

Communicating Workforce Restructuring: “Ethical Corporate Crisis Communication Strategies for Organizational Trust and Employee Retention”

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Abstract— Workforce restructuring has become a persistent feature of corporate life in the modern global economy. Driven by technological disruption, shifting market conditions, mergers, and competitive pressures, organizations regularly resort to workforce reductions and operational downsizing. The financial and strategic rationale behind such decisions has attracted considerable scholarly attention, but the way organizations communicate those decisions to employees has remained comparatively underexamined. This white paper examines internal corporate communication during workforce restructuring crises. The central argument is that the problem facing organizations in such circumstances is not the restructuring decision itself, but the quality, timing, tone, and ethical character of how that decision is communicated to employees. Evidence drawn from organizational communication theory, crisis communication scholarship, psychological contract research, and documented corporate case studies shows that poor internal communication during restructuring consistently produces measurable, lasting damage: trust erodes, rumours spread, morale falls, and voluntary turnover among retained employees rises substantially. The paper is organized around three concerns. First, it reviews and synthesizes the academic literature on internal communication, crisis communication, organizational trust, and psychological contracts. Second, it identifies research gaps that persist in the field, particularly the absence of structured, employee-centred communication frameworks and the limited empirical attention given to message tone, narrative framing, and listening mechanisms. Third, it proposes an original conceptual model, the Ethical Workforce Crisis Communication (EWCC) Model, offering a four-stage framework for guiding organizational communication through the full arc of a restructuring event. The paper concludes with ten targeted recommendations for corporate leaders, HR professionals, and communication practitioners. The core recommendation is that ethical, transparent, and empathetic communication is not merely a courtesy extended to departing employees; it is a strategic necessity for organizational continuity, survivor morale, and long-term institutional legitimacy.

Key Words: Corporate Communication, Crisis Communication, Workforce Restructuring, Organizational Trust, Employee Retention.

I. INTRODUCTION

Organizational restructuring is not new. What has changed is the speed, scale, and frequency with which it now occurs. Technology companies have shed tens of thousands of employees following pandemic-era overcorrections; traditional manufacturers have consolidated operations in response to supply chain disruptions. The International Labour Organization has documented persistent waves of workforce reductions across industrialized and emerging economies since the 2008 financial crisis, a trend that accelerated between 2020 and 2024.

Yet for all the managerial and academic energy devoted to understanding why organizations restructure and what the financial consequences may be, surprisingly little rigorous attention has been paid to a straightforward question: How do organizations tell their people? This paper addresses precisely that gap. The subject is not downsizing. The subject is the communicative act of downsizing: the words leadership chooses, the channels it uses, the timing it adopts, the tone it projects, and the listening mechanisms, or their conspicuous absence.

The stakes are not solely ethical, though ethics are central. They are also strategic, psychological, and reputational. Research published in the Harvard Business Review found that a

workforce reduction of just one percent can trigger a 31 percent increase in voluntary turnover among remaining employees in the following year. A Glassdoor study of 197 companies that conducted layoffs between 2021 and 2025 estimated aggregate losses of approximately 20.8 billion dollars in productivity and talent in the first year after restructuring. These are not the costs of layoffs. They are the costs of what happens inside organizations after the announcement, and they are substantially shaped by how communication was handled.

The corporate crisis communication literature has largely treated crisis communication as an external function: managing media narratives, protecting brand reputation with investors and customers, and issuing public statements for external audiences. Internal communication during crisis, the messages flowing between leadership and employees within the organization, has received far less systematic treatment. Where it has been examined, the focus has typically been on the mechanics of message delivery rather than the ethical quality of the communicative relationship.

This paper argues that a reorientation is necessary. The psychological damage inflicted on surviving employees by poorly managed restructuring communication, the erosion of organizational trust that follows from opacity and euphemism, and the reputational harm that accumulates when employees become reluctant ambassadors of a company they no longer trust, are all downstream effects of a communicative failure in the first hours and days of an announcement. Getting that communication right is not a peripheral concern. It is the foundational act of organizational continuity in a moment of crisis.

This paper proceeds from five foundational premises. First, communication is not merely a vehicle for delivering decisions; it constitutes the organizational relationship. Second, how a restructuring is communicated shapes employee perceptions of organizational fairness, legitimacy, and trustworthiness as powerfully as the restructuring itself. Third, internal communication failures during crisis events are predictable, avoidable, and addressable. Fourth, ethical communication is not at odds with legal prudence or strategic interest; it is their precondition. Fifth, organizations have an obligation to surviving employees that extends beyond legal compliance.

The paper's structure reflects these premises. After establishing objectives and methodology, it reviews the relevant academic literature, identifies research gaps, and articulates the problem the inquiry addresses. Substantive sections examine the communicative challenges of layoffs, mergers, and restructuring; the role of leadership communication; channel

selection and sequencing; tone and narrative framing; and the documented impact of communication quality on employee trust, morale, rumour formation, and retention. The paper closes with the proposed EWCC Model and concrete recommendations.

II. OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the role of internal corporate communication during workforce restructuring crises and assess how communicative quality shapes the experience of organizational change for employees.
2. To analyse how leadership communication attributes, specifically transparency, authenticity, empathy, and consistency, influence employee trust and psychological safety during periods of organizational disruption.
3. To evaluate the range of communication channels deployed during downsizing announcements, assessing their relative effectiveness in terms of reach, emotional calibration, and capacity for dialogue.
4. To examine how the tone and narrative framing of restructuring announcements shape employee perception of organizational fairness, legitimacy, and relational integrity.
5. To assess how crisis communication practices during restructuring influence organizational legitimacy, employer branding, and long-term reputational standing.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This white paper employs a qualitative conceptual research design. The study draws on secondary sources rather than primary data collection, and its methodological approach is grounded in systematic thematic analysis of the existing academic and practitioner literature. This is consistent with the white paper genre, which aims to synthesize and critically evaluate the state of a field to identify gaps, propose frameworks, and advance practice-relevant recommendations. Literature was drawn from peer-reviewed academic journals accessed through the following databases and repositories: Google Scholar, ScienceDirect (Elsevier), JSTOR, SSRN (Social Science Research Network), Emerald Insight, PubMed Central, SAGE Journals, and Taylor and Francis Online. Sources include journal articles in organizational communication, corporate crisis communication, human resource management, organizational psychology, public relations theory, and management science. Corporate case studies, practitioner white papers, and survey-based industry reports were also consulted where they provided documented evidence of communication practices and outcomes.

IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature relevant to communicating workforce restructuring spans several disciplines: organizational communication, crisis communication theory, human resource management, organizational psychology, and public relations. The synthesis below identifies the primary theoretical traditions and empirical findings that inform this paper, noting throughout where scholarship is well developed and where it remains thin.

1. Corporate Crisis Communication Theory

The academic study of crisis communication has a well-established record. W. Timothy Coombs's Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), first articulated in 1995 and significantly developed by 2007, remains the most widely cited framework in the field. SCCT holds that crisis managers should match their strategic responses to the level of organizational responsibility for the crisis and the reputational threat it poses. The theory groups crises into victim, accidental, and preventable clusters and prescribes deny, diminish, or rebuild response strategies accordingly. Its recognition that perception is central to assessing both responsibility and reputational threat has enduring value, and its empirical grounding sets it apart from more normative approaches.

The SCCT was, however, developed primarily with external stakeholder audiences in mind. Its prescriptions are calibrated to shape how investors, media, customers, and the public perceive an organization during crisis. Internal stakeholders, particularly employees directly affected by the crisis, receive comparatively little attention within the framework. Coombs has acknowledged this in subsequent work, noting that crisis communication scholarship has not paid sufficient attention to the internal dimensions of organizational crisis response. That gap is one this paper addresses directly.

2. Internal Communication and Trust

The relationship between internal communication quality and employee trust has attracted sustained empirical inquiry. Men, Qin, Fitzsimmons, DiStaso, and Heffron (2024) conducted a large-scale survey examining how leadership communication shapes organizational trust during disruption. Their findings, drawn from a sample of over one thousand full-time employees across diverse industry sectors in the United States, identified four communication attributes that matter: transparency, authenticity, empathy, and optimism. When leaders communicate with these qualities, employee uncertainty falls and psychological well-being improves, producing measurable increases in trust. Structural equation modelling confirmed the mediated pathways, establishing a clear empirical link between communicative quality and trust outcomes.

3. Leadership Messaging during Organisational Crisis

Leadership communication during organizational crisis has attracted significant scholarly attention. Gigliotti and colleagues, writing in PMC (2025), examined how leaders can build crisis readiness through communication practices that establish trust, convey stability, and strengthen institutional cohesion during disruption. Drawing on workplace communication in higher education contexts, the study introduced a rubric for evaluating resilience narratives and identified how leaders' communicative choices affect collective preparedness. The core finding was that the quality of leader communication shapes not only how stakeholders understand the crisis but how effectively the organization responds over time.

Massey (2001), in a foundational paper on managing organizational legitimacy, established that communication is the primary instrument through which organizations maintain their claim to legitimacy during crisis situations. Transparent, timely, and effective communication was identified as essential for preserving stakeholder trust and confidence. This finding has been replicated across contexts. The implication for restructuring is direct: when organizational leaders use opaque, legally hedged, or dehumanizing language during layoff announcements, they do not simply communicate the decision badly; they actively undermine the legitimacy of the organization in the eyes of those who remain.

Research on CEO communication during the COVID-19 pandemic offered a natural experiment in contrasting approaches. Organizations whose chief executives communicated early, frequently, personally, and with visible engagement with the human consequences of their decisions retained significantly higher employee trust than those whose communication was delayed, formulaic, or delegated to subordinates. The lesson is not that executives must perform emotion, but that the absence of visible human engagement in leadership communication is interpreted by employees as a signal of organizational indifference.

4. Rumour Formation and Uncertainty

Organizational researchers have established that rumour is not simply individual speculation; it is a collective sensemaking process that emerges under conditions of high uncertainty and low information supply. When organizations restrict or delay communication about restructuring decisions, they do not contain the flow of information. They redirect it through informal channels, creating rumour networks that are neither accurate nor controllable. Research across multiple studies confirms that rumours about layoffs and restructuring are

driven fundamentally by anxiety and the absence of reliable information from leadership.

The practical consequence runs counter to the instinct of leaders who believe that communicating less reduces uncertainty: it does the opposite. Uncertainty rises in direct proportion to the perceived information deficit, and that uncertainty finds expression in rumour and speculation. Empirical research on layoff survivor morale, summarized by OnwardsHR (2025) drawing on Leadership IQ data from over four thousand surviving employees, found that 74 percent reported declines in personal productivity after company layoffs, while 87 percent said they were less likely to recommend their organization as a good place to work.

5. Psychological Contract Theory and Communication Ethics

When an organization undertakes restructuring, it necessarily disrupts implicit promises. Research published by Liao, Li, and Huang (2024) in SAGE Journals found that psychological contract breach is a major cause of employee silence, which in turn produces cynicism, exhaustion, and a tendency toward exit. The study identified organizational identity and emotional exhaustion as mediating variables, connecting the experience of breach to subsequent behavioural outcomes. Gong, Sims, and colleagues (2023), examining psychological contract breach during pandemic-related workplace disruptions, found that perceived supervisor mistrust and work-life conflict were triggered by abrupt organizational changes, leading to increased breach perceptions and withdrawal behaviours.

A systematic review by Klonek and colleagues, published in *Gruppe Interaktion Organisation* (Springer, 2023), synthesized research on sustaining psychological contracts during organizational change. The review found that the practices most effective in preserving psychological contract integrity during major change, including mergers and downsizing, centred on organizational justice, effective communication, and genuine employee participation. By contrast, mergers and downsizing events marked by poor communication, absent participation, and the failure to integrate human resource concerns consistently produced the strongest breach perceptions and the most damaging attitudinal and behavioural consequences.

The ethical dimension of this scholarship warrants plain statement. Psychological contract theory reveals that restructuring communication is not simply a strategic challenge; it is a moment of ethical reckoning in the life of an organization. How an organization communicates its decision to restructure communicates simultaneously who it believes its

employees are, what it owes them, and what kind of organization it intends to be afterwards.

V. RESEARCH GAP

Despite the breadth of scholarship on corporate restructuring, downsizing, and organizational change management, the literature consistently sidelines internal communication as a primary variable in the crisis experience. Most existing research focuses on the financial consequences of workforce reductions, market reactions, strategic HR frameworks, and organizational performance outcomes. These are important questions, but they systematically set aside the communicative experience of employees, both as a substantive phenomenon in its own right and as a mediating variable for the outcomes scholars care most about.

First, there is a notable absence of structured, employee-centred communication frameworks designed specifically for the internal dimensions of workforce restructuring. The frameworks that exist, including SCCT and Image Restoration Theory, were built with external audiences in mind. Adapting them to internal communication contexts requires systematic work the literature has not undertaken.

Second, the role of message tone and narrative framing in shaping employee perceptions during restructuring has attracted only limited empirical attention. Scholars have observed in passing that empathetic communication tends to produce better outcomes than clinical or legalistic language, but the mechanisms underlying this relationship have not been adequately theorized or tested in restructuring contexts.

Third, research on the timing of restructuring communication is thin. Intuition and practitioner experience suggest that early, proactive communication is preferable to delayed communication, but the empirical record on optimal timing, including how much information to provide and at what intervals, remains underdeveloped.

Fourth, and most critically, there is almost no work linking internal communication quality during restructuring to trust recovery in the post-crisis period. The literature documents the damage that poor communication does to trust. It says far less about how organizations can systematically rebuild trust through communication once the initial crisis has passed.

Fifth, the treatment of employee listening mechanisms during restructuring is strikingly limited. Much of the scholarship on crisis communication focuses on message production and delivery. The question of whether and how organizations create

conditions for genuine two-way communication during restructuring events has not received sufficient attention.

VI. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Workforce restructuring is not only an operational challenge; it is a communication crisis within organizations. Analysis of the existing literature shows that restructuring outcomes are substantially shaped by the quality of internal communication. This section synthesizes key themes across corporate communication challenges, leadership roles, communication channels, ethical framing, and employee impact.

Communication Challenges in Workforce Restructuring

Organizations face distinct communication challenges in layoffs, mergers, and broader restructuring processes. A recurring difficulty is balancing transparency with legal constraints, which often results in vague, delayed, or impersonal messaging. In layoff scenarios, common failures include lack of clarity, absent leadership presence, and reliance on corporate euphemisms. These practices depersonalize the experience and erode employee trust. Mergers and acquisitions create prolonged uncertainty where employees go without adequate information because of regulatory limitations, intensifying anxiety and speculation. Broader restructuring initiatives often fail because the organizational narrative prioritizes strategic framing over the employee experience, generating disengagement.

1. Leadership Communication and Trust Formation

Leadership communication is central to employee trust during restructuring. Transparency, empathy, authenticity, and consistency are the attributes that matter most in messaging. Visible senior leadership involvement strengthens trust; absence weakens credibility. Middle managers and HR professionals are intermediaries but require training to deliver consistent messaging. Trust is built through ability, benevolence, and integrity as expressed in communication.

2. Role of Communication Channels

Channel choice shapes how restructuring messages land. Face-to-face communication is most effective for sensitive announcements; video balances emotional expression with accessibility. Written communication provides clarity but lacks emotional depth and should not stand alone. Digital platforms support ongoing communication but can amplify rumours if left unmanaged. An effective strategy requires appropriate channel sequencing, consistency, and accessibility.

3. Tone, Narrative Framing, and Ethical Communication

Tone and language directly shape employee perception. Corporate euphemisms reduce trust; plain, conversational language improves engagement. Ethical communication requires honest explanations, acknowledgment of uncertainty, and demonstrated concern for employees. Narrative framing that accounts for human impact strengthens organizational legitimacy.

Employee Impact: Trust, Morale, and Retention

Poor communication produces trust erosion, anxiety, and declining morale. Information gaps generate rumours and increase disengagement. Productivity falls after restructuring, and high-performing employees are more likely to leave. Transparent and empathetic communication improves retention and organizational loyalty.

Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the thematic analysis of the existing literature and the insights developed in the preceding sections; this paper proposes the Ethical Workforce Crisis Communication (EWCC) Model as a conceptual framework for guiding organizational communication through workforce restructuring events. The model is organized around four sequential stages, each with a distinct primary objective and a corresponding set of communicative priorities. It is not prescriptive in its detail; every organization will adapt its application to its own context, scale, and communicative resources. It is, however, intended to provide a structured architecture to replace the improvised and reactive communication approaches that currently characterize most organizational responses to restructuring.

Stage One: Pre-Announcement Preparation

The pre-announcement phase is where the communicative architecture of the restructuring event is designed. This involves leadership alignment on key messages, ensuring that everyone who will communicate the restructuring is working from the same narrative, using consistent language, and prepared for the questions they are likely to receive. Stakeholder mapping identifies the different employee groups affected and their specific informational needs. Legal review establishes what can and cannot be disclosed at each stage. Communication planning determines the sequence of channels, the timing of each communication act, and the mechanisms through which employee questions will be addressed.

Stage Two: Transparent Announcement

The announcement phase carries the highest communicative intensity. The EWCC Model specifies four required qualities: clarity in explaining the reasons for the restructuring decision, to the maximum extent legal constraints permit; empathetic

acknowledgment of the human experience of those affected; consistent delivery across all channels and organizational levels simultaneously; and factual accuracy that can withstand subsequent scrutiny. The announcement should be delivered, where possible, by the most senior available leader through the most relational channel available, followed immediately by access to HR support and the opportunity for employee questions.

Stage Three: Dialogue and Employee Listening

The dialogue phase recognizes that restructuring communication is an ongoing process, not a single event. In the days and weeks following the initial announcement, employees will have questions they did not think to ask in the moment, concerns that develop as the implications become clearer, and emotional responses that evolve as they process what has occurred. The EWCC Model specifies communicative structures for this phase: scheduled town halls, HR open sessions, manager-facilitated team discussions, and anonymous feedback channels that allow employees who are uncomfortable raising concerns directly to do so without fear of identification.

Stage Four: Post-Crisis Trust Recovery

The trust recovery phase recognizes that the communicative obligation does not end once the restructuring is concluded. The surviving organization requires sustained and visible communication from leadership about what the restructuring means for the organization's future, how performance against stated objectives is proceeding, and what the organization is doing to fulfil the commitments it made to employees during the announcement phase. This phase also includes active organizational engagement initiatives to rebuild the sense of purpose and community that restructuring events disrupt, and explicit re-articulation of the organizational values the restructuring was consistent with, and those it was not.

Recommendations

1. The following ten recommendations emerge from the literature review, the thematic analysis, and the proposed EWCC framework. They are addressed to organizational leaders, HR professionals, and corporate communication practitioners involved in planning or managing workforce restructuring events.
2. Develop and maintain a structured internal crisis communication plan specifically for workforce restructuring events, separate from and prior to any specific restructuring decision. Organizations that communicate well during crises are those that prepared before the crisis arrived.
3. Ensure visible and personal senior leadership engagement in all primary restructuring communications. The CEO or most senior available leader should personally address employees at the moment of announcement, rather than delegating this function to subordinates.
4. Train middle managers specifically for the communication role they will play during restructuring events. This includes preparation for the emotional dimensions of the communication, guidance on consistent messaging, and support for managing their own responses to the restructuring while simultaneously supporting their teams.
5. Use an empathetic, conversational, and plainly human communication register for all restructuring communications, avoiding corporate euphemism and legalistic language except where strictly necessary. Communicate as you would with a person you respect, not as a legal document would.
6. Communicate early and often, accepting the uncertainty that comes with early communication rather than waiting for complete clarity. Acknowledge what is not yet known, and commit to a specific communication timeline so employees can trust that further information is coming.
7. Design communication approaches that sequence channels appropriately, using the most relational channels for the most significant moments, and ensuring that no group of employees first hears about the restructuring through informal or external channels.
8. Create structured listening mechanisms that provide genuine opportunities for employee questions and responses throughout the restructuring process. Treat these mechanisms as seriously as message production.
9. Invest in post-crisis communication as a distinct and sustained phase of the restructuring process, recognizing that the communicative obligation to surviving employees does not end with the restructuring announcement.
10. Evaluate the quality of restructuring communication as a standard part of the post-restructuring organizational review, using employee feedback, trust surveys, and retention data to assess effectiveness and inform future communication planning.

11. Treat the tension between legal prudence and communicative transparency as a design challenge rather than an irresolvable dilemma. Work with legal counsel to identify the maximum informational transparency available within legal constraints, rather than defaulting to the minimum that legal compliance technically requires.

VII. CONCLUSION

Workforce restructuring is an inevitable aspect of modern organizational strategy. Whether it succeeds depends not only on operational decisions but on how those decisions are communicated. This paper demonstrates that internal communication directly shapes employee trust, morale, and organizational continuity.

Poor communication produces distrust, disengagement, and talent loss. Transparent and empathetic communication sustains relationships and organizational stability. The Ethical Workforce Crisis Communication (EWCC) Model provides a structured approach to managing communication at every stage of restructuring.

How an organization communicates during a crisis reflects what it actually values. Ethical, human-centred communication is not an optional feature; it is essential for maintaining trust, credibility, and long-term organizational health.

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