

Call Your Furloughed Employees! They Miss You

When businesses furlough employees, it's with the goal of bringing them back to work once circumstances change. Being furloughed can be a shock for the employee. It's important to alleviate the stress they feel, and ensure their continued connection to the business, so they'll want to come back when you need them. You do it by keeping them in the loop. Like with any relationship, communication builds trust, loyalty, engagement, and commitment. And, like in any relationship, when communication breaks down, you can expect the relationship to go with it. The saying, "out of sight, out of mind" applies to employees. Taking steps to ensure your employees feel connected to the business is paramount.

You don't need to look any further than Ellen Degeneres's current situation to see the effects of poor employee communication and lack of transparency right now. On April 7, Ellen said she "wanted to start doing my new show as soon as possible" for "my staff and crew. I love them, I miss them, the best thing I can do to support them is to keep the show on the air." Hmm. Not according to her crew. [Variety](#) reported that Ellen's core stage crew, about 30 employees, hadn't received any communication from the show about their employment status or their pay. They also complained that nobody had checked in for more a month about their physical or mental health. "Radio silence from producers created anxiety among crew members who feared they would be furloughed and, in that case, would need to explore unemployment benefits," according to the Variety article. The show ended up cutting pay and hiring a non-union crew to set up Ellen's home-based set.

Yikes. A reputation that took years to develop as a friendly, compassionate person is now in jeopardy. Not to mention that many of her employees are disgruntled and may jump ship when this blows over. According to the same article, Jimmy Kimmel and John Oliver are paying their crew's full rate during the crisis.

Leaders in any business can learn from this tale. Furloughed employees are nervous and transparency eases that. Your furloughed employees will appreciate you remembering them and keeping them informed – even if the news is not good, or if you don't have all the answers. There are many ways you can keep in touch. If your staff is small, a Zoom meeting or even a personal phone call can go a long way. If your staff is larger, a regular email or text, or even better, a short video, will ease people's minds. It just needs to be compassionate, on a regular basis, and honest.

Here are a few more tips:

1. Acknowledge any pain and anxiety the employees feel and thank them for their commitment.
2. Speak plainly and keep it real. Nobody is in the mood for "corporate-speak." Just use your regular speaking style.
3. Keep it short – there's no need to write a novel. Keep it to the relevant details.
4. Don't sugarcoat the facts – transparency will be appreciated, even if the news is not good. People like to be prepared for what's coming.

5. Be a leader. In difficult times, it gives people comfort to see the boss. Like FDR told American people in his first Fireside Chat during the banking crisis of 1933, “it is your problem . . . no less than it is mine. Together we cannot fail.” Let your people know you’re in it with them.

Jill Santopietro Panall, owner of Newburyport, Massachusetts-based [21Oak HR Consulting](#), works with small business leaders on their HR needs. She says, “We make sure employees are okay, find out if they need extra assistance, and assure them we want them back.” Before Covid-19 hit, unemployment was at an all-time low and employers were having a difficult time finding and keeping employees. We can expect that will be the case again once this crisis is over. Jill’s clients know that their people will appreciate how well they were treated.

The employee communication needs to be as rigorous now as ever, even more so. Make sure your furloughed employees know they are remembered, appreciated, and that you are looking forward to seeing them again – at work.