



We're only a few weeks into what will likely be a long journey, and like any journey, COVID-19 response is going to move through several phases. The one that employers need to prepare for now is how they'll handle communications when one of their own team members has a confirmed case.

## **It's happened. You have an employee who's tested positive for COVID-19. What now?**

As COVID-19 continues its rapid global spread, the number of companies with impacted employees also continues to grow. The question now is not *if* – but *when* one or more of your employees will be diagnosed with coronavirus.

Clearly, the health and well-being of that employee is of primary importance – followed closely by protecting that person's privacy and confidentiality. But it goes way beyond that. There are significant emotional impacts on co-workers, and the situation takes on a whole new dimension if the person diagnosed is a company executive.

Responses can range from highly supportive to highly fearful to highly critical, based in part on the actions you take, the information you provide, and the timing and sequence.

As with other critical issues, it's important to be deliberate – determine your **ACTIONS** first, **WHO NEEDS TO KNOW** second, and **WHAT TO SAY** third. Companies must plan ahead for the actions and announcements that will be necessary in the days ahead, keeping these steps in mind.

1. **Notify impacted employees quickly.** If you are aware that an employee has tested positive, you need to swiftly notify all colleagues, customers and partners who

may have been in prolonged personal contact with this person and/or worked in or visited the same facility. They don't need to know *who* has contracted the virus; in fact, by law, that information is confidential – but they do need to know if they are at risk. Have a template prepared for these communications so they are ready should you need them.

2. **Let your established protocols – and your company values – guide further communication.** Once potentially exposed employees have been notified, companies are not required to share further information with the rest of the workforce. Keep in mind, though, that the rumor mill undoubtedly will be in play. If your organization generally practices open communication, consider using your established channels to share a brief communication that an employee has been diagnosed, other employees who may have been exposed have been contacted, and the company is following established procedures for limiting further spread (quarantine, deep cleansing/disinfecting and others). Here again, employment law typically prohibits sharing information about an employee who has been diagnosed or is being tested.
3. **Prepare for executive diagnosis.** A positive diagnosis for a member of your executive team – especially if it is the CEO or president – requires additional steps because of the potential impact on the business. This is a time where having an executive contingency plan in place is critical. If the impacted executive is simply quarantined and continuing to work remotely, no further communication may be necessary. If the executive is hospitalized or taking a medical leave of absence to seek treatment, notify your Board or Leadership Team first. Make sure you have messaging in place that illustrates and affirms the strength of your business-continuity/leadership-continuity planning. Your Board or Leadership Team can be an effective message carrier, both internally and externally.
4. **Inform and reassure employees.** An executive testing positive is unlikely to fly under the radar at most companies. Consider sharing the information with employees – with permission from the person who has the virus. Share temporary succession plans, emphasize the ability of the executive Leadership Team overall to guide the business and its employees. In this case, straight-forward communication can be used as a galvanizing, “we’re in this together” moment for employees.
5. **Be prepared for external inquiries.** As the virus continues to spread, media interest in a single positive employee will become less likely. In most instances, a reactive approach is appropriate. Have a stand-by statement prepared that confirms a

diagnosis and the steps the company is taking but does not name the impacted employee. Media interest will be more likely if a member of the executive team tests positive. In that case, it may be advantageous to contact the media, naming the executive (again, with his/her permission) and including temporary leadership decisions. This offers an opportunity to reinforce business-continuity and strength messaging to multiple stakeholders. It's a decision that should be thought through on a case-by-case basis, with multiple factors considered and carefully weighed.

Communicating about employee health issues – especially coronavirus – requires thoughtful consideration. Companies that work through likely scenarios and develop upfront messaging and delivery protocols will be better able to respond with the right mix of empathy and business information that resonates with employees and key stakeholders.

For questions, guidance or support with your efforts, please call Sean Brickell. The above information is adopted from a WORLDCOM partner, the Padilla Response Team. We are here to help.