It's clear the C-suite needs to implement change on a large scale, the success of which will be in their collective ability to communicate on all of the platforms available. And it goes far deeper than getting a message to staff members or clear instructions on jobs to be done. It's about relationships, motivation and importantly, trust.

Communication is often easy to misconstrue: you heard what he didn't say and he meant what you never heard. Perception plays a huge role in understanding, and when meetings are not face-to-face, there are no facial expressions or body language cues that often help with understanding.

So, what moves must the C-suite as a cohesive team make to ensure consistent messaging, motivation among staff members and, crucially, trust?

Online journal *Timesheets* suggests management take a quick personal inventory to decide whether they are able to trust others to carry out their commitment, based on whether they naturally trust people or are a sceptic.

Unfortunately as, say, the CEO, your lack of trust will show in behaviours such as setting up a Friday 4.45pm Zoom meeting with your staff. The perception is not "my CEO is so motivating" as much as "my CEO doesn't believe I'm working a full day".

Checking in with remote workers consistently can be extremely motivating and sometimes it's the platform you use that makes all the difference. Some remote workers do best with a video chat periodically, others need a personal phone call to assist and assure them they're on track.

All those great expectations

Reports abound about workers spending far more time on the job from home than they ever did in the office, and presenteeism – the act of showing up at work but achieving little – has waned.

However, key to this trend continuing is a C-suite that understands work-life balance and boundaries. In an "always on" world, it's easy to suddenly remember an actionable request and call an employee without considering the time of your call or that you've just asked them to work through the weekend.

The successful executive will be mindful of boundaries, as well as the importance of work-life balance to the mental health of both themselves and their staff. By the very nature of the job, the CIO making urgent calls on Sundays is often warranted. The CFO, not so much.

Expectations must be in line with the employees' position and conditions of employment. Work over and above that may be required and a personal call or face-to-face meeting would be appropriate, just as you'd make time to speak to the employee if he or she was in the office.

The C-suite: Who cares?

As the pandemic continues to keep the world on its toes, the C-suite is being heavily relied upon to ensure staff wellness, make the right decisions about remote work and meet shareholder expectations in an uncertain economy. So, who takes care of them?

Companies are looking to integrated support systems for executives, where holistic counselling that includes advice on physical fitness, healthy eating, stress reduction, sleep hygiene and even meditation can help prevent C-suite burnout.

Eleven months down the line, today's "normal" isn't so new anymore, and executives who are setting up robust workplace systems while building their own resilience and emotional quotient (EQ), as well as understanding the importance of work-life balance for staff and themselves are the ones who will withstand further change that may lie ahead.

Importantly, all of this starts with effective, efficient communications.

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