

5 ways doctors can improve leadership communication during crisis

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The COVID-19 pandemic is heightening stress and workloads at health care organizations of all kinds. That makes it incumbent on the physicians leading these organizations to enhance their communication during this ongoing crisis, sharing the right information at the right time.

“It’s important for us to recognize that our employees trust us in our communication with them,” Suja Mathew, MD, chair of medicine for Cook County Health and Hospitals System in Chicago, said during a recent AMA webinar.

Dr. Mathew, an AMA delegate for the American College of Physicians, offered some advice for physician leaders on how to improve their organizations’ communications amid the COVID-19 crisis.

Share information quickly

One of Dr. Mathew’s favorite comic creators is Charles Schultz, who said, “Life is like a 10-speed bicycle. Most of us have gears that we never use.”

“Many of us have shifted into a higher gear over the last many months,” said Dr. Mathew, adding that “speed is critical in our communication.”

“People need to hear from us as employers, as physicians and scientists, very quickly at the organizational level,” she said. “We need to make sure that we are putting together an optimal team.”

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Ensure accuracy of information

“It is going to be absolutely essential that your audience trusts you,” said Dr. Mathew. “One of the best things you can do to build that trust is by creating communications that are, in fact, transparent.”

“For example, a lot of anxiety in my own organization—and many organizations—at the start of COVID were directed around PPE [personal protective equipment],” she said, adding that they sent “out communications regularly that documented exactly how many boxes of gloves, how many boxes of N95s we had in stock at any given time.

“That was important to show that this was an issue that we were taking seriously, that our employees had the right to be concerned about it, and we were presenting the information in a very transparent manner,” Dr. Mathew added.

The AMA offers resources to help physicians manage their own mental health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic and provides practical strategies for health system leadership to consider in support of their physicians and care teams during COVID-19.

Maintain consistency, allow for change

While consistent communication is vital, it is important to note that during a pandemic or any crisis information will change over time.

“As we learn more and have developed more knowledge, [communication] needs to be consistent, but it needs to allow for change,” said Dr. Mathew. Language such as “based on what we know at this time” should be used because “it allows you to help your readers, or your audience, recognize that this is the best, most accurate, most complete information that you can provide today,” she said.

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Limit number of emails sent

“Keep in mind when you're dealing with email that volume matters,” said Dr. Mathew. “Create a good email system that will provide a complete and clear and targeted message. Don't just send and forward email after email.”

“Clarity of an email is absolutely important, so include extra text only if it's necessary for some readers but highlight or underline the key parts that request action on the part of the reader,” she said. “Aim for no more than two minutes of content within an email.”

Choose words carefully

“When we communicate with our staff, particularly as leaders, we need to acknowledge that our words have great power,” said Dr. Mathew. “Take stock of what you're able to do for your staff. Be honest, be transparent, do not over promise and certainly don't promise that which you cannot deliver.”

Learn more from the AMA's Professional Satisfaction and Practice Sustainability webinar series, which focuses on physician well-being, practice redesign and implementing telehealth during COVID-19.