



EXECUTIVE ACTION NO. 33 AUGUST 2002

One Year After: The Leadership and Communication Dilemma of 9-11-02

by Lynne Morton

At a time when companies are under intense scrutiny because of their poor leadership and lack of communication, another challenge looms on the horizon – what to do on the anniversary of 9/11. For corporate leaders, listening may become more important than speaking.

Crises are situations in which established leaders play prominent roles and new leaders often emerge. However, leadership shows itself just as strongly in post-crisis situations, much like the anniversary of 9/11/01. This is a time for new and old leaders to become visible again.

Just as great leaders are great simplifiers, great companies can find simple ways to focus on renewal rather than on recovery. Without turning this solemn day from a commemoration to a celebration, companies can remember and share their stories, and then move on.

Back to Basics, Not Back to Normal

But what's appropriate or inappropriate? What corporate behavior will be taken as sincere? What might reawaken intense emotions?

The anniversary is a reminder of not only a tragedy of immense historic and economic proportions, but also of the crisis of confidence facing American business overall. Employees and, in fact, all corporate stakeholders are struggling to manage their disappointment, fear, and uncertainty about the future. Many view 9/11/01 as a “trigger event” for that uncertainty. Others view it as an act of war that remains separate from the current corporate malaise.

No matter what the position, business leaders are realizing that this anniversary is an opportunity for leadership communication. Such communication can be powerful, even healing. It can help companies get “down to basics”, albeit not “back to normal.” “Down to basics” is a constructive objective, since it promotes the importance of corporate vision and values, while offering a rejection of the “spin” used by too many organizations. However, “back to normal” is a less constructive objective. It faces us backward, rather than forward, and places us in search of an elusive “normalcy” that we may no longer be able to define.

The dilemma of what “to do” on 9/11/02 involves balancing appropriate commemoration against a range of pressures. At the societal level, there is immense pressure to “do something appropriate.” Few companies seem to think that no action is an option. At the corporate level, there is immense pressure to demonstrate renewed leadership and sensitivity. For those companies whose immediate response was to maintain productivity rather than to emotionally support employees on 9/11/01, this may be a chance to make up for perceived, previous transgressions. At the individual or inter-personal level, there is immense pressure to recognize and respect each other and those lost. This balancing act also must consider that whatever is done may itself be precedent setting.

Lastly, the impending anniversary and its leadership communication challenges present an opportunity to examine what we have learned about change itself.

A Framework for Reacting to Change

Although the phrase “change is the constant rather than the exception” has become almost a cliché, business leaders still shy away from planning for change.

They react to it, rather than anticipate it. They try to manage the small changes, without imagining the large ones. And then there are crises.

Crises are the ultimate forms of change—they are sudden, powerful, often life-threatening. They seem to come from nowhere, while they also seem to touch everyone. Crises force people and organizations to behave differently. Organizations must mobilize new or different forces, assign and accept new responsibilities, and respond rapidly, if not immediately. Crises are times when leaders rise to the surface or when new competencies emerge. The corporate communications actions surrounding 9/11/01, understandably, followed the dynamics of crisis communications.

The dynamics of crisis communication involve an emphasis on content over context. In such situations, the driver is control and, secondarily, support. The ways that messages are presented are less important, as the messages themselves take center stage. Communications are rapid and often brief. The wild cards for crisis or change-related communications are stress and emotion. Leaders, though, reach beyond those uncertainties, to rally their followers and keep them together on a course of action.

One Year Later: A New Set of Communication Challenges

But 9/11/02 presents a different set of dynamics and challenges for corporate leaders. This time, there will be a balance between content and context. Those involved will pay close attention to where, when, and how communications are constructed and delivered. Because there is time for proactive rather than reactive communication, the expectation will be that all factors will be considered. Leaders can, as they do ordinarily,

anticipate the needs and expectations of their audience, which they cannot do in times of crisis. Now they can utilize a wider range of communication options. These communications can be delivered through a variety of channels and of varying lengths.

On this coming 9/11, the driver is not control; it is acknowledgement or commemoration. That also creates new options for action. Listening becomes as important, if not more important, than speaking. As fewer announcements are made or directions given, more invitations for personal action will be suggested or offered. The wild cards now are power and scrutiny. Image protection and the projection of progress become motivating factors.

Let Corporate Culture Determine the Response

In the face of these pressures to “do something” and to show that they are managing change, companies are making different plans that fall into two basic categories. However, the actions also have several elements in common. Actions, events, communication are being positioned as leadership initiatives. They all place corporate leadership at the forefront, and promote the image of the company as a leader. They all reflect the culture of their individual organizations.

Some companies acknowledge that they often hold small group meetings, others that they rely on email for the bulk of their communications. The latter are now struggling to balance the use of email with other communication techniques. Although email is a quick and effective way to communicate, its impersonal style makes it less appropriate for issues, like this one, that are highly emotional and personal. Lastly, it is clear that there is no one appropriate response for all organizations. Companies are seeking to learn from each

other, are sharing ideas and exploring a range of considerations and options, but they are also seeing that their plans can only be made by them directly.

The emerging framework for evaluating potential responses and structuring corporate actions is clustering actions into categories that will allow companies to involve a wide range of their constituents, while also responding to the equally wide range of pressures.

The first category of corporate responses includes those that aim at re-establishing a sense of security. These sorts of responses include announcing the availability of new contingency and crisis plans. Share information about security procedures with all employees, including making sure that security exits are known and available for use. Flag previously unknown security issues. Some organizations have realized that their contingency plans need to go beyond emergency and safety procedures to look at their leadership development and staffing plans. Succession plans are being re-evaluated and potential new competencies targeted with an eye toward buttressing organizational capabilities. Although it is unlikely that such plans will be announced on 9/11/02, the thinking behind them may well be discussed.

Other companies realize that they need more information about what security concerns their employees and customers still have. They plan to use the anniversary to ask for feedback to help them respond more fully as they continue to plan.

The second category of corporate responses includes those that aim at rebuilding a sense of community. These actions take a more personal tone. They include such things as a moment of silence, producing publications or awards that honor lost colleagues/friends and family members, and holding small group or departmental meetings right after the leader-led moment of

silence. There is concern that events, announcements, or other actions, be sincere and honest. As a result, diverse groups of employees are being involved in the planning. This, in itself, will create new ways for personal connections to be made and experiences shared.

Companies are also showing a great deal of respect for individuals and anticipating a higher need for emotional support, either in groups or individually. Because of that, Employee Assistance Plan support groups are being called upon to be on site for the day. Companies also want to honor the need for individual choice on this anniversary. That may include providing the option of taking a personal day off, or using an honor system for time off that day.

Many companies located in lower Manhattan, in the neighborhood of Ground Zero, are still concerned about the broader definition of community. They want to include their local small businesses from whom they buy their newspapers or lunch during the workday, since these businesses have suffered both emotionally and financially. In fact, several companies are seeing this anniversary as a chance to show themselves to be good corporate citizens, restoring the sense of corporate responsibility that has been challenged by recent news.

The sense of community goes beyond the local neighborhood, too, to include suppliers, vendors, business partners, even customers outside of New York City. Their desire to be included in commemorative events is emerging and companies are considering their needs as plans are being formulated.

The emerging framework for corporate responses focuses more on doing the right thing, than on just doing any thing. Although there are concerns that the intense scrutiny surrounding corporate actions may create misperceptions, some companies realize that there

is another risk: that unique actions may be perceived as new precedents. The positioning of corporate actions as one time occurrences, rather than policy or precedent, should be examined.

Key Considerations for Communication Planning

When planning their 9/11/02 communications, companies need to revisit the basics of good communication planning. These include:

- Content—Verbal and Non-verbal. Verbal communication on 9/11/02 will include acknowledgement, sharing, announcements, counsel and responses. Many people may speak, starting with senior management, offering multiple perspectives. Respect for all opinions is important. Listening and encouraging will be key factors. This is being viewed as a tremendous opportunity for active listening and community building. Merely providing forums for people to gather and share their feelings, ideas, and stories may be all that is needed. More is not necessarily better.
- Context—Communication is best delivered in a credible format that relates to the corporate culture. Meetings may offer familiar settings and work well for one organization, while print publications are familiar and effective for another. Small group settings are good ways to explore implications of emotional or sensitive issues, since they are more conducive to sharing and asking questions. Forums that showcase leaders can provide both corporate and personal benefits. The choice of context, though, must be carefully considered so that it doesn't conflict with the content or create skepticism among participants. Although this is a time to do something "special," it is also a time when "special" must be defined within the context of corporate culture.

- Process–Communication is not an “event” but a process, incorporating many channels, many audiences, and many communicators. Thinking of it in holistic terms builds credibility and encourages participation. First time actions may be viewed skeptically, unless they are positioned within the context of the entire process. Special events, too, need to have a place within the whole. Lastly, the process includes all stakeholders, which broadens the definition of community and options for action.

Final Thoughts

On 9/11/01 many people were asking “why?” On this coming 9-11-02, many people will be asking “now what?” What has this meant for me personally? What has this meant for my family, for my home, for my work? What might this mean for my future? Corporate leaders who have helped their stakeholders to create meaning out of this chaos will have also created a unique bond between those stakeholders and themselves. It is not inappropriate to realize that good can come from bad situations. To some extent that may be what Confucius meant when he said, “Leaders are dealers in hope.”

About The Author

Lynne Morton is a change management consultant with 20 years of experience helping individuals and organizations in the areas of leadership development, communication, learning systems, and creative problem solving. Her clients have included Fortune 500 companies, government agencies and not for profits. She has also held senior management positions at PricewaterhouseCoopers, Seabury & Smith (Marsh & McLennan) and Burson-Marsteller. A native New Yorker, she is a frequent speaker and author. Post 9-11, she counseled The Twin Towers Job Centers and individual companies. She can be reached at Lmorton@pisols.com.

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