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# **Unravelling the What and How of Organizational Communication to Employees during COVID-19 pandemic: Adopting an Attributional Lens**

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## **Abstract**

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in a massive, unexpected, and sudden disruption to billions of employees in many sectors, including the higher education sector. Employees turn to organizational leaders for information, which heightens demands for effective communication of critical decisions. While human resources (HR), communication and organizational change research has developed some knowledge about when communications are successful in ‘getting the message across’, insights about the antecedents of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ elements of these communications have not been a focus of previous research efforts. There may be a significant variability in ‘what’ and ‘how’ institutions communicate with staff. In this context, a team of international scholars have started an international project with the goal of improving our understanding on the antecedents of messages sent by universities to their staff using the attribution perspective as an overarching analytical framework. Although, 30+ participants from Australasia, North America, Europe and Asia are already involved, participants from across the globe are still joining the project to allow for a cross-cultural analysis of the data.

In 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in a massive, unexpected, and sudden disruption to billions of employees around the world. Organizations and employees have been forced to transform their operational routines virtually overnight. This has resulted in unprecedented demands on managers to make decisions in very uncertain conditions. In times of crises such as those, employees turn to organizational leaders for information, which heightens demands for effective communication of critical decisions (Van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes, & Vliegenhart, 2017; Van Zoonen & Van der Meer, 2015). In general, in the ‘new normal’ resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic many white-collar and professional employees are working from home. This presents a whole range of communication challenges. In response, organizations have adopted technology-driven solutions, where managers communicate time-critical information via multiple channels including but not limited to email, intranet, video conferencing, and other tools.

Globally, the impact of COVID-19 has been devastating in many sectors including the higher education sector (Wang, Cheng, Yue, & McAleer, 2020). An important question within this sector is

how senior leaders communicate with staff, students and other stakeholders about both the immediate future as well as potential long-term transformations within the university and the broader education sector. We have conducted an initial assessment of how senior leaders within universities across the world are dealing with the COVID-19 crisis from a communication perspective. As in many organizations, our initial research suggests that a considerable amount of communication from Vice Chancellors/President, Deans and/or Heads of Department has occurred via email although other mediums also are in use. These messages have focused on news about infections in students or employees, encouragement to follow hygiene rules and to maintain social distancing, as well as the need to rapidly shift from face-to-face to online teaching, procedures related to working from home, and more recently, the emerging financial consequences of the COVID-19 crisis for universities.

One of the challenges for senior managers is that there has been a need to convey a huge amount of information to employees, and to manage multiple mediums and used by multiple senior managers. While human resources (HR), communication and organizational change research has developed some knowledge about when communications are successful in ‘getting the message across’ (see for reviews Hewett, Shantz, Mundy & Alfes, 2018; Wang, Kim, Rafferty & Sanders, 2020), insights about the antecedents of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ elements of these communications have not been a focus of previous research efforts. Therefore, we seek to address how crisis communication messages from leaders are formulated and how they are received by employees. In this context we aim to provide more insight in how universities globally deal with these communications to staff. Next, we first elaborate on attribution theory, a framework central to crisis management communication, and which will assist us in our understanding of (the effects of) these messages.

**Attribution theory: People as ‘naïve’ psychologists.** Understanding how individuals perceive and cognitively process crisis events and related (post)crisis messages are vital to alleviate the harm that may be caused by events such as COVID-19 (Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2010). Coombs (1995; 2007) developed a framework for understanding crisis communication, which is based on attribution theory (Kelly, 1967). This theory contends that people, as naïve psychologists, try to make sense of the situation around them. This framework has been successfully applied to understand HR (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Sanders & Yang, 2016) and organizational change issues (Sanders &

Rafferty, 2020; Nguyen, Schwarz, & Sanders, 2019). Extending the application of attribution theory to crisis communication, and drawing from its core tenets, we argue that employees are more likely to understand communications from their management as intended when the messages are *distinctive* (the messages are standing out in the environment, thereby capturing attention and arousing interest), are *consistent* (the information in the messages is the same across all situations) and are *consensual* (multiple actors are sending out the same information). When messages are perceived as distinctive, consistent, and consensual, employees attribute the information in the messages to their management (*entity or stimuli*) and can understand what is expected from them. In all other cases, employees are more inclined to attribute the message to themselves or to circumstances, and struggle to understand the information.

For instance, if employees receive regular emails from their manager about the importance of staying healthy, and these emails provide clear information (distinctive), are consistent across the many emails that are communicated, and the messages are similar from different departments and different hierarchical levels (consensus), employees understand that staying healthy and employee well-being is very important for this organization. On the other hand, if managers communicate the importance of health on Monday but on Wednesday focus on the importance of productivity and meeting targets, employees will be confused about the intentions of management, and will not understand what is expected from them. In this respect, given the great amount of uncertainty during this pandemic, highly distinctive, consistent and consensual messages about COVID-19 should be able to mobilize employees to act collectively in accordance with management's intention. Previous research shows that employees' understanding of management's intention is positive related to their commitment to the organization, their engagement, their well-being, (mental) health and productivity (see for reviews Hewett et al, 2018; Wang et al, 2020).

**Antecedents: A novel research avenue.** In comparison to the effects of distinctive, consistent and consensual messages, we lack knowledge about other characteristics of managerial messages that influence employees' responses. The lack of knowledge is especially noticeable when we consider the antecedents that influence which messages are conveyed by organizations. For instance, there are a range of questions that we are not currently able to answer including; do large

organizations communicate similarly to all their employees, do subsidiaries from an US or Chinese multinational differ in their messages depending on the country of the subsidiary, and what factors determine who signs off on messages. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the uniqueness of the situation allows for opportunities to conduct new and exciting research. In this context, our project entitled "COVID-19 Messages to University Staff: An International HR and Change Perspective" aims to offer more insight in how universities globally are communicating with their employees, especially in terms a) *what* is the content of the messages, b) *how* are these messages communicated (e.g., e-mail, video, website, combination of strategies, and are these messages distinctive, consistent and consensual) and c) what factors predict the development of distinctive, consistent and consensual managerial messages. Both the content and the way the communication is formulated will be examined from a multi-level framework including characteristics of the countries (region, cultural values, institutional data and the development of the virus in that country) and the universities (ranking, size, gender and background of Vice Chancellor/President and the Dean, percentage of international students). For instance, we expect that countries high in power distance will communicate in a more directive way and will pay less attention to the distinctiveness, consistency and consensus of their messages. Also, we expect that more people-oriented countries and female leaders will, even when the message is difficult, try to send out a clear message about the content but also that they care about their employees.

To address these research questions, we decided to collect archival data from universities across the world. Some universities have been updating their staff regularly with daily and weekly messages about COVID-19, whereas in other cases staff are less informed by their management and have to rely on news from their governments. All these messages will be analyzed in terms of distinctiveness, consistency and consensus, as well as the content and the 'tone' of these messages. Scholars around the world have been invited to participate resulting to date in acceptance to participate from 35 universities in 14 countries, including Australia, countries in North America, countries in Europe, and countries in (South-east) Asia. With this large-scale cross-country study, we intend to draw important lessons and develop knowledge of how organizations can more effectively

communicate with staff during a global crisis. We hope to inform you soon with some novel insights from our joint international project on communication in universities during COVID-19!

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