

INTERNAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Case company: Hämeenmaa

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Title of the thesis Internal Crisis Communication During The Covid-19 Pandemic		
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Abstract <p>The purpose of the research is to analyse how efficient the internal crisis communication has been during the Covid-19 pandemic at case company Hämeenmaa and what kind of knowledge about crisis communication was gained by the supervisors of the units. The aim is to provide valuable and practical information for the case company.</p> <p>The theoretical section of the thesis covers four main subjects. Firstly, crisis communication is covered in which crises are defined, internal communication is briefly explained, issues of crisis communication are presented, and evaluation is introduced. Secondly, special features of Covid-19's connection to communication are presented. Thirdly, supervisor communication during crises is discussed. Fourthly, an introduction of the case company's situation regarding internal crisis communication is provided.</p> <p>The empirical part of the thesis utilized a triangulation research method by combining quantitative and qualitative methods. This was done by establishing an online survey consisting of closed and open questions. The survey provided supervisors with the possibility of expressing their views of the topic. The survey was collecting information for two and half weeks from the research target group which consisted of 130 supervisors. Results were then analysed and compared to the theoretical framework.</p> <p>Valuable information was gained about the efficiency of crisis communication. The situation in the company has been overall demanding, yet results show that good practices have been used. Pre-planning and fast reaction have been dominant elements. Supervisors felt that the style, content and channels of the communication have been efficient. Additionally, the communication was able to help the supervisors succeed in their work.</p> <p>Supervisors have learned that the most important factors of crisis communication are up-to-date information, clarity of communication and swiftness of the initiative. Additional knowledge was also gained, and the overall image of learning has been positive. The gained knowledge and experiences are recommended to be shared among other supervisors</p> <p>The study findings provide a basis for more profound research regarding internal crisis communication within the company and offer a resource for other companies to examine while evaluating their crisis communication efforts and plans.</p>		
Keywords Internal communication, Crisis communication, Covid-19, Supervisor.		

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Societies, individuals and companies have suffered and felt the consequences in various ways during the Covid-19 pandemic. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease that was discovered by the World Health Organisation on 31 December 2019 originating in the People's Republic of China (WHO 2020). The disease spread at an accelerating rate around the globe momentarily crippling policymakers. The nations of the world are still dealing with the pandemic, and it has had a devastating impact with high death tolls. The social impact has been huge as unprecedented measures have been taken to protect the health of communities by limiting the freedom of movement, daily routines, social contacts and working conditions. (Stroebe & Schut 2020.)

Worldwide the vast majority of companies have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic at varying levels regardless of the industry. This has led to consequences such as a decrease in sales, reduced working hours, full and part-time lay-offs, and a temporary shutdown of business activities. Topics such as hybrid working models, employee vaccination statuses and remote-collaboration tools have become more important. (The World Bank Group 2021; Boston Consulting Group 2022; Duc & Souquet 2020.)

The case company Hämeenmaa is no different from other companies with this surprising event and its negative effects. From the beginning of the pandemic, the company experienced a decline in the number of customers in hotel and gas station activities. Furthermore, the government demanded the opening hours of restaurants to be shortened. (S-Ryhmä Uutisarkisto 2020a.) Occasional difficulties in product availability emerged due to a sudden increase in demand for day-to-day products and groceries. (S-Ryhmä Uutisarkisto 2020b.)

Various efforts have been implemented in all areas of the business to balance the stability of company operations and government recommendations and regulations. Remote working was implemented to whom it was possible, sanitation measures were increased, restaurant employees were transferred to grocery market units to support their subsistence and communication for employees as well as customers were increased and centralized to the abnormal situation. (Hämeenmaa 2021.)

Corporate communication and corporate strategy are closely linked, and good corporate communication serves the business well as its main focus is on the key stakeholders. Corporate communication is a management strategy that determines the importance of different stakeholders and what information they need. (Forman & Argenti 2005, 248.)

During a time of crisis, importance of communication is heightened. Crises are often described as threatening, destructive and overall negative events without any redeeming value. Crisis communication is not solely about managing the crisis-induced threat. With properly planned and implemented communication the crisis may create potential for opportunity, renewal, and growth. By using the right methods, the company may preserve its reputation and image. (Ulmer et al. 2011, 1.)

1.2 Objective and Research Questions

A research objective supports research questions and allows the author to operationalise them. An objective presents how the research is intended to be structured to answer the questions and achieve the aim of the project. (Saunders et al. 2016, 46.)

In this research, the focus is on corporate communication and more specifically on internal communications as experienced by supervisors of the case company Hämeenmaa. Hämeenmaa operates in an area of 21 municipalities within Kanta- and Päijät-Häme. Business operation areas involve grocery, hardware, department, specialty, car, traffic, accommodation, and nutrition. The company employs approximately 2950 workers.

The objective of this research is to understand the efficiency of crisis communication practised during the Covid-19 crisis and what kind of knowledge was gained from the crisis regarding crisis communication, with the focus on supervisor communication. Based on the results of the research, recommendations are provided for the company and suggestions for further research are presented.

The research question is the centre of the research project, and it defines what the issue is to be studied and what the project seeks to find out, explain and answer (Saunders et al. 2016, 42).

Due to the objectives of the research, the following research questions were formed:

How efficient has the internal crisis communication been during the Covid-19 crisis?

What kind of knowledge was gained by the supervisors about crisis communication?

1.3 Research Limitations

Limitations of the research are characteristics of the design or methodology that occur from the interpretation of the findings by the author. These can be constraints on generalizability, applications to practice or usability of the findings caused by the initial decision to design the study. (USC Libraries 2021.)

There are a few clear limitations to this specific research. Firstly, the primary data of the research is collected from the supervisors of the units and not from all personnel so in the results this aspect will be excluded.

The case company is a rather large chain company with its own communication unit so the results may not be directly proportional to the smaller companies which may execute the crisis communication in a different manner as the number of staff is lower, physically working at the place and the communication responsibility solely on the business owner.

1.4 Research Method

In quantitative research, the author aims to find answers to research questions based on quantities and percentages often acquired through questionnaires. Results can be presented with charts and graphs. A quantitative method usually gives an insight into the current situation but not about the causes. A qualitative research method helps to understand the research subject more thoroughly. It is limited to a smaller group of cases, but the aim is to analyse them as detailed as possible. This method can be implemented for example with interviews. (Heikkilä 2008, 16-17.)

In this research, the theoretical framework comes from a variety of literature considering the topic of crisis communication. Theoretical framework sources include books, e-books, and scientific articles as well as relevant information from the organisation. A qualitative research method was applied to gain information about the current situation of the crisis communicational efforts at the case company. This was done by sending a pattern of questions to the customer relations manager of Hämeenmaa. Questions were formed from the theoretical literature.

Primary data was collected by using a quantitative research method in the form of a survey. The survey was sent to the supervisors of the units. The survey includes also a qualitative research method as it contains open questions which seek to find out more in-depth information. This is called the triangulation method. This method provides a more comprehensive view of the researched topic and potentially increases the validity and reliability of the research. (Bhandari 2022.)

The focus of the survey was to find out if the communication was successful and clear or if something was challenging or if there was something that would need to be examined and adjusted. Additionally, the aim was to find out what the supervisors learned from the crisis communication and if it was supportive enough to enable their capability to execute their tasks. The survey was established in cooperation with Hämeenmaa.

The research group was the supervisors of the units at Hämeenmaa. The research target group was large which led to a decision on emphasizing the quantitative method. This target group was chosen because their role demanded them to process and deliver the data onwards to the teams and because they are not just information receivers. Another reason to select supervisors to be the research group was to gain a higher answer rate and therefore more reliable results. The risk in including all the employees would have been a lower answer rate as the survey was not made mandatory for the target group and there was not a possible reward to provide for the answering as sometimes Hämeenmaa may provide on its self-made personnel surveys.

1.5 Structure and Timetable of the Thesis

The thesis consists of five main parts. These are the introduction, theoretical framework, empirical research & data analysis, conclusions, and references. The structure is presented in figure 1.

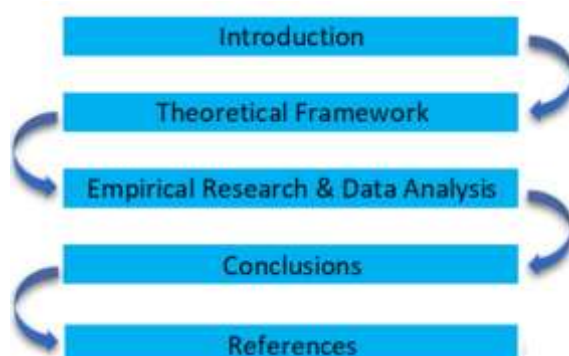


Figure 1 Thesis Structure

The first part includes the background information and introduces the essential parts such as research objectives and methods. The second part provides the theoretical framework for the thesis. It consists of four chapters. Firstly, internal crisis communication is introduced. Secondly, special features of the Covid-19 pandemic's effects on crisis communication are discussed. Thirdly, the theory regarding supervisor communication is provided. Fourthly, the situation of internal crisis communication in the case company is introduced. The third part explains the methods of the research, presents the results, and provides recommendations. The fourth part concludes the thesis by answering the research questions and analysing validity, reliability and ethics. Suggestions for further research are also provided. The fifth part contains the references followed by appendices.

The theoretical framework was gathered during the years 2021 and 2022. The survey was sent out on 9.3.2022 which was collecting data until 27.3.2022. During the spring of 2022, the data was analyzed and results with recommendations and suggestions were implemented.

2 CRISIS COMMUNICATION

2.1 Definition of Crises

We live in a society affected by natural disasters, organizational crises, public health threats and terrorism as well as other types of crises that have the potential to disrupt our lives. Different governmental departments need professional crisis communicators. Companies and organizations are recognizing the need for these professionals, who have crisis communication skills to implement into their human resources, public relations, and leadership teams.

Crisis can be viewed as opportunities for learning and improvement at turning points in an organization's life cycle. If crisis communication is not studied and planned the stakeholders associated with the organization are likely to be stunned, frightened and depressed which may lead to everlasting decreased confidence in the organization. (Ulmer et al. 2011, 2-4.)

IKKK-Model presented by Korteso (2016, 32-36) aims to explain the origin of a crisis event. It starts from a phenomenon which may be anything from a single post on social media to a slightly increased number of infections of a new virus somewhere in the world. Some of these phenomena then progress to spark debate making them an issue and depending on the effects and level of seriousness, they may create a crisis. This progression of the model may happen in seconds or take even years. A common statement states that it is hard to prepare for crises as all of them are different, but in fact, they tend to follow the same pattern (Karhu & Henriksson 2008, 120).



Figure 2 Phases of a Crisis (Korteso 2016, 32)

Figure 2 demonstrates four stages of a crisis. Before the actual crisis, it is possible to notice pre-warnings by sounding the phenomena and debating issues. All negative events may not evolve into crises but with poor preparations and preparedness crisis may develop suddenly and unnoticeably. (Korteso 2016, 32.)

Crises can be classified according to organization type, activity and environment. There can be both internal and external as well as tangible and intangible crises. Tangible crises involve physical damages, risk in profitability and problems with equipment and property. Intangible crises present threats to reputation and knowledge capital. Fundamental characteristics are the element of surprise, threat and short response time. In addition, there are

also unexpected slowly evolving crises, such as illnesses, frauds and crimes. (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi & Murtola 2015, 110.)

Coombs (2004) presents three additional types of crises in his Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). A *victim crisis* is a type of crisis that is not the company's fault and could have not been prevented. These may be for example rumours or natural disasters. In an *accidental crisis*, the company is at fault, but it comes from an unintended mistake such as product or equipment failure. An *Intentional crisis* which may be also called a preventable crisis means that the company has made a purposeful action that resulted in negative consequences. Business involves risk-taking and it may lead to devastating events making this type of crisis the worst threat to the company's reputation.

2.2 Fundamentals of Internal Communication

Communication is a basic function within communities, companies, associations and networks to make ground for working conditions. It belongs to the core of operations, and it is fundamentally linked to other activities in an organization. When utilized well, it can be an essential resource for the community. (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi & Murtola 2015, 9.)

Core principles of communication are:

1. all organizations need managed day-to-day communication
2. exchange of information
3. enhancement of sense of community.

The most important target segments are personnel and stakeholders closely connected to the organization. (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi & Murtola 2015, 9-11.)

Association of communication professionals ProCom e.V. stated in 2012 that the main tasks of organizational communication are to be goal-oriented and interactive. Interactive and transparent communication makes a common vision and makes objectives clear. Sounding provides the organization insight into planning and decision-making. Communication professionals tune, advise and guide their community to communicate via consultation and communication education. (Juholin 2013, 28.)

Communication is interaction and the language has an important role in that. According to Kortetjärvi-Nurmi and Murtola (2015), there is a sequence for arranging the language. This sequence focuses on the selection of content and tone, and the arrangement of how it is presented

2.3 Crisis Communication Strategy

Planning of communication is based on the community's operational strategy, in which the community has defined its basic purpose (mission), future will and aspect (vision) and values (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi & Murtola 2015, 54-56).

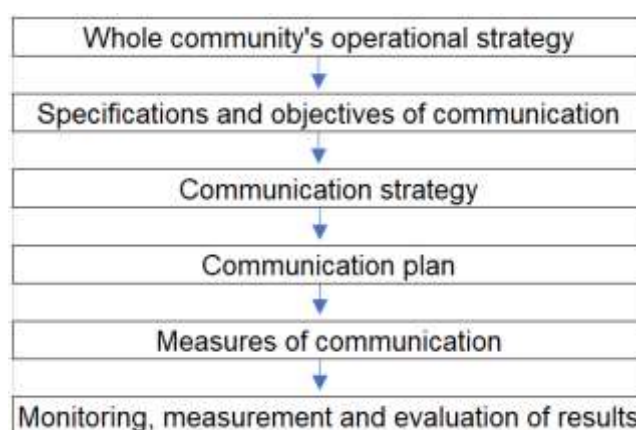


Figure 3 Community's Communication Planning (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi & Murtola 2015, 54-56)

The planning consists of strategic and operative levels. The strategic level is often called communication strategy and it promotes the community's efforts to achieve the overall goals. A communication plan is established from the strategy. The plan defines practical actions on an operative level for a certain period of time. By establishing clear objectives, the results can be measured and evaluated. (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi & Murtola 2015, 54-56.)

SCCT is an efficient tool for the public but may equally be used for internal communication. It gives an outline for crisis communication, but a decision on the necessary actions is based on the situation and the knowledge that the company has of its stakeholders and their expected responses.

Firstly, a company needs to identify the type of crisis it is facing which was defined in subchapter 2.1. Secondly, a company should choose an internal crisis communication strategy. There are four different options for communication strategies. A company cannot predict the exact reaction of the stakeholders, so it should prepare and be ready to use a different strategy based on the reaction of the initial strategy implemented. Examples of strategies are rebuilding, diminishing, denying and bolstering. (Coombs 2014, 5-6; Amaresan 2022.) With the Covid-19 crisis the bolster strategy could be seen as a fitting option. The strategy on internal communication aims to remind employees of the business' past successful way of operating and to call out for loyalty and dedication. John Capodanno (2020) further states

that highlighting of employee efforts reassures that their dedication is greatly appreciated and valued.

It should be noted that not every crisis needs to be communicated to the public at all. The message to the stakeholders can be different from the message to the public, but still maintain consistency on fundamental issues. (Amareesan 2022; Sommerfeld 2017.)

Whenever possible, internal crisis communication should precede communication with external stakeholders. It is for example vital that employees do not hear negative Covid-19 news affecting their organization and employment from outside sources first. This will alienate them and hinder otherwise successful pandemic response and recovery efforts. (Schmidt 2020.)

From another perspective, personnel is also a remarkable announcement channel to the outside of the company, for example, to media. This means that bad internal communication can also ruin the crisis communication to the public. This is why it is important to keep the personnel up to date on the situation and its impacts on the company right from the beginning. (Karhu & Henriksson 2008, 63.)

Thirdly, consideration should be done on whether some degree of external consultation is needed. This can enhance the company's ability to respond and recover. A few trusted advisors may also help to brainstorm the picked strategy. (Coombs 2014, 5-6; Schmidt 2020.)

According to Juholin (2013), a crisis communication plan should avoid being too theoretical, detailed, narrow and outdated. The plan also should not be established on the old plan prior to the "online-time" as it demands 24-hour implementation readiness. The implementation is also difficult if the plan is never tested in practice.

If the communication chain will not work fast enough and the people in key roles won't receive an accurate picture of the situation fast enough, it may lead to bad results. The reaction will be viewed as too little which gives an undermining image. On the other hand, too hurried actions may result in faulty information which is hard to correct. (Karhu & Henriksson 2008, 37-38.)

2.4 Style

Fundamentals of crisis communication are swiftness, openness, honesty and initiativeness. Often undermined attributes are also responsibility and humanness. (Karhu & Henriksson

2008, 27.) Honest and clear communication helps to avoid giving an untrusted image and it should be provided for all involved in the crisis (Coombs, 2014 5-6).

Telang and Deshpande (2016) refer to 5Cs in their study of crisis communication. The framework lists the main factors to be care (the company empathizes with those who are affected and show care about their problems), commitment (by showing the willingness to solve the problem, seek the cause and prevent it from repeating), consistency and coherence (everyone in a responsible position has the same line in their messages) and clarity (problems of the crisis should be addressed and the company's position and actions should be clarified).

There is not a "one size fits all" in crisis response as the situations are surprising by their basic nature, but the pattern should be researched to develop a more efficient crisis communication. One good method is to research other companies' crises situations and study their best practices.

Allen Sommerfeld's (2017) research suggests that a company should focus its internal crisis communication on regular communication in all phases of the crisis, favour face-to-face communication, establish opportunities for employee dialogue and compose trustworthy messages.

Research also recommends best practices for communicators which focus on proper timing, the content of the messages and connection. Regarding timing, impulsiveness should be avoided, a schedule should be made involving consistent updates, employees need to communicate first, and also after the crisis.

When creating messages, the communicator should have an internal sounding board for ideas. Messages should reflect the values of the organization and the communicators should learn from the internal audience. Karhu and Henriksson (2008, 27) add that a company should avoid too technical professional language to keep to the message easily understandable.

Employees who are communicated in an open, timely and truthful way are not only able but also often willing to represent their company and support its goals internally as well as externally. This is especially true in the time of Covid-19. (Schmidt 2020.)

2.5 Two-Way Communication

Traditionally the line between internal and external communication has been that the “message receivers” or “parties of interaction” could be divided into inner and outer circles. Employees, managers, executives and relatable partners would be the inner circle as then customers and other segments or partners would be the outer circle. (Juholin 2013, 51.)

The traditional line is fading as in the modern world stakeholders are communicating more efficiently and creating more networks among each other. Stakeholders and staff may need to influence the company’s matters which could then lead to more proactive relations embracing discussion and interaction. (Juholin 2013, 53.)

Employees are likely to be vested in helping the company to overcome the disruption and maintain its competitiveness. Some of the employees may be willing to put extra effort and time to improve the situation. These employees should be guided to speak up externally and internally. This empowerment reinforces messages within the organization and helps to carry them into the community. (Schmidt 2020.)

Especially during a crisis, communication should be viewed as two-way communication. There are three methods to approach this and are best when applied altogether: interpersonal, horizontal and cross-functional communication. Interpersonal communication is an exchange of messages between two people. Horizontal communication means information sharing between groups of people on the same level within the organization. Cross-functional communication locates between different departments or functions within the organization. (Coombs 2014, 5-6.)

Figure 4 from Frandsen and Johansen (2011) gives an example of relation in terms of two-way communication during a crisis cycle.

A Staged Approach to Internal Crisis Communication			
	PRECRISIS STAGE	CRISIS EVENT	POSTCRISIS STAGE
Focal point	To prevent To prepare	To handle the crisis To make sense	To learn To change
(1) Employees as receivers Management or crisis management team as senders Other types of senders outside the organization	Communication of risks, issues and stakes Communication that strengthens the psychological crisis-preparedness Communication of the crisis management plan (policies and guidelines)	Communication of relevant instructions and information Handling of reactions to the crisis and sense making Protection/restoration of the trust and confidence among employees Crisis auto-communication	Communication of new knowledge (organizational learning and memory) Communication of post-crisis changes Discourse of renewal Memorials
(3) Horizontal communication among managers and among employees			
(2) Employees as senders Management or crisis management team as receivers Other types of receivers outside the organization	Negative upward communication through the line (whistle blowers, dissenters)	Communication of reactions to the crisis Positive and/or negative organizational "ambassadors"	Organizational storytelling
Organizational factors having a positive or negative influence	Crisis type (content, intensity, dynamics and interpretation) Cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions to a crisis (such as anger, stress, grief, and betrayal) Crisis culture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety and error culture • Psychological defense mechanisms • Crisis perception • Crisis memory • Collective mindfulness Communication culture or climate Communication strategy		

Figure 4 Staged Approach to Internal Crisis Communication (Frandsen & Johansen 2011)

Stages of crisis are presented on the horizontal axis which is defined by focal points. Vertical axis distinguishes between communicative situations. The distinction demonstrates how employees are to be mobilized during each stage of a crisis.

2.6 Evaluation

2.6.1 Evaluation of Communication

Approximately half of all organizations measure their communication but the connection to the organization's goals and strategy is not always obvious. Traditional measurement methods are focused on media hits and different kinds of feedback and staff surveys. The challenge is to answer the question of how communication has helped the company achieve its goals. (Juholin 2010, 15.)

ROI (Return on Investment) is an essential business measurement tool that is used to measure the profitability percentage coming from a company's certain investment (Beattie 2021). This should be utilized in communication as well, even though it is viewed as challenging in that area. For example sales results or crisis prevention is often affected by multiple factors. Results of communication can be measured by focusing on notoriety, reputation, trust, commitment and the effectiveness of work community communication. (Juholin 2013, 416-417.)

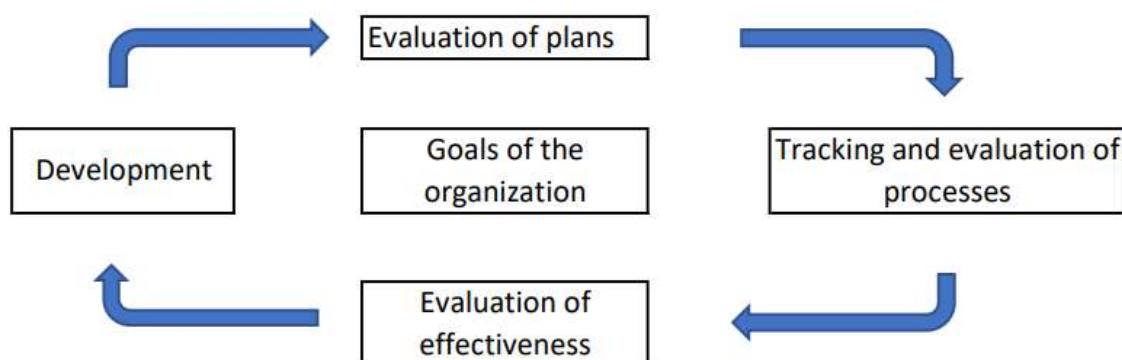


Figure 5 Dynamic Cycle of Evaluation (Juholin 2013, 417)

Figure 5 presents the continuing linkage of evaluation. Evaluation of the plans focuses on the future and questions if the company is doing the right things and if the plans are based on real challenges in the future? Tracking and evaluation of the processes focuses on the current moment asking what is happening and are we acting smart? Evaluation of the effectiveness may be evaluated within a certain frequency by finding out what was accomplished and if the goals were achieved. These three steps are done for the development, making it the most important phase. It aims to find out strengths, weaknesses and issues to develop.

In critical events companies should also ask themselves during the cycle, what led to success, what led to failure, how should have we acted in order to succeed and what attitudes, values, skills, knowledge and procedures led to success or failure? (Juholin 2013, 417-421.)

Additionally, the following questions highlight key points from the communications aspect: Was the crisis detected early enough? How did the communication start? Did the message remain intact, and if not, was incorrect information corrected? (Kortesuo, 2016, 171-172.)

2.6.2 Data Collection

Data collection is the first step of the evaluation. Data comes from sources such as crisis records, stakeholder feedback and organizational performance measures. The records should be reviewed for any noticeable mistakes. Examples of these mistakes could be: was the important information not processed, were there inappropriate messages sent to the stakeholders or were stakeholder inquiries ignored.

Feedback from employees gives management insight into whether messages have reached the employees and reached desired goals. Management can learn from their employees' perceptions, opinions and expectations. Additionally, it may reveal what external stakeholders and colleagues are sharing with them. Feedback often offers valuable suggestions to seize opportunities, minimize damage and enable critical changes. (Mendy, Stewart & Van Akin, 2020.)

This information alone does not present the overall performance of crisis management. It describes the final impact of the crisis. Crisis managers must compare the outcome to the objectives of the crisis management team and to the projections of what the impact would have been if no actions would have been taken to manage the crisis. (Coombs 2014, 169.)

Crisis managers should keep stakeholders updated on possible changes, as they are completed and how well the changes are working. Investigation and tracking of the crisis should be continued to prevent future crises. This leads to natural transmission from the post-crisis phase to precrisis phase making the crisis management an ongoing process. (Coombs 2014, 173-177.)

3 SPECIAL FEATURES OF COVID-19 TO COMMUNICATION

3.1 Stages and Actions

McKinsey’s article has framed the Covid-19 crisis in five stages: resolve, resilience, return, reimagination and reform. These phases take place at different points of the life cycle of the crisis. Each phase requires a different kind of communication. These phases are presented in figure 6.

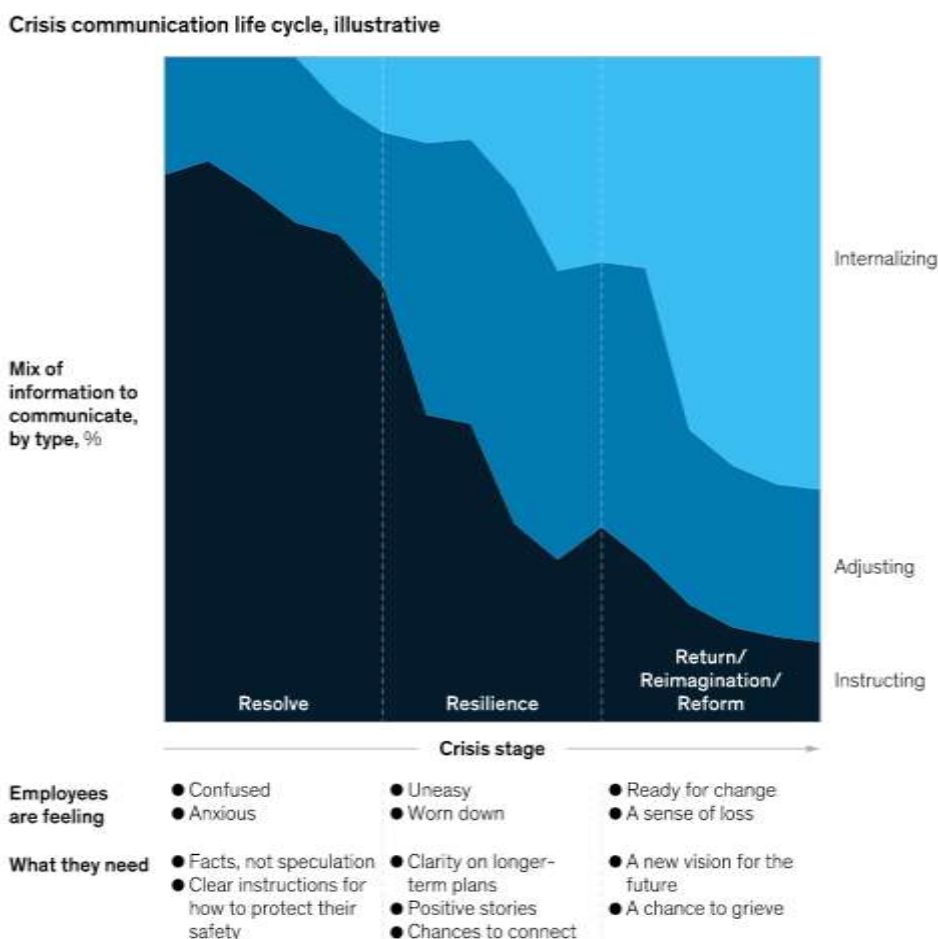


Figure 6 Crisis Communication Life Cycle (Mendy, Stewarts & Van Akin 2020)

In the early stages, communicators are providing instructing information to stay safe and calm.

As fundamental instructions are understood and followed the communication shifts the focus on adjusting for the change and uncertainty.

Finally, the information received is to be shared to help people understand the crisis and its impact better. (Mendy, Stewarts & Van Akin, 2020.)

3.2 Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility's basic idea is to give and take. Every company exists because of the society around it. Society consists of such groups as customers, employees and habitats of the local area. The practice of CSR is done by contributing something back to that society. This may include actions toward environmental development, sustainability, education or health and sanitation. CSR can benefit a company in form of innovations, opportunities and fresh prospects. (Sharma 2020.)

According to Christina Bertinelli (2020), an increasing number of companies have expressed their desire to practice better CSR during the Covid-19 pandemic. From the perspective of internal communication, she advises companies with the following practices; demonstration of appreciation in form of even a simple "thank you". Reassurance that the situation is temporary. Reminders of the resources available to help cope with the crisis, such as mental health services, wellness programs or flexibility with childcare. Providing platforms and space for employees to show how they are giving back by posting photos and updates on social media.

3.3 Sources of Information

One-voice policy has become a more popular method of communicating in pursuit of coherent and simultaneous communication. This policy may be difficult to maintain during Covid-19 as employees tend to talk about stressful work-related matters with the community around them.

A disgruntled employee poses a potentially serious threat by sharing damaging information with reporters or on social media. This could harm the one-voice policy and erase crisis response efforts. Company-wide one-voice policy can therefore be a beneficial investment. (Schmidt 2020.)

3.4 Channels

The covid-19 pandemic forced many to work from home offices. This may affect communication but channels that employees are used to should be favoured. Adjustment of these existing channels may be needed, as well as developing, testing and implementation of new

ones which are facilitating two-way communication with employees throughout the organization better. (Schmidt 2020.)

Slack, Yammer and Zoom provide examples of online communication solutions to facilitate the new way of communicating. Such tools are essential to connecting employees remotely. (Schmidt 2020.)

3.5 Style of Communication

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, the demand from employees for updated information and continuous feedback has increased. Therefore, the volume and frequency of internal communication should meet these needs.

The following questions should be examined before communicating with the employees:

1. What is the desired outcome of the communication?
2. What will be communicated?
3. Who will initiate the communication?
4. Which employees will be communicated with?
5. How and (or) where is the communication going to happen?
6. When will the communication take place?

After the communication, as a part of evaluation and improvement, communicators should examine whether the communication objectives were met and what could be done better.

As employees' trust in management's ability to handle the pandemic is critical, even seemingly unimportant concerns should be addressed on systematical and ongoing basis.

Managers and supervisors must carefully listen to employees and openly communicate what is known (facts), how they feel about it (feelings), and what they are doing about it (actions).

Covid-19 effects on employees are pressure and uncertainty. This creates panic, false information and rumours. Guidance, relevant information, and motivation provided across the organizational hierarchies by the senior management reduce the possibility of these emerging. Particularly important issues to cover are concerns relating to the health and safety of employees and the company's future.

Despite the wealth of sophisticated technology at the disposal of today's professionals, face-to-face communication between supervisors and their direct reports remains one of the most effective communication tools.

Even though many negative outcomes of the Covid-19 are out of a single company's reach and cannot be affected, there are some things the company is responsible for. An example of this is a situation involving a positive Covid-19 result in the workplace. Communication should include empathy as well as a clear presentation of steps to be taken to handle the situation and prevent recurrences. Communication should not be solely viewed from the management's perspective. The opinions, perceptions and expectations of employee groups should also be considered. (Schmidt 2020.)

4 SUPERVISOR COMMUNICATION DURING CRISIS

Figure 7 presents the main sectors of an ongoing cycle for an ethical communicating leader.



Figure 7 Cycle of Communicative and Ethical Leader (Juholin 2017, 268)

A leader who handles these sectors knows himself and is there for the employees. He listens and leads dialog. He also recognises experts around him and utilises the technology. (Juholin 2017, 268.)

When dividing the roles in crisis communication, senior management is often in charge of the external public side, and supervisors are responsible for the daily communication. Chain companies of greater size may also have different departments or units devoted to communication. In crisis communication own personnel is a particularly important stakeholder. A supervisor should avoid unnecessary speculation, cover-ups and underestimation and aim for swift, open, up-to-date and regular communication. There should be enough time reserved for face-to-face interaction. Time of crisis is often physically and mentally burdening so supervisors need to ensure the time to care for their own basic needs, so they can appear humane, considerate and balanced in terms of words and body language in front of their staff. (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi & Murtola 2015, 112-113.)

A crisis is a test of loyalty. Common goals and team spirit are obvious features during normal times. During a time of crisis, employees tend to shift their thinking more towards their own position and safety. This results in negligence towards instructions, misinterpreting information, pulling aside and an attitude of turning against their managers. A company should provide a way to express extreme feelings. Loyalty can also be increased with empathy, which means the ability to put yourself into the other side's position. Importance lies not only in the content of the message but also in the style the messages are presented. (Karhu & Henriksson 2008, 108.)

Mark Dancer (2020) argues that supervisors are critical for finding solutions during crises. One beneficial way is to gather ideas that may be helpful for the company's survival. His research proposes four priorities for supervisors. These priorities are advocacy, innovation, renovation and communication. Communication should focus to share practical information among other supervisors. Essential topics are functionalities of methods, availability for support and channels to voice out fears, and space for ideas and feedback.

Supervisor support directed to the employees is based on social interaction, information exchange and quality of the relationship. This support crucially lessens the psychological impacts and uncertainty during a time of crisis and organizational change process. If the supervisor support is successful, the role of crisis communication from the organization may reduce. Counter-wise, if the support is low, employees need to rely more heavily upon the organization's communication. (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn 2020.)

Shaun Martin (2020) states in his article that one major challenge during the Covid-19 crisis is information overload. This is caused by multiple external parties such as news, brands, government and health officials. Regardless, often it is better to over-communicate than under-communicate so in supervising position it is efficient to concentrate communication on guiding questions of "what, when and how". This helps to keep the communication less burdening.

Information is to be shared promptly as it's received, but if there is something essential that is not known, that should be shared as well. Reinforcing the organisation's core commitments and values instill meaning and purpose.

Information should be reviewed, repeated and reinforced. This is a way to make sure important messages are heard and understood by everyone. During a crisis, employees' capacity to voice out their questions and concerns may be lessened so initiative from managers is needed before the concerns arise.

Connection on the human level reduces the threat response and communicates care. Demonstration of vulnerability such a way as introducing a discussion topic of emotions experienced at a given moment lead to a much richer conversation. When attention is focused on listening to the facts, values and feelings, the intended message can be more efficiently delivered and people feel that they've been heard.

Research done by Charoensukmongkol and Phungsoonthorn (2020) proposes that coworker support regards as a key social resource to reduce work stress. Coworkers informally share information, and it fills the possible gap lacking in the formal communication from the organization.

This may be an efficient and stress-relieving method of sharing information but there is a higher risk of misinformation and speculation leading to negative outcomes, increasing the anxiety and uncertainty of the employees. Content of this communication should be taken into consideration and formal communication should be comprehensive and consistent.

5 INTERNAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION AT HÄMEENMAA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The case company exercises sounding for weak external signals and internal change signals. These are noticed in the planning of the communication. The company noticed the signals of a possible crisis and recognized the special need for internal and external communication in the early phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. The crisis expanded faster than expected but the executive team had time to be partially prepared for the necessary measures.

The Crisis Management Team (CMT) was established on 17.3.2020. The team had been predetermined. Effects of the upcoming crisis were evaluated at first by CEO and CFO. After this, business directors were involved, and the effects of different scenarios were to be estimated.

Hämeenmaa has got crisis communication plan. It defines the CMT and guides actions in different crisis situations in form of status cards. The plan is based on operating model of the crisis management team and a pre-prepared crisis management and preparedness plan.

Crisis communication is practiced regularly with the experts of Suomen Osuuskauppojen Keskuskunta (SOK). SOK and regional co-operative enterprises such as Osuuskauppa Hämeenmaa belong to the retailing cooperative organization S-ryhmä.

The overall picture of the crisis communication was not clear in advance, but Hämeenmaa got remarkable support from SOK to promote the necessary measures. Hämeenmaa had active cooperation with SOK, and the aim was to synchronize and coordinate the communicational entities to avoid potential discrepancies.

The responsibilities of the communication were agreed upon beforehand but specifications came along the way. Market support, Human resources (HR) and product communication had their own team.

The division between executives and HR was that the HR was responsible for communication concerning activities and safety of the staff. The role of the executives was to reassure, ensure the operational capability, ensure the implementation of made decisions and lead by example.

Especially the activity and positive encouragement of the staff were highlighted. CEO emphasized the style of communication to honesty, openness and encouragement which were supported by active communication by the executive team.

Objectives of the crisis communication were fast situational awareness, a feeling of security for customers and staff as well as maintaining trust and reduction of fear and uncertainty. In addition, crisis communication for the supervisors of the units provided operating instructions for daily actions and support for customer communication.

The main aspect of the personnel strategy was to retain the jobs of the staff, relocate staff between industries and ensure future continuity.

Cooperation with the authorities focused on customer safety and communication of the infection situation for quarantines and infections. Communication was done between hospitals and the communication expert of Hämeenmaa.

The channels of communication were the company's website, email, newspaper advertising and social media. Inside the stores, audio advertising, posters and digital displays were used.

Hämeenmaa has internal communication channels "Workplace" and "Workchat". Workplace functions in a similar way as the social media platform Facebook. Workchat is a more direct messaging platform for smaller groups. By centralizing internal communication to Workplace and Workchat the company has enhanced two-way communication with the staff and reduced communication via email.

The importance of this personnel communication system increased during the crisis, and it was selected to be the primary information-sharing channel. This system saved time and resources as the information, discussions and refinements promptly reached the whole staff.

Due to the crisis, a separate chat group was established for the CMT as well as a Q&A group concerning Covid-19 in which the experts of the company answered the questions of the staff. From the Q&A group company could recognize more efficiently weak signals and specify the responsibilities of the executives and roles in the communication.

In the past, crisis communication has been assessed by job satisfaction surveys and customer feedback. Company views that the crisis communication was executed on a good level. (Personal Communication Järvenselkä 2021.)

6 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND DATA ANALYSIS

6.1 Data Acquisition

A structured survey is a common way to collect feedback. A survey is most effective when it is kept simple and not too time-consuming. A typical survey is seeking information about specific strengths and weaknesses, level of satisfaction and suggestions for improvement. (Coombs 2014, 163.)

The questions of the survey may repeat a similar pattern over time to achieve comparable information, but they can also include unique questions if the issue is acute and important. There are different methods on how to form a survey such as opposite adjectives, scaling from 1 to 5 and open questions. The survey should avoid things such as asking too personal background questions as it may reduce the willingness to respond or implementing too many questions as analysis of qualitative material could be difficult. (Juholin 2013, 427.)

The survey for this research had a pattern of statements and questions. The survey consisted of a total of 16 questions or statements and it was established with the Webropol survey program. All the questions or statements fell under four categories. The categories were Style, Channel, Content and Supervisor work.

There were two questions to obtain background information of the respondents regarding age and years of experience in supervising position.

10 statements used Likert's scale in which the respondent is asked to present his/her personal opinion for a given statement (Heikkilä 2014). The scale was structured in the following manner:

- 1) Täysin samaa mieltä (Fully agree)
- 2) Osittain samaa mieltä (Partially agree)
- 3) En osaa sanoa (I don't know)
- 4) Osittain eri mieltä (Partially disagree)
- 5) Täysin eri mieltä (Fully disagree)

In one statement the respondent could express his/her opinion on the number of communication channels. In this statement options were, too few, good amount and too many.

Four of the questions were open-ended questions in which the respondents could express their thoughts more broadly about the presented issue. In one of these questions, the respondent may freely express his/her suggestions for the development of internal crisis communication in the company.

The survey was published in the internal communication service Workplace on supervisors' group "Hämeenmaa tiedotteet esimiehille". It was collecting information from 9.3.2022 to 27.3.2022.

6.2 Results

26 out of 130 supervisors answered the survey. This represents 20% of the research target group.

Background

Table 1 shows that 42% of the respondents were under 40-years-old and 58% were older than that. Table 2 shows that 23% of the respondents had worked in supervising position at Hämeenmaa for less than 6 years. Equally 23% had worked for 6 to 10 years and the rest 54% had over 10 years of experience.

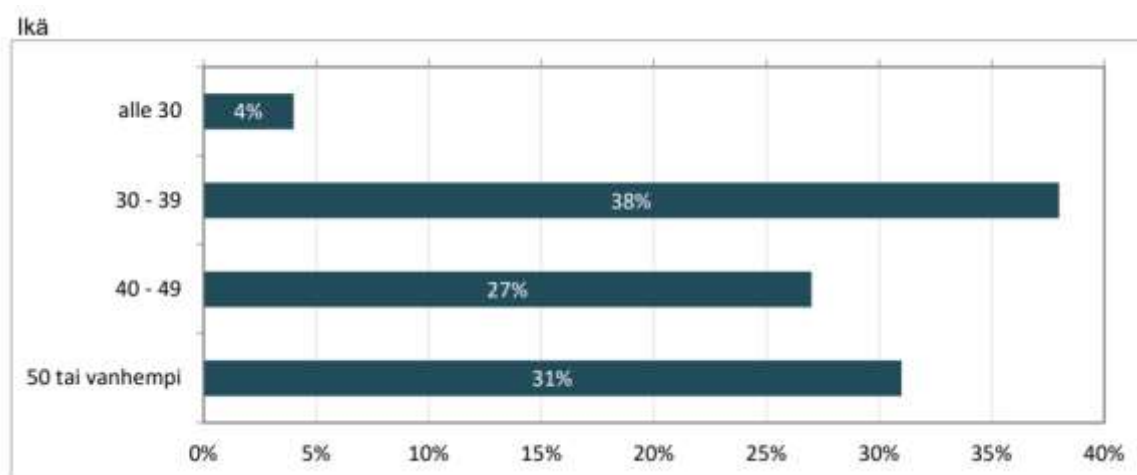


Table 1 Age of Respondents

Kokemus esimiestehtävissä Hämeenmaalla

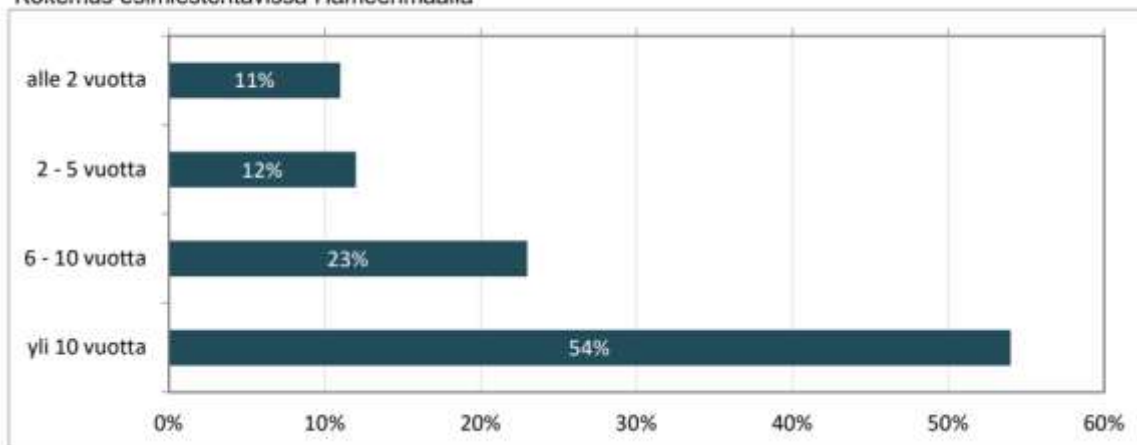


Table 2 Experience as a Supervisor at Hämeenmaa

Crisis communication statements

The following statements and results are presented in categories

Style

Kriisiviestintä alkoi koronatilanteen alkaessa riittävän nopeasti (The crisis communication started fast enough as the corona situation started). Table 3 shows that 58% of the respondents fully agreed and 34% partially agreed. 4% of the respondents had no opinion and 4% partially disagreed. According to the data, it can be stated that the crisis communication started fast enough at the beginning of the corona situation, as the majority of the respondents fully agree and a third partially agree.

Kriisiviestintä alkoi koronatilanteen alkaessa riittävän nopeasti

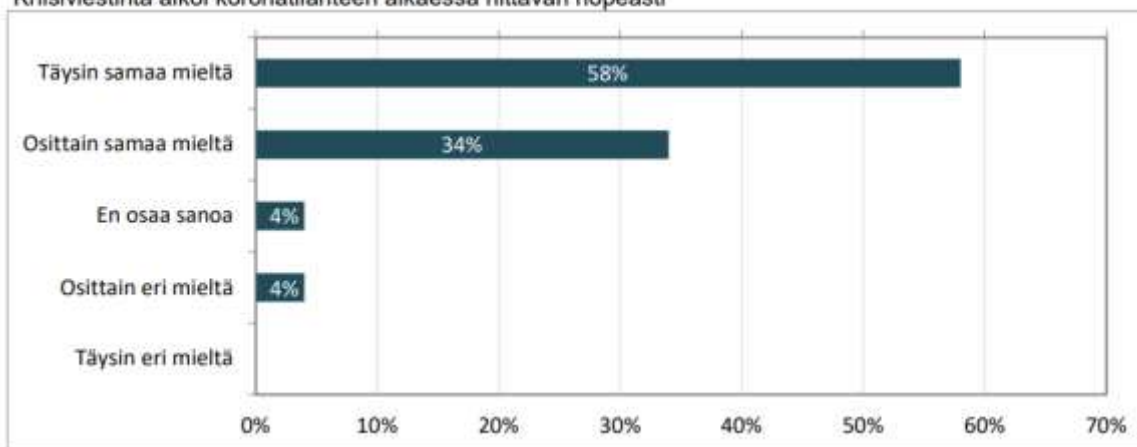


Table 3 The Start of Crisis Communication

Viestintä on ollut tarpeeksi säännöllistä (Communication has been frequent enough). Table 4 shows that 58% of the respondents fully agreed and 31% partially agreed. 11% of the respondents partially disagreed. According to the data, the communication has been frequent enough as the majority fully or partially agreed with the statement.

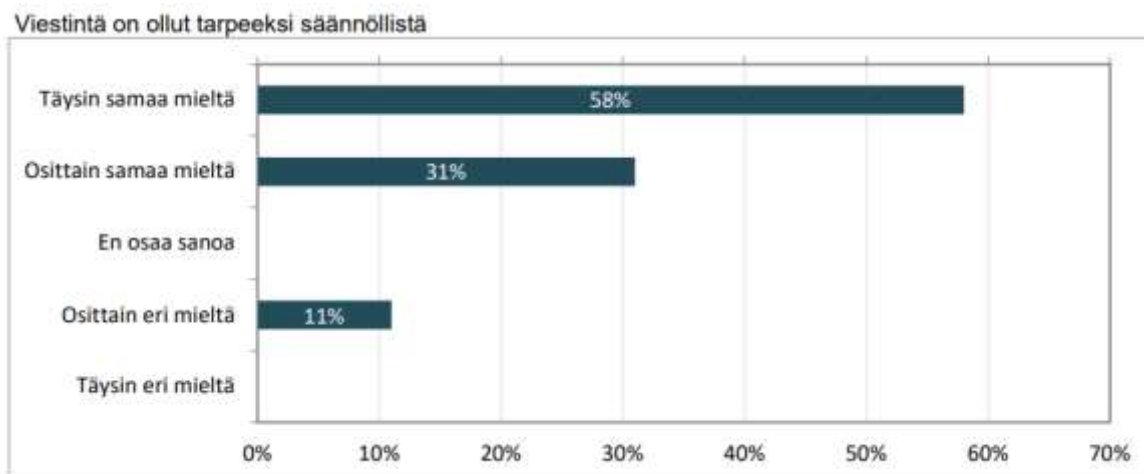


Table 4 Frequency of Communication

Informaatio on ollut helposti ymmärrettävää (Information has been easy to understand). Table 5 shows that 27% of the respondents fully agreed and 54% partially agreed. 15% of the respondents partially disagreed and 4% fully disagreed. Approximately four-fifths of respondents were agreeing from which majority of them just partially agreeing. Fifth were in some level disagreeing. According to the data, the vast majority found the information easy to understand.

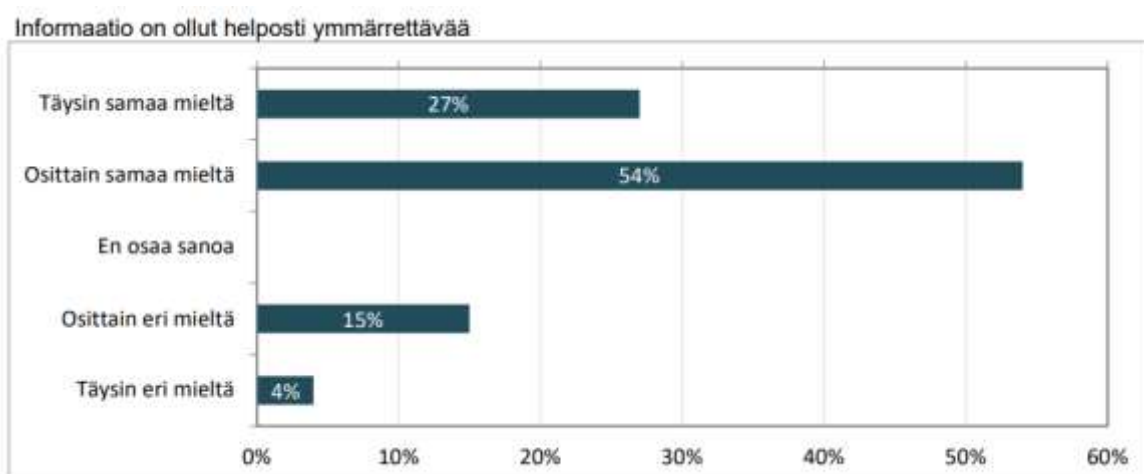


Table 5 Clarity of Information

Content

Viestintä on ollut ajankohtaista (Communication has been up to date). Table 6 shows that 48% of the respondents fully agreed and 52% partially agreed. According to the data, the communication has been up to date and the statement can be viewed to present an accurate representation of the current situation as all the respondents agreed with the statement.

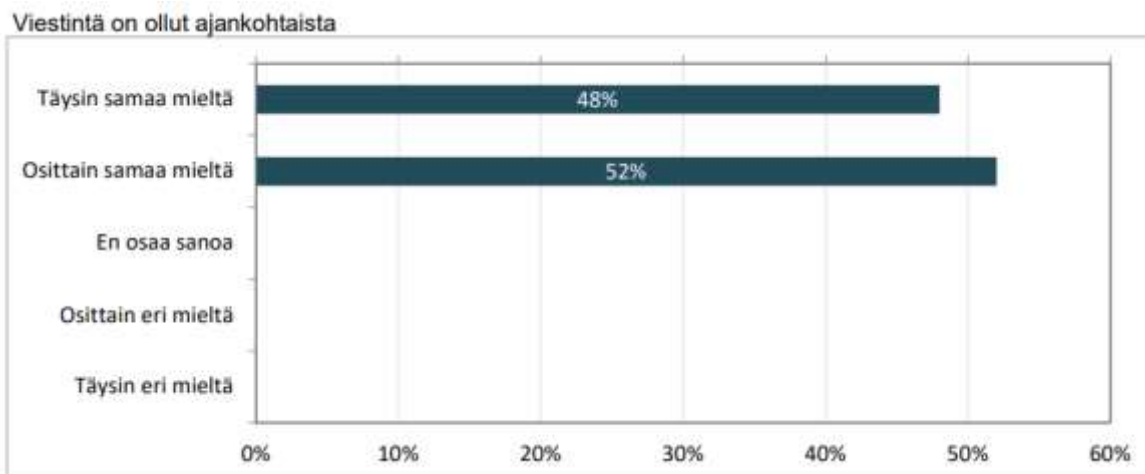


Table 6 The Timeliness of Communication

Lisätietoa on ollut helposti saatavilla (Additional information has been easy to access). Table 7 shows that 52% of the respondents fully agreed and 40% partially agreed. 8% of the respondents partially disagreed. According to the data, additional information has been easy to access as the vast majority agrees with the statement indicating it to be accurate to represent the current situation.

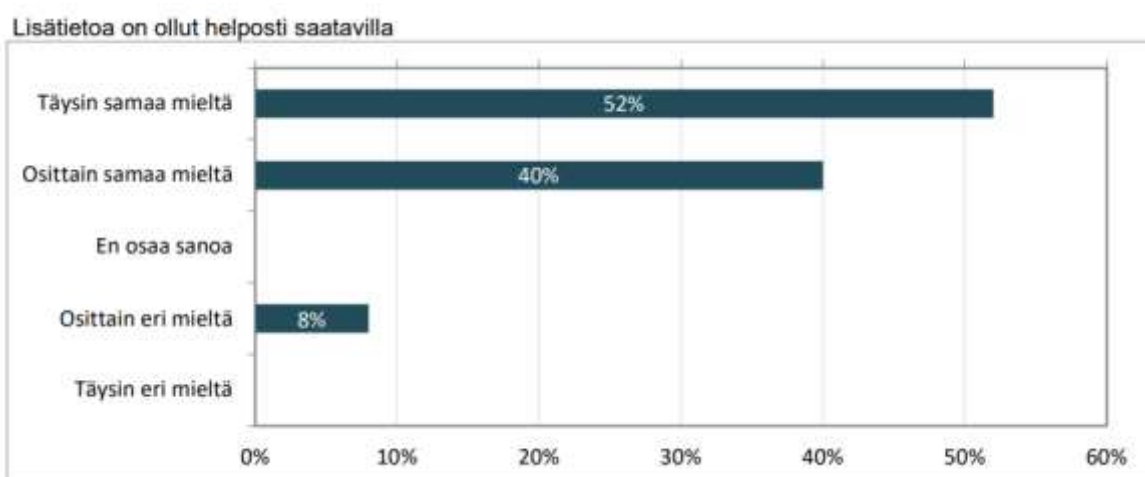


Table 7 Access to Additional Information

Mistä asiasta olisit kaivannut lisää viestintää? (From what issue would you have wanted more communication?). 9 respondents chose to answer this question. The opinions connected to the actual question seem to be on a satisfying level, expressing that no further information has been needed. One respondent suggested that at some point the communication could have been more clear on which official orders and recommendations each operating instruction is based on.

There were few remarks not necessarily straightly connected to the provided question. The main points are translated from Finnish as follows:

“Messages came often on Fridays and during the afternoon when I had already left work”

“Problem was not the adequacy of messages but the fact that they were scattered in different channels”

“Corona teams would have been efficient”

Channel

Viestintäkanavia on ollut a) Liikaa b) Sopivasti c) Liian vähän (There has been a) Too many b) Good amount c) Too few communication channels. Table 8 shows that 4% of the respondents thought that there have been too many channels and 96% thought there has been a good amount. This strongly indicates that no less or more channels have been needed.

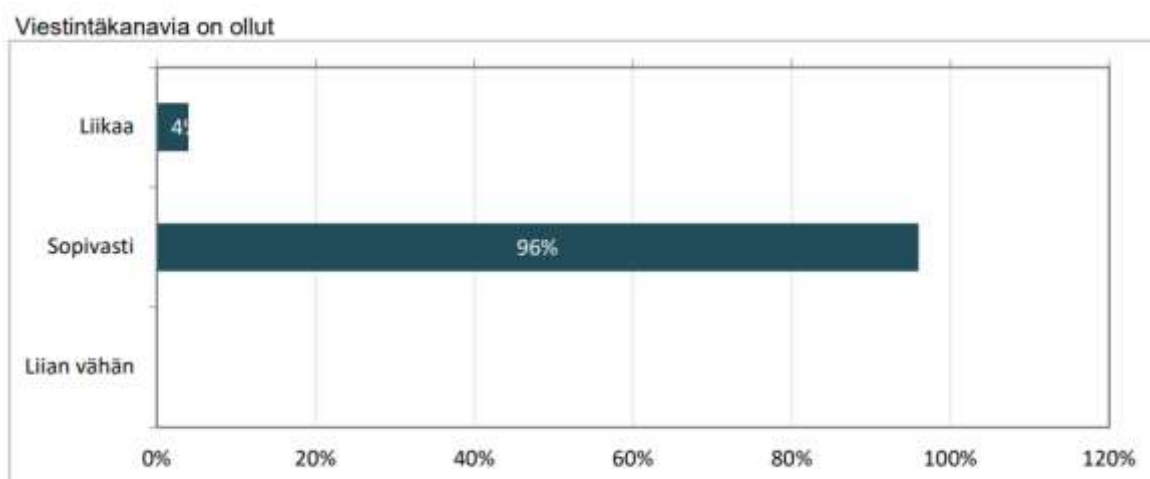


Table 8 Amount of Channels

Mitkä tiedonvälityskanavat ovat olleet sinulle tärkeimmät? (Which communication channels have been most important for you?) 21 of the respondents answered this open-ended question. Single answers consisted of one or two channels. An equal number of respondents answered “Workplace” and “Email” as being the most important channels for them. One respondent added that Workplace works well as it is a real-time communication channel. Another respondent stated also that the media has been an important channel. Results show that Workplace and Email are the most favored channels.

Supervisor work

Koen, että viestintä tuki työstäni suoriutumista (I feel that the communication supported my ability to succeed in my work). Table 9 shows that 69% of the respondents fully agreed and 23% partially agreed. 8% of the respondents partially disagreed. According to the date the crisis communication has been able to support the supervisors’ ability to succeed in their work.

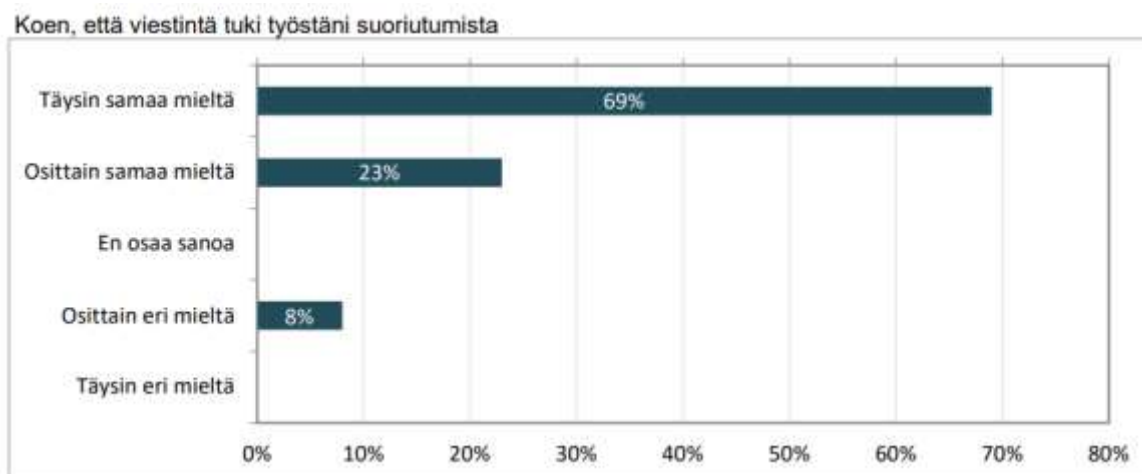


Table 9 Communication Support for Work

Informaatiota on ollut helppo käsitellä ja välittää eteenpäin (Information has been easy to process and deliver forward). Table 10 shows that 32% of the respondents fully agreed and 48% partially agreed. 20% of the respondents partially disagreed. As half of the respondents are just partially agreeing and fifth partially disagreeing, data gives the impression that there have been challenges relating to this issue. Regardless, the majority of the respondents found the information easy to process and deliver forward.

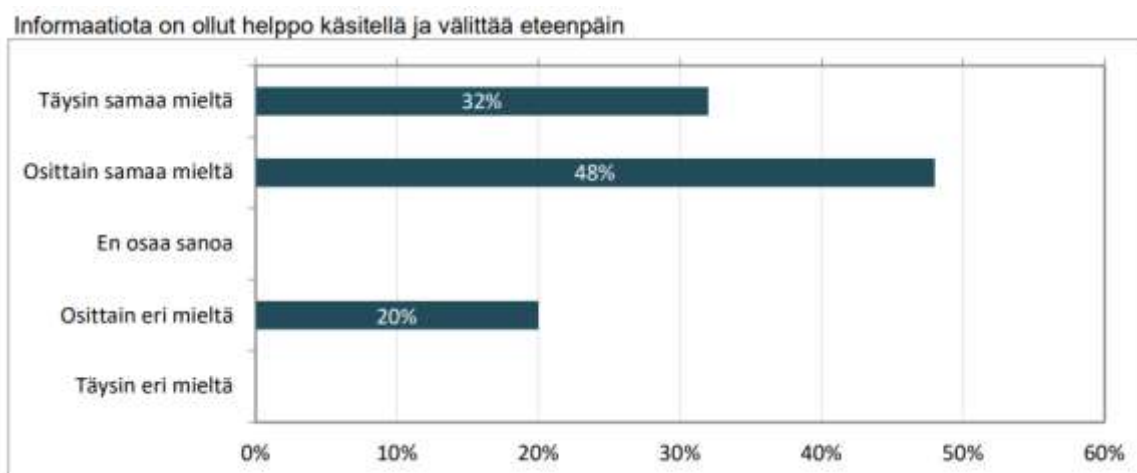


Table 10 Processability of Information

Minulle on ollut selvää kenelle, ja minkäläistä tietoa saan välittää eteenpäin (It has been clear to me, to whom and what kind of information I am allowed to deliver forward). Table 11 shows that 58% of the respondents fully agreed and 38% partially agreed. 4% of the respondents partially disagreed. According to the data, the instructions regarding information privacy have mostly been clear to the respondents.



Table 11 Rights and Restrictions of Communication

Koen, että kriisin jatkuessa viestintä on pystynyt vastaamaan minun ja tiimini sen hetkisiin tarpeisiin (I feel that as the crisis has continued, the communication has been able to meet the current needs of me and my team). Table 12 shows that 58% of the respondents fully agreed and 31% partially agreed. 11% of the respondents partially disagreed. According to the data, the communication has been able to meet the current needs of the respondents and their team with occasional setbacks as the majority of the respondents fully agree with the statement.

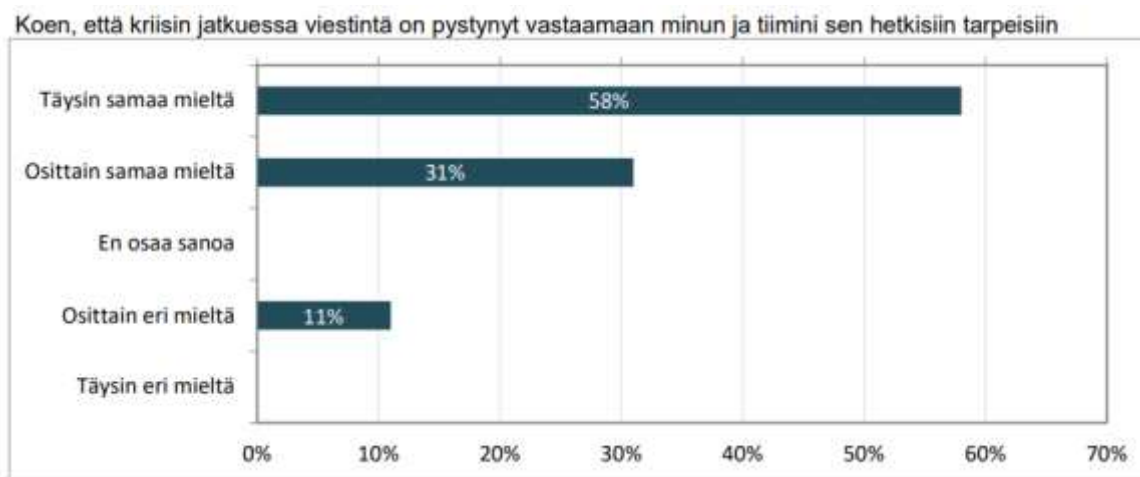


Table 12 The Current Needs from Communication

Mitä olet oppinut kriisiviestinnästä tiedon välittäjänä? (What have you learned from crisis communication as a transmitter of information).

14 respondents answered the question. The following results are translated into English. Original full answers in Finnish can be found in appendix 2 at the end of the document.

Instructions and guidelines may change very rapidly and there may be regional differences. Communication must be monitored continuously.

I have learned to keep myself calm and fully trust that I will receive all relevant information concerning my work, from Human Resources, Market support, etc. as soon as they have the information.

Speed is a trump card.

Speed is a trump card. Instructions made by Human Resources, from which you can clearly find things that have changed, have been excellent.

Deliver precise information clearly and concisely. Information is to be delivered at regular intervals, not too often.

Communication must happen immediately. Announcement of changed issues also immediately.

Deliver information fast, directly and without speculation.

You shouldn't hesitate with crisis communication (which has not happened here though), but you have to immediately communicate something. Communication must be based on facts, which can be proved.

Expressing the matter as simply as possible.

I've learned that it is important to share updated information still forward because even though everyone is in the groups, in which matters have been announced at every point, still they are not read or heard of.

How important announcing is.

To read a message with care, and if necessary, even twice before delivering it to the field.

People understand messages differently, some faster than others.

Ensure timeliness, distribution list and validity in your sector. Focus on the essentials and think about how the messages are delivered forward to the workgroup. Stick to the relevant, stay up to date and ask if you feel contradiction in instructions.

The last question did not fall under the main categories. Its purpose was to give respondents a chance to suggest improvements for crisis communication. This question was answered by 9 respondents and was presented as follows:

Mitä kehittämistoiveita sinulla on liittyen kriisiviestintään? (What kind of development suggestions do you have regarding crisis communication?)

Suggestions and feedback are summarized and translated into English. Original full answers in Finnish can be found in appendix 2 at the end of the document.

Internal communication should be faster and synchronized better with the decision-making of the official authorities to establish a shorter response time.

Information was not delivered fast enough.

There were difficulties in delivering information to the team because too much information was received. Especially in the beginning, the updates and changes were difficult to deliver as information was often received outside of office hours.

Preferably only one or two parties to provide communication. The information came with different frequencies and was sometimes contradicting. Some instructions required a lot of additional information on how to implement instructions to practice.

Sometimes information was hard to understand, which may be due to the ambiguity of governmental communication. I believe the communication has been as good as can be. No development suggestions.

All material such as store and staff communication as well as latest instructions to one place. For example to S-point or verkkolevy (network drive) to ensure access to the latest reliable information.

Clear instructions to the whole regional cooperative area (Osuuskauppa). More information sharing on good practices.

No wishes. Job well done.

Workplace chat group with the topic of crisis communication for the staff of the regional cooperative area. (Osuuskauppa)

6.3 Discussion of the Results

STYLE

Regarding the style of communication, the majority of the respondents agreed that crisis communication started fast enough. As theory suggests, this is a fundamental issue in crisis communication to avoid giving an undermining image of the situation (Karhu & Henriksson 2008, 37-38). Employees are also a remarkable channel to the outside of the company, making swiftness right from the beginning an important matter (Karhu & Henriksson 2008, 63).

Satisfaction towards the frequency of the communication was almost as equally high as towards the initiation of the communication. This is yet another important issue due to the increased demand for information during the Covid-19 pandemic (Schmidt 2020). Answers from open questions offered additional feedback relating to the topic from three respond-

ents. One respondent suggested that internal communication should be synchronized better with official authorities to establish a shorter response time. Another respondent also stated that information was not being delivered fast enough.

One respondent felt that information was contradicting and came in different frequencies because too many parties were producing the communication. This opinion did not arise in any other answer, but it doesn't mean no one else from the target group would have experienced it. It is not clear to the author how crisis communication was exactly practiced. A one-voice policy may increase coherent and simultaneous communication (Shmidt 2020) and there is a possibility that at some point the information providers were not aligned properly with each other. Another reason for the respondent's opinion may be as mentioned in one open question stating that instructions may change rapidly and there may be regional differences.

The answers to the statement of understandability of the information differed slightly from the previously mentioned. 81% of the respondents were agreeing that information was easy to understand of which 27% fully agreed. 19% of the respondents were disagreeing with the statement while 4% fully disagreed. One respondent suggested that this may have been due to the ambiguity of governmental communication. This opinion may provide a significant factor for the results. As some supervisors have found the information difficult to understand and follow, the company's executives may have felt the same. From the author's knowledge and interpretation, the Covid-19 crisis has shown as a very complicated issue to handle by the government as well as other nations of the world. Instructions may have been, from time to time, unclear and rushed.

Additionally, one respondent was not satisfied with the timing of the communication, expressing that the messages often came outside of office hours.

Overall, the satisfaction with the style of the communication was high but based on the results there have been difficulties to understand the provided information by several supervisors.

CONTENT

Regarding the content of the information majority of the respondents agreed on some level that the information has been up to date and that additional information has been easy to access. Answers to the open questions provided more details about the topic. One respondent suggested that all material, such as store and staff communication as well as the latest instructions, should be placed in one place to ensure access to reliable information. Another respondent pointed out that a lot of additional information was required on how to implement

instructions in practice as they were so “high-class” information. To maintain understandability in the messages, a company should avoid too technical professional language (Karhu & Henriksson 2008, 27).

Additionally, one respondent suggested that there should be more information sharing on good practices. This is a recommended practice during Covid-19 and within the crisis communications life cycle. This will help people to understand the crisis and its impacts (Mendy, Stewarts & Van Akin 2020.) By sharing information, supervisors and employees may also share topics regarding the availability of support and otherwise express feelings regarding the whole situation (Dancer 2020).

One respondent gave compliments to human resources’ communication for providing updated information. Respondents furthermore expressed satisfaction with the content of the communication in an open question. None of the respondents expressed a need for communication on additional topics except for one respondent who stated that the communication could have been more clear on which official orders and recommendations each operating instruction is based on.

Results show that the supervisors have been highly satisfied with the content of the crisis communication with few improvement suggestions provided.

CHANNEL

Almost all of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the number of communication channels. Only 4% of the respondents felt that there have been too many channels. One respondent stated that messages were scattered in different channels, which was experienced as problematic. Two respondents suggested additions to channels. The other suggested that “Korona teams” would have been efficient as in other suggested implementation of a Workplace chat group for the whole staff of the regional cooperative area. As Schmidt (2020) states, the Covid-19 pandemic may create a need for adjustment to existing channels to facilitate better two-way communication.

Results clearly show that the selected number of channels was good, adding that some modifications could be beneficial.

Schmidt (2020) furthermore suggests that the channels that employees are used to, should be favored and this was shown in the results as the respondents equally weighed Workplace and email being their most favored channels.

SUPERVISOR WORK

Regarding the supervisor work, the majority fully agreed that the communication has been able to support their ability to succeed in their work. For an almost equal amount of the respondents, it was clear to who and what kind of information they have been allowed to deliver onwards.

89% of the respondents agreed from which the majority fully agreed that the crisis communication has been able to meet their current needs. These results indicate that the communication has been able to follow the pattern provided by Mendy, Stewarts & Van Akin (2020) regarding how crisis communication should react to different stages of the crisis.

An increased number of respondents felt difficulties in processing and delivering information. The majority did agree that the information was easy to process. Yet, the majority of them only partially agreeing. 20% of the respondents partially disagreed that it was easy. One respondent expressed the difficulty in this being that too much information was received. The reason at least partially contributing to this answer may lay in the statement of Shaun Martin (2020). Information overload has been one of the major challenges of Covid-19. This is not just because of the increased amount of internal communication but also because of the increase in communication from external parties. The results of this topic align with the results regarding the understandability of information.

Overall, the respondents felt that the crisis communication has been supportive, has been able to meet the current needs and mostly been clear. More clarity on the information is desired. In addition, the respondents expressed to have learned a vast array of key points as a part of the crisis communication chain.

The results showed three clear main themes. Up to date information, clarity and speed. The themes are supported in theory as being important aspects in crisis communication (Karhu & Henriksson 2008, 27, 37-38, 63; Coombs 2014, 5-6, 173-177; Telang & Deshpande 2016; Schmidt 2020; Kortetjärvi-Nurmi & Murtola 2015, 112-113; Martin 2020).

Respondents have learned that it is important to keep the delivered information updated. To achieve this, you should keep yourself updated, communicate with a decent amount of frequency and ensure the messages are understood.

Communication should focus on the essentials and be clear, precise, simple and concise. In addition, unnecessary speculation should be avoided, and information should be able to substantiate with facts.

Crisis communication should start as fast as possible, and it should be renewed as soon as new information is available.

A couple of answers related to thoughtfulness and support. You should process the given information with thought and then plan your message well. If something is unclear, you can get support from, for example, the Human Resources department. Acknowledgment of available expert support is an important feature of a communicative and ethical leader (Juholin 2017, 268).

In addition to the above-mentioned findings, there were single mentions about keeping yourself calm, noticing the individual differences in the ability to receive and process information within the team, outlining the distribution group and how the instructions are implemented in your operational environment.

6.4 Recommendations

As theory suggests, Covid-19 has increased the demand for updated information and continuous feedback (Schmidt 2020). The theory also encourages sharing information, good practices and thoughts in general concerning the topic. This may provide new insights and ideas for the future. (Mendy, Stewarts & Akin 2020; Dancer 2020.) As supervisors have shown to learn the important factors of crisis communication, this knowledge, as well as experiences, could be shared among other supervisors.

Theory shows that supervisor support fills the gap of that is lacking in crisis communication (Charoensukmongkol & Phungsoonthorn 2020). If the information provided by crisis communicators is hard to understand and process for whatever reason, a supervisor equipped with proper crisis communication skills could be capable of making the situation better within the team. Horizontal information sharing of feelings, challenges and efficient day-to-day practices among supervisors could enhance the individual and independent crisis communication capabilities.

7 CONCLUSION

7.1 Answer to the Research Questions

How efficient has the internal crisis communication been during the Covid-19 crisis?

The supervisors viewed the internal crisis communication overall as being efficient. The results show a high level of satisfaction in fundamental categories of crisis communication. Communication has been executed with efficient style, the content has been easily available and up to date, and the number and selection of channels have been good. In addition, communication has proved to be helpful for the vast majority of the supervisors to succeed in their work. Supervisors did express difficulties in understanding and processing the information.

What kind of knowledge was gained by the supervisors about crisis communication?

Supervisors have learned the importance of keeping themselves and the team linked to the latest information, the importance of the clarity of communication and messages, and the swiftness of taking initiative and providing information. Additional practices were also discovered which proved to be beneficial. These practices include the acknowledgment of the support available, carefulness in processing information, calm mentality, acknowledgment of individual differences among people and their ability to process information.

7.2 Summary

The thesis analyses how efficient has the internal crisis communication has been at the case company Hämeenmaa during the Covid-19 pandemic and what kind of knowledge was gained by the supervisors of the units.

The theoretical framework provides supporting data for the research. The element of surprise, threat and short response time are common characteristics of crises (Kortetjärvi-Nurmi & Murtola 2015, 110). They often follow a pattern starting from pre warnings and ending with exhaustion (Kortesuo 2016, 32). Pre-planned crisis communication strategies and plans help the company to quickly initiate crisis communication efforts and maintain a reliable image (Coombs 2014, 5-6; Karhu & Henriksson 2008, 37-38).

The Covid-19 crisis can be divided into multiple stages and different kind of crisis communication is required based on the stage. Communication should start with an instructing and

calming way in the early phases, then shift to focus on adjustment for the change and uncertainty, and ultimately learning and sharing of information and experiences. (Mendy, Stewarts & Van Akin 2020.)

Hämeenmaa recognized the special need for internal communication in early phase of the Covid-19 crisis. It had an existing crisis communication plan which has been practiced regularly. Important objectives were to secure the operational capability and safety of the staff. The crisis communication targeted specifically to supervisors provided instructions for daily actions and support for customer communication. (Personal Communication Järvenselkä 2021.)

Empirical research shows that the supervisors are highly satisfied with the crisis communication. Issues such as speed, frequency, channels and support for the supervisor's capabilities received appreciation from the vast majority of the respondents. Supervisors felt clarity and processability of the information to be more difficult issues. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a difficult crisis for governments around the world which has demanded fast actions and changes in legislation. Regardless, based on the results received by the supervisors, Hämeenmaa has practiced highly efficient internal crisis communication.

Additionally, supervisors have learned important issues involved in crisis communication. Three main themes being up to date information, clarity and speed. Additional issues concerned thoughtfulness, support, calm mentality and individual differences. All previously mentioned issues are supported by theoretical framework to be as efficient practices and focus points.

7.3 Validity, Reliability and Ethics

Valid research measures what was intended, does not include systematic errors and gives on average right results. Validity is reached by establishing questions that are simple and cover the research questions. The answer rate must be high. Reliable research gives precise results which are repeatable with the same results. There must be a wide enough sample, and it needs to present the target group well to have a reliable research. Also, the gathering and handling of information must be done with care and without errors. (Heikkilä 2014.)

The research was conducted by using several theoretical references. This included academic literature on fundamental concepts of crisis communication and supervisor work as well as the latest articles to provide newly discovered information concerning Covid-19.

References within the main body of the text are marked clearly and corresponding references can be found from the list of references to review suggested theories.

The majority of the theoretical framework was compared among each other to obtain reliable information. To gain additional information for the theoretical framework, the customer relations manager of Hämeenmaa was interviewed via email to gain better knowledge of the current situation of internal crisis communication within the company. This information is backed by theoretical literature, because of this, the author was able to conduct a comprehensive survey for the research.

The research covered the fundamental issues related to crisis communication thus, giving a reliable view of the crisis communication experienced by the supervisors. Furthermore, the open questions provided information on more specific opinions of the respondents. The theory has been able to be linked to the results, making it possible to evaluate the efficiency of the crisis communication.

Questions of the survey were simple, reducing the possibility of misinterpretation. Author recons that the middle answer option "En osaa sanoa" (I don't know) could have been the sixth answer option. To give respondents a better option to describe their feelings replacing it could have been the option "Neutraali kanta" (Neutral stance). In this way, respondents could have expressed whether they have a neutral opinion about the issue or that they simply are not familiar enough with the statement and therefore cannot contribute to answering. Although it is possible that respondents regardless of the answering options form, viewed it as a neutral stance, meaning they do not agree nor disagree with the statement.

The survey should only have a limited number of questions, and this is why some more detailed questions had to be left out of the survey. Semi-structured interviews could be beneficial to get more in-depth thoughts and give better aspects on how to adjust the communication if necessary.

The research can be viewed as a reliable representation of the state of the internal crisis communications performance and possessed knowledge from the aspect of the units' supervisors as data was obtained from 20% of the research group.

The outcome of the results is the author's interpretation of the collected data, which may differ from the perception of another researcher.

During the process of the thesis, the author acknowledged that more emphasis could have been on the research of the supervisors specifically. Regardless, the topic gave aspiration

for the thesis and the data gained from supervisors' work and knowledge did add value to the research.

The research's objective was to provide information for Hämeenmaa concerning the internal crisis communication during Covid-19. This was done by seeking answers to research questions presented in the report. The design of the research and results supported the author's ability to answer these questions and provide information to the company.

The results do not present a reliable view on how the internal crisis communication has been viewed by the whole personnel, which is a pre-acknowledged and agreed aspect. The results are comparable to potential research made with the focus on the whole staff by excluding issues concerning supervisor work.

Ethics in research involves the application of fundamental ethical principles to research activities. These are for example respect towards society and others, design and implementation of research, the use of resources and scientific misconduct. (University of Stirling 2022.)

The referencing of the resources respect the ethics of research, by marking them correctly and maintaining the original thoughts and opinions. The results are analyzed carefully to avoid overinterpretation and speculation. Respondents' anonymousness is respected by not asking too personal background questions or other personal details. Responding to the survey was equally possible for every respondent in the target group.

7.4 Suggestions for Further Research

Research targeted for the whole personnel would give a more comprehensive insight into how the crisis communication has been viewed within the organization. A topic to consider to add in further research could be concerning how and from where the information most often reaches an employee, as well as does it reach them uncompromised.

Functionality and reachability of Workplace could also be researched. During the author's career at Hämeenmaa, he had very little knowledge of Workplace and its channels and the majority of information came through the supervisor of the unit. This view was shared with some other colleagues as well.

Interviews with supervisors could provide more in-depth data and provide a better understanding of the crisis management capabilities and possibly reveal useful tips and practices.

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Appendix 1. Online Survey

Sisäinen viestintä Hämeenmaalla koronatilanteessa

Ensimmäinen koronavirustartunta Suomen kansalaisella todettiin helmikuun lopulla 2020. Taudin leviäminen eteni nopeasti, johtaen valmiuslain käyttöönottoon 17. maaliskuuta. Yhteiskunnan toiminta muuttui totutusta radikaalisti vaikuttaen niin yksityiselämään kuin yritystoimintaan. Työn tekemiseen syntyi uusia haasteita ja mukautumista. Viestinnästä ja kommunikaatiosta on tullut entistä tärkeämpi osa työstä selviytymistä.

Tämä kysely liittyy opinnäytetyöhöni, joka koskee koronaviruspandemian puhkeamisen aikaista sekä siitä tähän päivään jatkunutta sisäistä kriisiviestintää Hämeenmaalla, jonka kohderyhmänä ovat yksiköiden esimiehet. Kysely sisältää 16 kysymystä joiden vastaamiseen menee 5-10 minuuttia. Kiitos kaikille vastaajille!

1. Ikä

- alle 30
- 30 - 39
- 40 - 49
- 50 tai vanhempi

2. Kokemus esimiestehtävissä Hämeenmaalla

- alle 2 vuotta
- 2 - 5 vuotta
- 6 - 10 vuotta
- yli 10 vuotta

3. Kriisiviestintä alkoi koronatilanteen alkaessa riittävän nopeasti

- Täysin samaa mieltä
- Osittain samaa mieltä
- En osaa sanoa
- Osittain eri mieltä
- Täysin eri mieltä

4. Viestintä on ollut ajankohtaista

- Täysin samaa mieltä
- Osittain samaa mieltä
- En osaa sanoa
- Osittain eri mieltä
- Täysin eri mieltä

5. Viestintä on ollut tarpeeksi säännöllistä

- Täysin samaa mieltä
- Osittain samaa mieltä
- En osaa sanoa
- Osittain eri mieltä
- Täysin eri mieltä

6. Informaatio on ollut helposti ymmärrettävää

- Täysin samaa mieltä
- Osittain samaa mieltä
- En osaa sanoa
- Osittain eri mieltä
- Täysin eri mieltä

7. Lisätietoa on ollut helposti saatavilla

- Täysin samaa mieltä
- Osittain samaa mieltä
- En osaa sanoa
- Osittain eri mieltä
- Täysin eri mieltä

8. Viestintäkanavia on ollut

- Liikaa
- Sopivasti
- Liian vähän

9. Mitkä tiedonvälityskanavat ovat olleet sinulle tärkeimmät?

10. Koen, että viestintä tuki työstäni suoriutumista

- Täysin samaa mieltä
- Osittain samaa mieltä
- En osaa sanoa
- Osittain eri mieltä
- Täysin eri mieltä

11. Mistä asiasta olisit kaivannut lisää viestintää?

12. Informaatiota on ollut helppo käsitellä ja välittää eteenpäin

- Täysin samaa mieltä
- Osittain samaa mieltä
- En osaa sanoa
- Osittain eri mieltä
- Täysin eri mieltä

13. Minulle on ollut selvää kenelle, ja minkälaista tietoa saan välittää eteenpäin

- Täysin samaa mieltä
- Osittain samaa mieltä
- En osaa sanoa
- Osittain eri mieltä
- Täysin eri mieltä

14. Koen, että kriisin jatkuessa viestintä on pystynyt vastaamaan minun ja tiimini sen hetkisiin tarpeisiin

- Täysin samaa mieltä
- Osittain samaa mieltä
- En osaa sanoa
- Osittain eri mieltä
- Täysin eri mieltä

15. Mitä olet oppinut kriisiviestinnästä tiedon välittäjänä?

16. Mitä kehittämistoiveita sinulla on liittyen kriisiviestintään?

Appendix 2 Full answers for open questions

Mitkä tiedotuskanavat ovat olleet sinulle tärkeimmät?

- R1 Workplace reaaliaikaisena viestikanavana toimii tällaisissa asioissa hyvin. Toki olisi hyvä, että yrityksessä päätökset ja linjaukset tehtäisiin mahdollisimman nopeasti viranomaisten tekemien päätösten jälkeen, jotta eri tahojen ohjeistusten välillä ei olisi ristiriitoja ja näin epätietoisuutta.
- R2 Sähköposti ja workplace
- R3 Workplace Sähköposti
- R4 Sähköposti
- R5 Sähköposti
- R6 Workplace ja chat
- R7 Sposti
- R8 Sähköposti
- R9 S-posti ja Workplace
- R10 Workchat ja sähköposti.
- R11 Sähköposti
- R12 Sähköposti ja workplace.
- R13 WorkPlace, sähköposti
- R14 Workplace ja sähköposti
- R15 Workpacen ja suoraan yksikköön tulleet viestit
- R16 Workplace ja sähköposti
- R17 WP
- R18 Workplace ja sähköposti
- R19 Sähköposti, workplace, media.
- R20 Workplace
- R21 Workplace ja s-posti

Mistä asiasta olisit kaivannut lisää viestintää?

- R1 Sain kysymällä kaiken lisätiedon, mitä tarvitsin
- R2 Viestit tulivat monesti perjantaisin ja iltapäivällä, jolloin ainakin itse olin jo lähtenyt töistä pois.
- R3 ??
- R4 En mistään.
- R5 Ongelmana ei ollut viestien riittävyys vaan se että viesti oli hajautettuna eri kanavissa.
- R6 Ehkä olisi jossain kohtaa voinut paremmin viestiä, mihin viranomaismääräyksiin tai suosituksiin mikäkin toimintaohje perustuu.
- R7 Välillä oli montaa eri käytäntöä osuuskaupan sisällä. Se hämmensi miten tilanteessa toimia.
- R8 -
- R9 Hyvin on pärjätty nykyisillä ohjeilla.
- R10 Korona teams olisi ollut tehokas

Mitä olet oppinut kriisiviestinnästä tiedon välittäjänä?

- R1 Ohjeet ja linjaukset voivat vaihtua erittäin nopealla tahdilla ja lisäksi ohjeistuksissa voi olla maakuntakohtaisia eroja. Viestinnän seurannan on oltava jatkuvaa.
- R2 Olen oppinut pysymään itse rauhallisena ja luottamaan täysin siihen, että saan kaiken työssäni tarvitseman tiedon hr:stä, markettuesta ym heti kun tieto on heidän saatavilla.
- R3 Nopeus on valttia.
- R4 Nopeus on valttia. HR:n tekemät ohjeet, joista on selkeästi löytynyt muuttuneet asiat, ovat olleet erinomaisia.
- R5 Välitä täsmätietoa selkeäsanaisesti ja tiiviissä muodossa. Tieto tulee antaa tasaisin väliajoin, ei liian usein.
- R6 Viestinnän tulee tapahtua heti. Uusista muutoksista tiedottaminen heti.
- R7 Välitä tieto nopeasti, kerro suoraan/kiertelemättä, älä spekuloi
- R8 Kriisiviestinnän kanssa ei pidä viivyttellä (ei tässä ole kyllä niin tehtykään), vaan heti viestittävä jotain. Viestinnän perustuttava faktoihin, jotka ovat osoitettavissa.
- R9 Asian ilmaiseminen mahdollisimman yksinkertaises
- R10 Olen oppinut, että on tärkeää jakaa päivitettyjä tietoja vielä eteenpäin, koska vaikka kaikki ovat ryhmissä, joissa asioista on tiedotettu joka käänteessä, niin silti niitä ei sieltä lueta eikä ole koskaan kuultukaan.
- R11 Kuinka tärkeää tiedottaminen on
- R12 Lukea huolella viesti tarvittaessa vaikka kahteen kertaan ennenkuin välitetään kentälle.
- R13 Ihmiset ymmärtävät viestit eritavalla ja omaksuvat ne myös erilaila, jotkut nopeemmin kuin toiset.
- R14 Varmista ajantasaisuus, jakolista sekä ohjeen käypäisyys omalla toimialalla.
Keskity olennaiseen ja mieti, miten viestit asiat eteenpäin työryhmälle.
Älä rönstyile, pysy ajantasalla, kysy jos koet ristiriitaa ohjeissa.

Mitä kehittämistoiveita sinulla on liittyen kriisiviestintään?

- R1 Yrityksen sisällä viestinnän tulisi olla nopeaa ja synkronoitu alueellisten viranomaisten päätöstentekoon. Ei voi olla niin, että viranomainen ilmoittaa yhtä ja yrityksessä ei oteta ohjeistukseen kantaa välittömästi.
- R2 Infoa ei ole tullut tarpeeksi nopeasti
- R3 Hetkittäin on tuntunut, että tietoa tulee niin paljon etten ehtinyt jakaa sitä yhtä nopeasti työryhmälle eteenpäin. Varsinkin koronan alkuvaiheessa oli haasteellista viestiä muutoksista, kun suuri osa tiedosta tuli työaikojeni ulkopuolella (klo.16 jälkeen).
- R4 Olisi ollut hyvä, että olisi ollut vain yksi tai kaksi tahoa joilta viestintää tuli. Nyt samoja asioita tuli monesta paikasta hiukan eri syklillä ja toisinaan toisista poikkeavia ohjeita. Ja osa viestinnästä oli niin "ylätason" ohjeita, että joutui paljon pyytämään tarkennusta siihen mitä ohje tarkoittaa
- R5 Väliillä asia on ollut vaikeasti ymmärrettävää, mutta se on johtunut siitä, että julkiselta vallalta saatu tieto on ollut poukkoilevaa/sekavaa ja/tai huonosti informoitua. Hämeenmaan osalta viestintä on ollut varmasti niin hyvää kuin sen on mahdollista olla. Eli ei kehitystoiveita.
- R6 Kaikki materiaali samaan paikkaan. Ajantasaiset ohjeet, myymälä- ja henkilökunnan viestintä olisi hyvä olla samassa paikassa esim. S-pointissa tai verkkolevyllä, jotta tiedetään että siellä on varmasti se viimeisin -ja oikea tieto.
- R7 Selkeät ohjeet koko osuuskaupalle. Jos huomataan et toinen tapa parempi. Kerrotaan se muille.
- R8 -
- R9 Ei toiveita. Hyvin on hoidettu.
- R10 Osuuskaupalle henkilökunta workplace chat ryhmä / kriisiviestintä .

Appendix 3 Questions for background information

Oliko teillä kriisiviestintäsunnitelmaa? Voitteko kuvailla sitä?

Oliko kriisiviestintää / kriisiviestintäsunnitelmaa harjoiteltu?

Harjoitetaanko teillä kriisiviestinnän suhteen luotausta?

Yllättikö kriisin puhkeaminen tiiminne/johdon?

Oliko tiimille/viestintähenkilölle selvää minkälaisia toimenpiteitä he tekevät seuraavien päivien ja viikkojen aikana?

Pidettiinkö tapahtumista ja toimenpiteistä kirjaa?

Oliko toiminta selvää organisaation johdon kanssa ja miten se tapahtui?

Minkälainen jako oli HR:n kanssa viestinnässä?

Minkälaista yhteistoimintaa oli viranomaisten kanssa?

Oliko kriisiviestinnässä tavoite/tavoitteita?

Minkälaisia viestintäkanavia käytettiin? Syntyikö normaalista poikkeavia kanavia kriisin johdosta? Oliko nämä mahdolliset uudet kanavat ennalta suunniteltu?

Suoritettiinko projektointia erilaisista potentiaalisista tapahtumakuluista? Ääripään esimerkkinä; minkälainen lopputulema olisi, jos kriisiviestintää ei harjoitettaisi ollenkaan.

Perustettiinko kriisin vuoksi erillistä kriisiryhmää? Tai oliko tiimissänne jotain vastaavaa uudelleen organisoinnista?

Toteutettiinko teillä missään muodossa käänteistä viestintää? Miten?

Viestittiinkö henkilöstölle kiitollisuutta? Miten se tehtiin?

Poikkesiko esimiehille kohdistettu kriisiviestintä siitä mitä koko henkilöstölle viestitettiin? Miten?

Ovatko yksiköiden esimiehet saaneet kriisiviestintä koulutusta?

Millä tavoin kriisiviestintää on aiemmin arvioitu? Minkälaisia tuloksia tai johtopäätöksiä niistä on tehty?

Mitä mieltä te itse olette kriisiviestinnästä ja kriisistä?

Minkälaisia asioita te haluaisitte tietää/selvittää esimiehiltä?

