

## 3 ways to Calm the PR storm After an Executive Departs

By Beki Winchel | July 25, 2018

A crisis can quickly befall any organization, especially if an executive slips up or announces a resignation.

Papa John's PR team has been scrambling [in the wake of its former chief executive and founder](#) leaving ([after using a racial slur](#)). [Elon Musk has been both championed and criticized](#) for his bold tweets, [which has affected both his organizations](#), SpaceX and Tesla. Starbucks is [saying goodbye to its chief of nearly 40 years](#), Howard Schultz—and [Uber is still facing pressure](#), even after former Expedia chief Dara Khosrowshahi took over [after the startup ousted its co-founder and former chief](#), Travis Kalanick.

Here are three ways you can quickly and effectively communicate an executive's departure or another leadership-level crisis—and keep your organization's reputation intact:

### 1. Align your messages and create a consistent brand voice.

Your PR and marketing campaigns aren't the only communications measures that must be clear, crisp and unified with your brand's tone and voice.

"It's crucial that the messaging being communicated to all audiences is uniform," says Jill Davison, vice president of corporate and brand communications for [Meredith Corporation](#). "It's particularly critical that both parties are clear and agree on how they're communicating the employee's departure."

Jamie Izaks, president of [All Points Public Relations](#), agrees and says keeping a consistent response is important.

"[T]he company as a whole should be on the same page regarding its stance internally," Izaks says.

Internal communications is just as important during these times as external communications. Rachel Miller, director of [All Things IC](#), says effective internal communications strategies help make "clear, consistent and accurate" messages possible.

She says:

... You should have effective channels in place, line managers should understand their role in sharing information and aiding the flow of communication and everyone should be looking to amplify employees' voices. If you have a robust structure in place for your internal communication channels, you can deal with whatever gets thrown at you.

"No one likes to be caught off guard in a position how to manage conversations for which they don't know how to manage effectively," says Tim Gibbon, founder and director of [Elemental Communications](#).

## 2. Keep employees in the loop.

Many communicators worry about communicating effectively to journalists, investors and consumers when an executive does or says something that brings backlash to the organization.

However, you shouldn't forget your staff when sharing news of a resignation or firing—or handling another sticky situation.

Davison says:

[A] senior executive who works with the impacted employee's team should communicate the news and, if appropriate, have the impacted employee present and say a few words. Immediately after the team is notified, distribute an internal announcement to the rest of the employee base (if applicable) that reinforces what was communicated verbally to the team.

Izaks suggests first discussing an executive's departure with senior employees, then taking it to the affected team or department. After meeting with senior leaders, some PR pros might move to communicate the change to the entire office, "depending on the office culture and size."

He says:

In-person communications versus email is always a better way to go when it comes to communicating this type of change so that all involved can sense the tone of the communications being conveyed.

"No employee wants to learn about a senior level departure—or anything, for that matter—in the press before being informed first via an internal message from their CEO," says Davison.

By seamlessly communicating tough news, you can not only mitigate a bigger crisis—you can also set up your employees for a positive environment moving forward.

"A change of leadership often leads to a change of company culture," Miller says. "Setting the tone for their exit is as important as planning an entrance strategy for a new leader."

Don't wait until a leader is negatively affecting your organization's culture to have discussions with your employees. Just as good crisis communications follow a plan that has been established long before an incident occurs, change management and communications should start before you're forced to relay bad news or correct a problem.

Davison says:

Gathering employees in ongoing town hall meetings is the best tactic — these forums provide access for employees to ask the company's C-Suite questions and gives them the chance to be heard. Nothing beats in-person communication!

Continue proactive communications before a crisis such as an executive leaving happens.

Izaks says:

... [I]n anticipation of a departing executive, the most critical component of the communication is to have an action plan in place, because your team is going to want to know how this impacts them — what opportunities does it present and what challenges does it offer.

Izaks advises communicators to address who is assuming the former executive's duties, how documents and tasks will be handed off and how much time (if any) the person will spend with the organization before leaving.

### **3. Foster trust through listening and transparent communications.**

A big part of effectively handling a leadership crisis is taking steps to rebuild trust. Start this immediately by being transparent in your communications from the start—and listen to your employees as well as external stakeholders.

These practices, like all good preventative communications, should be enacted long before an executive departs.

Davison says:

Building trust and creating a transparent environment starts with the CEO. The CEO should inform employees regularly and articulate the organization's vision and strategy clearly — clear enough that employees are able to articulate that vision and strategy.

Davison says that your chief executive officer walking the halls of your office, attending informal team meetings or even eating at the organization's cafeteria can also establish open dialogue and foster a culture where employees are in the know—and interfacing with your organization's leaders.

Relationships are also paramount when it comes to interacting with the leader who is causing your reputational woes.

Miller says the most effective way to handle outspoken executives is focusing on building strong relationships where you can communicate the consequences of their words and actions, whether that comes with negative headlines or a decreased stock price.

“When you have a strong, visible leader, particularly a founder, one cannot separate the two when it comes to reputation,” Miller says. “Their actions impact the company and their personal brand.”

Whatever you do, don't leave your communications plans until the crisis is in full swing.

Gibbon says:

Waiting for a situation to occur then trying to deal with fallout is a recipe for disaster. Organizations need to be equipped beforehand and know how to manage communications, not only when things are going great, but for when issues arise and that require a different type of management.