



Organisational Crisis Communication in the Post Pandemic Era: Impacts on Employee Engagement and Trust in Indian IT Firms

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Abstract - The COVID-19 pandemic served as a deep, global organizational crisis, driving a drastic and prompt transformation in work environment, predominantly within the Indian Information Technology (IT) sector. This paper studies the evolution of organisational crisis communication in the post-pandemic era and its consequent effect on employee engagement and trust within Indian IT firms. The research claims that the pandemic acted as a critical, basically shifting crisis communication from a responsive, top-down dissemination of information to a continuous, transparent, and empathetic dialogue central to sustaining the human element of the organization. Through an analysis of the immediate shift to remote and hybrid work models, the paper explores how consistent, and compassionate communication became the primary tool for mitigating anxiety, fostering a sense of belonging, and maintaining effective organisation. It further investigates how the demonstrated authenticity of leadership during this period became a critical element in either reinforcing or eroding employee trust.

Keywords - Crisis Communication, Employee Engagement, Organizational Trust, Post-Pandemic Workplace, Indian IT Industry, Hybrid Work Model, Leadership Communication, Remote Work.

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was more than a global health emergency; it was an unprecedented organizational crisis that tested the grounds of corporate governance, operational resilience, and human resource management. For the Indian Information Technology (IT) sector, the pandemic presented a unique set of challenges in a foundation of the nation's economy and a global outsourcing hub. Immediately, organizations, companies, business and corporate sectors that thrived on collocated, collaborative environments were compelled to transition their massive workforces to a remote operating model. This sudden dislocation disrupted not only workflows but also the intricate social and communicative fabric that binds employees to an organization. In this context, organisational crisis communication emerged from the periphery of public relations to occupy a central, strategic role in determining organisational health. This paper posits that the post-pandemic era has redefined crisis communication within Indian IT firms, transforming it from a detached, event-based response into a constant



and strategic discourse. This evolution has remained to ensure, a profound and direct impact on two critical organizational pillars: employee engagement and organizational trust. The pandemic-era taught lessons in transparency, compassion, and consistent communication have become non-negotiable elements for sustaining a motivated and reliable workforce in the new-fangled, hybrid standard.

Before the pandemic, organisational crisis communication was largely conceptualized through frameworks like Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which chiefly channelled organizations on how to protect their reputation in the wake of a distinct, negative event (Coombs 17). Communication was often periodic, responsive, and directed through official, hierarchical structures. However the pandemic was a diffuse, long-lasting, and widespread calamity with no immediate resolution in hand. It was a "crisis of uncertainty," where the major employee requests shifted from mere information about the occurrence to reassurance about job security, health, and the future of work itself. For Indian IT employees, this uncertainty was compounded by anxieties around digital infrastructure at home, work-life balance blurring into work-life integration, and creates a sense of isolation from their teams and organizational culture. The initial organizational response was, reasonably, focused on stability of business. Those companies, enterprises, and organisations that realised early on that their communication strategy was their main weapon for managing human capital during the chaos were the ones that prospered.

The impact on employee engagement was instantaneous and multifaceted. Employee engagement, defined as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli and Bakker 295), is highly vulnerable to environmental and psychological factors. The unexpected and sudden shift to remote work dismantled the physical indications and social interactions that often withstand engagement. The proverbial water cooler conversations, team lunches, and immediate supervisory provision disappeared, creating a void. Crisis communication filled this void. All-hands virtual meetings conducted by senior leadership, transparent updates on company performance, client sentiments, and flawless procedures on remote work policies became the new commentators. For instance, when firms like Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) announced its "Secure Borderless Workspaces" (SBWS) vision—a model aiming to have 75% of its workforce working from home by 2025—it was not merely an working policy shift but a powerful communicative act (Press Trust of India). It provided a clear, forward-looking narrative, decreasing ambiguity and giving employees a sense of direction amidst the chaos. This strategic communication helped re-engage employees by aligning them with a shared, future-oriented goal.

On the other hand, firms that resorted to sparse, solely task-oriented communication observed as a steep decline in engagement. When communication is sporadic during a crisis, the space is often filled with chitchats, misinformation, and discriminating anxiety. Employees, disconnected from the organization, began to feel like mere executors of tasks rather than valued members of a collective. Their dedication in work declined as they felt unsupported, and their energy was exhausted by the constant stress of uncertainty. The channel of communication also played a critical role. The over-reliance on email, a one-way communication tool, proved insufficient. The most effective strategies leveraged a multi-channel approach, including video messages from



CEOs to humanize leadership, dedicated FAQ portals on intranets, and regular check-ins by line managers trained to spot signs of disengagement and stress. This demonstrated an organizational commitment to the employee's well-being beyond their productivity, which is a key driver of sustained engagement.

Perhaps the most significant impact of crisis communication during and after the pandemic has been on organizational trust. Trust, the “willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of another party” (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 712), is the base of any employment relationship. The pandemic placed this vulnerability under a microscope. Employees were vulnerable in terms of their health, job security, and psychological well-being. The organization's communication became the primary evidence upon which employees judged its trustworthiness. Actions, in a remote world, were largely invisible; words and policies were the noticeable reality around the world. Leadership communication, in specific, became a critical trust-building or breaking tool.

The three key dimensions of trust are ability, benevolence, and integrity was directly tested by crisis communication practices (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman 717). Ability was proven through the organization's competency in handling the crisis: the swift provision of laptops, VPN access, and IT support communicated technical proficiency, while strong and confident updates from leadership communicated managerial skill. Benevolence, the observation that the organization genuinely cares for its employees, was communicated through norms and policies. When Indian IT giants like Infosys and Wipro implemented wide-ranging employee assistance programs, offered wellness leaves, and provided allowances for home office setups, these actions were commanding. However, it was the communication surrounding these actions that enlarged their trust-building effect.

The dimension of integrity, the perception that the organization obeys to a set of principles and is honest, was the most delicate. Integrity was built through radical transparency, this means that communication not only the good news but also the challenges the company was facing. When leaders were authentic about potential business headwinds or the difficulties in navigating client relationships, it fostered a culture of honesty. Admitting to not having all the answers was often more trust-building than projecting a facade of infallibility. As noted in a Harvard Business Review analysis of leadership during the pandemic, “What employees need most during a crisis is for their leaders to be calm, clear, and compassionate... and that includes acknowledging the uncertainty” (Folkman 92). Leaders who displayed empathy and authenticity in their video communications by sharing their struggles with lockdowns and remote work were able to forge a stronger, more human connection with their employees, significantly strengthening as perceived integrity and trust.

The post-pandemic era, characterized by the widespread adoption of hybrid work models, has surfaced the strategic importance of these evolved communication practices. The crisis is no longer critical, but the environment remains unstable. The communication patterns established during the peak of the pandemic have now become employee expectations. The hybrid model, with its blend of remote and in-office work, presents a new layer of complexity for communication. There is an intense risk of creating a two-tier workforce: one that is physically present, who enjoys greater



visibility and informal networking opportunities, and another that is remote and potentially isolated from the workplace.

Preventing this schism requires a deliberate and inclusive communication strategy. Crisis communication principles must now be applied to this crisis of proximity. This involves ensuring that all meetings are structured to be hybrid-friendly, with remote participants having an equal voice. It requires managers to be even more intentional about checking in with their remote team members, not just to discuss tasks but to foster connection with one another.

The communication must consistently reinforce that contribution and value of the employees are not determined by physical location. For example, a manager stating explicitly in a team call, “We want to ensure our colleagues joining remotely are fully included in this discussion, so let's make sure we use the chat function and speak clearly,” is a simple but powerful communicative act that builds trust and inclusion. Furthermore, the content of communication must continue to address the “new normal,” openly discussing the evolving policies on hybrid work, performance metrics, and career progression in a non-collocated environment. A lack of clarity or perceived equity in these areas can quickly erode the trust meticulously built during the pandemic.

The role of Internal Communication (IC) departments within Indian IT firms has consequently been raised. Previously often viewed as a support function for disseminating newsletters and organizing events, the IC function is now recognized as a strategic partner. It is tasked with crafting the narratives that uphold cultural cohesion, measuring employee sentiment through regular pulses and surveys, which equip leaders and managers with the skills to communicate effectively in this new landscape. The data gathered by IC provides the evidence base for refining communication strategies, ensuring they are responsive to employee needs and concerns. This data-driven approach to communication is a direct legacy of the pandemic, where understanding the mood of the organization was critical for stability.

However, this new paradigm is not without its challenges.

The nature of digital communication, aggravated by remote work, has led to widespread stress and Zoom fatigue. There is a delicate balance to be struck between being communicative and being overwhelming. Employees can become insensitive to a constant group of messages, leading to what can be termed “communication fatigue,” where important updates are lost in the clatter. Therefore, the modern crisis communication strategy must also be respectful of boundaries. This involves consolidating communication where possible, designating “focus hours” free from meetings, and leadership openly approving the significance of disconnecting. This, in itself, is a dominant trust-building message, signifying that the organization values the long-term well-being of its employees over short-term, hyper-connectivity.

The Indian cultural context adds another layer of nuance. The IT sector in India often structures a more prominent control compared to Western counterparts, where employees may have been historically less likely to voice concerns or challenge authority. The remote environment could potentially amplify this, making it harder for dissenting voices or signs of disengagement to surface. Proactive and empathetic



communication from leadership must, therefore, actively invite feedback and build safe channels for it. Anonymous surveys, virtual open houses with HR, and managers trained to solicit honest opinions are crucial to ensure that communication is not just top-down but a genuine dialogue. By actively seeking and, more importantly, acting upon employee feedback, organizations demonstrate that they value their employees' voices, which is a profound enhancer of both engagement and trust.

II. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic irreversibly changed the background of organisational crisis communication for Indian IT firms. It thrust communication from a planned, outlying activity into the strategic core of organizational management. The extended and ambiguous nature of the crisis confirmed that effective communication is not merely about communicating information but about nurturing resilience, sustaining engagement, and building enduring trust. The pre-pandemic models of crisis response were found deficient, giving way to a new pattern on constant transparency, discernible empathy, and authentic leadership discourse.

The findings of this analysis indicate that in the post-pandemic, hybrid-driven era, the principles of crisis communication are no longer reserved for emergencies but have become integral to daily operations. Employee engagement, once fostered through physical proximity and shared social spaces, is now critically dependent on consistent and inclusive communication that makes every employee, regardless of location, feel noticed, heard, and valued. Organizational trust, the fragile foundation of the employer-employee relationship, is now built and maintained primarily through communicative acts that prove the organization's ability, generosity, and integrity in navigating an indefinite world.

For Indian IT firms aiming to retain their competitive edge in the global market, the imperative is clear. Investing in a sophisticated, strategic, and human-centric communication function is not an optional overhead but a critical business necessity in today's modern world. This involves equipping leaders at all levels to be effective communicators, leveraging technology to foster inclusive hybrid interactions, and unceasingly listening to the employee voice to guide strategy. Organisations who understand that the pandemic problem has taught them a valuable lesson that in a world that has grown increasingly digital and fragmented, the most important thing connecting the modern workforce is clear, compassionate, and consistent communication—will thrive. Communication that builds trust and encourages participation is essential to the hybrid workplace of the future.

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