Leaders as Communication Agents

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Leadership and Communication

In the past century, our understanding of leadership has evolved from the leader trait perspective and behavioral approaches to defining leadership in terms of influence, interactions, and relationships (Lord et al., 2017). For instance, Van Vugt et al. (2008) defined leadership in terms of "influencing individuals to contribute to group goals" and "coordinating the pursuit of those goals" (pp. 182–183). Similarly, Yukl (2010) believed leadership is "the process of influencing others to understand and agree

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about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives" (p. 8).

Leaders exert influence on the effectiveness of an organization or group through various activities. Some activities are more abstract and strategic, such as choosing the right goals and objectives, designing structures and programs, and cultivating shared values and culture. Some are more direct and concrete, including mentoring and motivating followers, imparting knowledge and skills, and coordinating work activities (Yukl, 2010).

Leadership and communication are inextricably linked. Many researchers suggest a communicative lens to studying leadership; they view leadership as a language game and a special form of human communication. For instance, Johnson and Hackman (2018) offered a communication-based definition of leadership as "human (symbolic) communication that modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet shared group goals and needs" (2018, p. 12). Similarly, De Vries et al. (2010, p. 368) defined a leader's communication style as "a distinctive set of interpersonal communicative behaviors geared toward the optimization of hierarchical relationships in order to reach certain group or individual goals." The communicative constitution of organization perspective, spearheaded by organizational communication scholars, regards communication as the central, fundamental element that constitutes and constructs leadership (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014).

Common in these conceptualizations is the belief effective leadership requires skillful use of communications, storytelling, active listening, emotional intelligence, and strategic self-reflection. Excellent communication pertains to how leaders influence others, build trust, strengthen relationships, enrich workplace culture, and forge employee alignment and engagement to achieve a shared vision. Importantly, understanding leadership from a communication standpoint does not negate the importance of other widely acknowledged components of leadership such as abstract reasoning, strategic and tactical knowledge, and management skills. Rather, communication is a valuable resource that complements leadership repertoire.

Despite its importance and relevance, research into the communication aspects of leadership has been sparse (De Vries et al., 2010). As Mayfield and Mayfield (2017, p. 6) pinpointed, communication is "the elephant in the room of leadership" as most research collapses

assessment of leader communication into broader leadership styles, such as charismatic-transformational leadership (van Knippenberg & Stam, 2014). However, there are several benefits of distinguishing leadership communication from leadership styles (e.g., transformational, ethical, authentic leaderships).

To start, measures of leadership styles are typically too parsimonious to account for the specific communication acts that occur between leaders and followers. By constructing leadership in a higher-level, gestalt manner, researchers overlooked the conceptual richness of communication behaviors and their predictive power on outcomes (De Vries et al., 2010). From a practical standpoint, a dive into precise communication strategies provides clear guidance for leaders and communication managers regarding which communication behaviors likely elicit positive outcomes, so crucial to developing actionable, concrete behavioral interventions (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018). In what follows, we break down leadership communication into executive and supervisory levels and discuss their respective functions.

Leaders as Communicators

Executive Leadership Communication

Executive leaders are senior managers of an organization, including CEOs, heads of business units, and top management team members. Internally, executive leaders, in particular CEOs and founders, define an organization's DNA and shape culture, character, and value of the organization. They are also the representatives, spokespersons, and faces of their organizations to external constituencies (Men & Bowen, 2017; Park & Berger, 2004).

A key internal function of executive communication is to express the organizational vision to followers and align followers' personal goals with the vision. Vision communication is "the act of motivating followers by communicating images of the future of the collective" (Stam et al., 2014, p. 1172). Leaders do so by creating stories, legends, and anecdotes of their organizations and consistently publicizing and interpreting them to followers (Men & Bowen, 2017). Strategic vision communication attracts followers and improves leadership evaluations, follower attitudes,

and performance (Stam et al., 2014). Senior leaders' vision communication has proven effective in inducing followers' support especially during organizational change (e.g., Men, Yue, et al., 2020).

The role of senior leaders expanded rapidly in recent years. Public relations professionals used the term "chief engagement officer" to highlight CEOs' communication and engagement responsibility (Edelman, 2014). Research has explored how senior leaders can leverage personalized and interactive communication to build relationships with internal and external stakeholders. For instance, CEOs with a professional online disclosure strategy (i.e., posting about corporate issues) are likely to increase positive perceptions of the organization from online audiences (Yue, Chung, et al., 2020). Internally, when communicating with compassion, sincerity, and warmth, CEOs can cultivate good employee-organization relationships and build internal reputation (Men, 2015). Senior leaders also can influence internal communication by installing systems and programs, and fostering a positive, participative culture to facilitate two-way, transparent communication.

Supervisory Leadership Communication

Supervisors are described as "the linchpin of employees" and "the surest, most direct path" to followers' support and loyalty (Therkelsen & Fiebich, 2003, p. 120). Supervisor communication is one of the most salient elements of communication for organizational members because it serves multiple functions in daily interactions with subordinates. As information providers, supervisors keep members informed about jobs and the workplace (e.g., job instructions, policies, and rules). Many employees rated information provided by supervisors as more accurate, timely, and useful than by senior management during organizational change (Allen et al., 2007). Employees depend on immediate supervisors for instrumental support, including clarifying tasks and improving their skills and efficacy. They also go to supervisors to negotiate matters related to workplace flexibility (e.g., work schedule, location, job duties, task autonomy). Therefore, supervisors should solicit questions and suggestions, offer timely feedback on subordinates' performance, and communicate openly and sensitively (Myers, 2015).

Supervisors' communication styles and effectiveness have received increasing scholarly attention in recent decades (Myers, 2015). Research has examined the positive impact of supervisor communication on

employee and organizational outcomes from various angles, including communication styles, content, quality, and quantity (Jian & Dalisay, 2017). For example, Bakar and Connaughton (2010) found that supervisory communication, characterized by upward openness, positive relationship messages, and job-relevant information, engendered followers' organizational commitment (OC). Conversation quality, defined by "efficiency, coordination, and accuracy in meaning interpretation and information transfer in the process of task accomplishment," also fostered followers' OC (Jian & Dalisay, 2017). Additionally, supervisors' use of motivating language cultivated a positive organizational emotional culture and facilitated employees' organizational identification (Yue, Men, et al., 2020). Other positive outcomes, such as supervisor-subordinate relationship quality, workgroup relationship, job satisfaction, trust, loyalty, engagement, and advocacy behaviors were positively related to effective supervisory leadership communication (Men & Yue, 2019; Myers, 2015).

Leadership Communication: An Overview of Theoretical Frameworks

In this chapter, we focus on leaders' communication styles rather than leadership styles, though we acknowledge the influence of leadership styles on organizational communication climate. Scholars have empirically supported that transformational (e.g., Men, 2014a) and authentic leadership (e.g., Jiang & Men, 2017) helped foster a symmetrical internal communication system and transparent communication climate, featured by trust, openness, feedback, negotiation, accountability, and employee empowerment. Leaders with these styles are likely more committed to creating systems and programs to facilitate an open, inclusive communication culture. The culture may also form via a cascading mechanism, i.e., senior leaders' attributes and working styles—including their communication styles—get transmitted down the organizational hierarchy. We offer three theoretical approaches to studying leadership communication.

Socio-Communicative Style

Socio-communicative style (SCS) refers to the skills individuals use to initiate, adapt, and respond to interpersonal communication (Thomas et al., 1994). The two primary dimensions of SCS are assertiveness and responsiveness. *Assertive* communicators are dominant, independent,

forceful, competitive, and willing to take a stand. *Responsive* communicators are warm, friendly, tender, compassionate, and sensitive to others' needs. Responsive communicators also place greater emphasis on maintaining "liking" in a relationship, while assertive communicators focus on the task dimension of a relationship (Richmond, 2002). However, assertiveness should not be confused with aggressiveness. Unlike aggressive communicators who make demands, assertive communicators make requests without hurting others' chances to succeed (Richmond, 2002).

Scholars have recently integrated SCS in examining leadership communication. Men (2015) found CEOs with responsive communication style (vs. assertive style) were perceived to be more effective communicators, though both communication styles fostered quality employee-organizational relationships. Similarly, CEOs who applied personal messages and a down-to-earth tone (i.e., responsive communication) on social media were more likely to cultivate meaningful interactions and relationships with the online publics (Tsai & Men, 2017). Most recently, researchers found positive connections between responsive communication employed by supervisors, the cultivation of a positive emotional culture, and employees' extra-role behaviors (Men & Yue, 2019).

Motivating Language Theory

Motivating language theory (MLT) is a linguistic framework primarily applied in leadership communication context. This theory, known as "a systematic, research-tested model that covers all forms of leader-to-follower speech," places communication in the center of leadership behavior (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018, p. 2). According to MLT, strategic leader speech is comprised of three categories—direction-giving, meaning-making, and empathetic language—and is most effective when all three are used. *Direction-giving* language contains articulating task parameters, role expectations, reward contingencies, performance feedback, and emphasizes transparency and uncertainty reduction. *Meaning-making* language concerns successfully translating and transmitting organizational mission, value, and purpose to followers. By telling organizational stories and using metaphors, leaders align followers' individual pursuits with higher organizational purpose and help followers understand how their work contributes to the big picture. *Empathetic* language refers to leaders using empathy, compassion, and care to connect with followers emotionally. Empathetic language is not limited to work-related

tasks, but can also be applied in personal life events. For instance, leaders can show their authentic, human side by congratulating followers on achieving personal milestones or expressing genuine, heartfelt concerns for their setbacks.

Motivating language has been consistently linked to positive employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational identification, work engagement, job performance, and creativity and innovation (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). Leader motivating language also is instrumental in creating a positive communication culture (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2017) and a positive organizational emotional culture replete with joy, pride, gratitude, and companionate love (Yue, Men, et al., 2020).

Leadership Listening

Leaders who have their followers' best interests at heart are active listeners. As Lacey eloquently noted, "without a listener, speech is nothing but noise in the ether" (2013, p. 166). Management scholars have studied listening in the context of interpersonal, dyadic interactions between leaders and followers. Rogers (1959) referred to active listening as an accepting and non-judgmental way of perceiving and attending to an individual. Lloyd et al. (2017) defined listening quality as "the individual's perception of being attended to, accepted, and appreciated" (p. 433). Van Quaquebeke and Felps (2018) incorporated verbal and non-verbal signals in describing attentive listening in interpersonal communication. Specifically, leaders demonstrate attentive listening by adopting "adequate eye contact, appropriate facial expressions…, head movements that convey understanding…, occasional verbal reassurances that encourage the speaker to continue…, and showing that the content resonates…" (p. 5). In contrast, poor listening entails leaders gazing off, interrupting responses, or checking phones. Research examining supervisor listening behavior has identified a positive link between supervisor listening and perceived leader-follower relationship quality, follower job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors. It also decreased follower turnover intention and emotional exhaustion (Lloyd et al., 2017).

Macnamara (2016) lamented that "listening is mostly referred to in passing with no examination of what listening entails at an organization-public level" (p. 152). Often, listening is present, yet implicit, in the

conceptualization of various organization-public communication strategies. For instance, researchers define a two-way communication model in public relations as entailing active organizational *listening*, mutual understanding, and a balance of power through negotiation between organizations and publics. However, listening has been too little explored in public relations and internal communication research.

Public relations scholarship has traditionally explored listening as an organizational rather than leadership behavior. For instance, the two-way symmetrical communication model highlights the importance of organizational listening in building mutual understanding and quality relationships with strategic publics (Grunig et al., 2002). Dialogue also requires organizations to demonstrate the capacity to "*listen* without anticipating, interfering, competing, refuting, or warping meanings into preconceived interpretations" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 27). However, organizational listening cannot be achieved without the support of leadership. Leaders can enhance organizational listening by serving as a good role model and actively managing listening. To elaborate, leaders who demonstrate exceptional listening skills are likely to cultivate a listening culture in their organizations. Understanding the importance of listening, leaders can create tools, systems, and policies to enable and encourage large-scale listening on the organizational level. We invite future research to explore the mechanisms through which leadership listening may impact organizational listening.

Leadership Communication Channels and Effectiveness

Organizational leaders today have numerous communication channels within the organization and externally, including traditional face-to-face interactions, print, electronic media, and digital channels. Leaders' choices of communication channels depend on multiple factors—the organization's size, culture, communication content, purpose, cost, reach, channel richness, and employees' preferences (Men & Bowen, 2017; Tkalac Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020).

Traditional Communication Channels

Traditional communication channels include face-to-face interactions (e.g., town halls, small group meetings, one-on-one meetings, management by walking around, and after-work informal meetings), print publications (e.g., newsletters, memos), phone calls, and voice mails. According to media richness theory, which centers on matching the richness of a medium to the equivocality of a task, print publications are lean media best used for one-way, routine messages in the workplace. Phone calls and e-mails fall in the middle of the media richness continuum (Lengel & Daft, 1988).

Face-to-face communication is the richest medium for conveying complex, nonroutine messages and facilitating immediate feedback. Face-to-face communications from supervisors are immensely valued. In comparison with social media, employees were more satisfied with one-on-one or team meetings with supervisors (Tkalac Verčič & Špoljarić, 2020). Similarly, Men (2014b) found supervisors most often used face-to-face communications with followers, which engendered followers' satisfaction with organizations and perceived symmetrical internal communication. In addition, there is a high demand among employees for some degree of face time with senior leaders (Roy, 2018). Thus, senior leaders should consider creating more opportunities for interpersonal interactions, such as "lunch and learn" programs, daily executive rounding, and an open-door policy. For instance, Credit Karma founder and CEO Kenneth Lin invites anyone to come by his office and share their thoughts about the company, whenever he is in office and available. These interpersonal interactions put a human face on a leader's title and help build trust, understanding, and a sense of a shared goal. However, depending on company size and location, employees' face-to-face time with senior management, particularly with the CEO, may be limited. In this case, digital and electronic forms of communication should come into play.

New Digital Channels

New digital channels, such as intranets, instant messengers, social networking sites, and videoconferencing systems, are at the forefront of leadership communication with diverse stakeholders. The two-way, interactive feature of digital media amplifies stakeholder voices and provides leaders convenient venues for listening and responding. Rich

features (e.g., online chat functions, embedded audio or video, webcams, liking, commenting, and sharing features) of digital channels mimic the communal and relational aspect of offline face-to-face communication (Tsai & Men, 2017). Consequently, digital channels flatten the traditional hierarchical structure of internal communication and narrow the psychological distance between leaders and stakeholders (Men, 2014b; Yue, Chung, et al., 2020).

Furthermore, leaders with a strong internal digital presence were found to facilitate employees' upward communications, relationship outcomes, and work engagement (Tsai & Men, 2017). Today, stakeholders demand greater access to the opinions and insights of corporate leadership in open communications. Executive leaders' social media activities influence how external stakeholders perceive the leader and the organization (Yue, Chung, et al., 2020). Examination of U.S. CEOs' use of social presence strategies, dialogical principles, disclosure types, and message strategies on social media supported the CEO's role as the relationship builder and engagement officer (e.g., Men et al., 2018; Yue et al., 2019; Yue, Chung, et al., 2020).

More recently, prominent CEOs from the U.S. have spoken out on thorny social and political issues online and offline. Business leaders like Tim Cook of Apple and Marc Benioff of Salesforce agree that CEOs today need to stand up for everybody, not just shareholders, but also employees, customers, partners, the community, and the environment. Despite ongoing debates on the impact of CEO activism on business and society, one thing is certain: In the social media age, "silence is more conspicuous—and more consequential" (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018, p. 81). Therefore, it has become essential for public relations and communication officers to help senior leaders decide what, when, and how to weigh in on controversial topics and measure progress and outcomes on various communication platforms.

Leadership Communication in Turbulent Times

One of the many challenges leaders must cope with in today's increasingly VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) world is regarding how to lead through changes (e.g., merger & acquisition, layoffs, culture change, leadership change, etc.) and crises (e.g., natural disaster, product recall, financial scandal, etc.). Leadership communication, if done properly, can help facilitate organizational change and

maintain stakeholder relationships during crisis times, which contribute to organizational resilience and effectiveness.

Leadership Communication in Organizational Change

There's no doubt leadership communication is a key determinant of successful change management. Aiken and Keller (2007) discussed four roles of CEOs leading through transformation: (1) making the transformation meaningful, (2) role-modeling, (3) building committed teams, and (4) pursuing impact while being accountable, all of which can't be achieved without effective leadership communication. For instance, to make transformation meaningful, leaders, especially CEOs, should clearly define the vision of the change and explain why change is happening and where the organization is heading. Such clarity can reduce employees' uncertainty and resistance, and facilitate change implementation (Men & Bowen, 2017).

In fact, leaders' visionary communication during change has been recognized as a key vehicle in motivating employees toward change (Venus et al., 2019). Recently, Men, Yue, et al. (2020) identified three communicative behaviors of charismatic leaders that contribute to employees' support for change: envisioning, energizing, and enabling. *Envisioning* refers to executive leaders' communication about the vision of change. *Energizing* refers to executive leaders channeling personal passion, energy, and confidence about the change initiative. *Enabling* refers to executive leaders' communication of care, support, empathy, and showing an understanding of employees' feelings and concerns during change.

Leadership Communication in Crisis Times

Crises can pose immense challenges for leadership communication as employees are often faced with increased uncertainties, stress, and negative emotions. Communication has been recognized as one of the two most critical leadership competencies required to successfully handle crises, along with decision-making under pressure (Wooten & James, 2008). Jamal and Abu Bakar (2017) showed that charismatic leadership communication during a crisis can effectively mitigate the crisis impact and strengthen organizational reputation. Increased research on crisis leadership has revealed a preference for certain leadership styles

during crisis times, which provides implications for leadership communication. In particular, transformational leadership is preferred as such leaders demonstrate care for the welfare of followers and provide inspiration by connecting employees' roles to a higher organizational purpose, needed more in turbulent times. However, research has also shown that as threats become overwhelming, such as during times of catastrophic crises, employees expect leaders to centralize authority and take actions; more power and less open consultation become more acceptable than during normal times (Haddon et al., 2014).

More recently, literature related to the COVID-19 pandemic has discussed best practices of leadership communication during crisis times. Corroborating such literature, Men, Heffron, and colleagues (2020) proposed the TAEO leadership communication framework (transparency, authenticity, empathy, and optimism) and empirically demonstrated the strong positive impacts of CEOs' TAEO communication in reducing employees' uncertainty, enhancing their psychological wellbeing, and building their trust during the pandemic. In particular, leaders' *transparent* communication involves openly and proactively sharing relevant information to stakeholders in a timely and digestible manner and being honest and upfront about the impact of the crisis. Transparency also emphasizes listening to employees' needs and understanding what transparency really means for each stakeholder group. *Authentic* leadership communication refers to leaders being truthful to their characters, values, and beliefs, being genuine, real, and personable in their communication, and being cognizant of their self-limitations in handling the situation. *Empathetic* leadership communication is characterized by a people-first mindset and leading with humanity. It involves leaders' perspective-taking and communicating understanding, compassion, care, support, encouragement, sympathy, and gratitude. Leadership *optimistic* communication stresses positivity, calmness, faith, hope, and confidence which fosters stakeholders' positive thinking. It is strategic, inspirational, and motivating aimed to cultivate employees' confidence and resilience.

Leadership Self-Reflection

The practice of self-reflection (SR) provides a rich opportunity for improving leadership communications—if we but seize it. Self-reflection is the primary way we examine ourselves and how others see us to increase self-awareness, a crucial quality for leaders. Greek philosophers believed self-knowledge was the highest form of knowledge. American educational pioneer John Dewey claimed we do not learn *from* experience but rather from *reflecting on* that experience. The value of SR for leaders is documented in studies in many fields but is largely absent in public relations research and education (Mules, 2018). However, a recent study of SR among public relations leaders underscored its crucial role in improving employee communications, team building, decision-making, and overall performance (Berger & Erzikova, 2019).

The Strategic Self-Reflection Process

Self-reflection (SR) is deliberate, conscious introspection to better understand our thoughts, experiences, and emotions—to become aware of them, learn from them, and increase self-awareness. Many public relations leaders say they practice SR, though frequency and approaches vary (Berger & Erzikova, 2019). Some use a *me-reflection* approach, focusing almost totally on the self. Others use a more holistic *we-reflection* approach, considering others' perceptions and feelings, too, or sometimes even including others in the process. The most common approaches include: (1) daily self-talks, (2) inspired writings or journaling, and (3) seeking feedback from team members, colleagues, or others.

The two biggest barriers to meaningful SR are (1) the ego problem, which may inhibit honest self-evaluation, or lead to excessive self-criticism and (2) real, or perceived time pressures. Drawing upon their research, Berger and Erzikova (2019) developed a six-step, strategic process for SR. This includes: deliberately *making time for SR each day*, no matter how busy; *creating the right mindset*, by adjusting mental focus; *being self-honest* and not letting ego overpower self-assessment; *formulating*, *calendaring*, and then *carrying out* relevant actions; and *writing things down* to evaluate action outcomes.

Crucial Benefits of Self-Reflection for Leaders

Studies in communication, education, and psychology over the past 40 years documented a handful of crucial benefits for leaders at all levels. Self-reflection can be a transformative experience through which we examine who we are and our values, question our assumptions, and come to an altered awareness and sense of identity. Making SR a crucial part of work *and* personal life may yield substantial benefits.

SR can improve leadership communications and growth by "gaining wisdom from an experience" (Kail, 2012). It boosts emotional intelligence by helping us recognize and understand our emotions, listen better, and be more empathetic (Goleman, 1995). SR also enriches critical-thinking and decision-making (Miller, 2012), and builds stronger relationships with team members, as well as more engaged and productive work teams (Eurich, 2017).

SR seems implicit in the three theoretical approaches noted earlier, especially *motivating language theory* and *leadership listening*. In addition, the potential benefits of SR could empower those in the profession and the classroom: the opportunity for advancement of leadership communications is huge. Yet, while many leaders say they are active and honest self-reflectors, research findings challenge such claims. Eurich's (2017) extensive research with thousands of leaders across professions indicated that only 10–15% of leaders are highly self-aware; most strongly overvalue their own skills and performance.

CONCLUSION

Leadership and communication are inherently linked. This chapter discussed three theoretical frameworks—i.e., sociocommunicative style, motivating language theory, and leadership listening—that should provide insight into future research in leadership communication. Furthermore, we examined leadership communication from both executive and supervisory levels and reviewed their respective functions in organizations. Understanding the increasingly versatile communication channels that leaders can leverage to reach internal and external stakeholders, we reviewed both traditional and new digital channels, and pointed out the advantages of a strong digital presence for organizational leaders. As the impact of COVID-19 intensifies globally, how to lead organizations through disruption and adapt to complex realities has

never been more important for leaders. This chapter concluded with a call for leaders' self-reflection, which can be used to improve leadership communication and growth.

A Mini-Case Study: Transparency in a Crisis

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One of the key tenets of internal communication at Airbnb is transparency. When you're a business built on the premise of trust, being open and honest with your employees is table stakes. Whether it's an email or an all-hands meeting, we start with why, we provide context for the decisions we make, and we communicate in a conversational and human way.

Our commitment to transparency has never been more important than when the world and our business faced a global pandemic. Within a matter of weeks, our entire company began working remotely, our industry (travel) came to a standstill, and our business began to struggle. It would be natural for most leaders to hunker down behind closed doors during a time like this. We took a much different approach.

Our CEO increased the frequency of his company-wide Q&As from twice a month to weekly. Each Thursday, he addressed employees honestly about the business, shared the Executive Team's plans for recovery, and openly acknowledged that we would have to make difficult decisions to reduce costs. He told the company that nothing was off the table. Employees submitted and upvoted questions, and we didn't shy away from any of them: Will there be layoffs? Should we expect pay cuts? What about our plans to go public? We worked hard every week to be as transparent as possible about the situation we were in.

In a time of such uncertainty, you might expect the culture to suffer or trust in leaders to plummet. In our case, just the opposite happened. Our CEO received hundreds of e-mails from employees expressing gratitude for his openness and authenticity during such a difficult time. Employees said the weekly Q&As were the highlight of their week and that watching alongside their teammates helped them feel like we were all in this together. An engineer even built a tool where employees could choose a seat in a virtual audience and "sit together" as teams and react to the meetings with emojis and comments. In a time when employees felt isolated, these Thursday meetings brought the company together in a way we never anticipated.

The goodwill we built was put to the ultimate test in early May 2020 when we announced we had to let go around 25% of the company. Our founders and Executive Team worked hard to do it compassionately and respectfully. Employees received generous severance packages, and we helped people impacted find new jobs. Instead of retreating in this painful moment, our CEO once again leaned in. Just two days after the layoffs were announced, he showed back up in front of our team—1900 of whom had just learned they were losing their jobs—and hosted his weekly Q&A. The questions weren't easy to answer, but he was honest and open. In a time of crisis, being transparent is one of the most important things you can do.

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