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CASE STUDIES & TEACHING CASES

Rough sea: communication driving navigation

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INTRODUCTION

The routine of a factory is based in a lot of procedures, rules and standards to guarantee the production of food with quality and safety. This routine started to change definitely at GDC Alimentos, on March 17th, 2020, at 5 o'clock, when the employees started to access the main company unit in Itajaí (SC). The subject of all conversations: the Decree from the government of the state of Santa Catarina (Decreto nº 515, de 17 de março de 2020), which determined social isolation and the functioning of only essential services. Elaine, production assistant, is 22 years old and works at the factory since 18 – when she got her first job –, period during which she witnessed some tragedies, mainly floods that devastated the state, but that day, the feeling was different. Despite being young, she tried to calm the other collaborators, but she also felt a certain apprehension. “Are we at any risk?” One of her colleagues answered with another question: “Will the company stop?”.

Many doubts filled the environment, on all levels and areas, on that same day and many were the conversations among the company's executives, between the leaders and the teams and many “watercooler” conversations among the employees. An environment of doubts and uncertainty, which did not with the scenery of discipline and standards known by the company's employees. At 2 p.m., Vivian, human resources director, called for an emergency meeting with the health, safety, communication, and industry coordinators, that is, professionals that would have the difficult mission of planning actions and executing them fast so that the fear and insecurity did not put the normality of operations of one of the largest food factories of Santa Catarina at risk.

Since the crisis was a reality, the scenario in which the company found itself was complex, challenging and with a great degree of unprecedentedness, bringing forth many questions and doubts in relation to the course of this unexpected situation in a normal production context. Should they use traditional communication methods for crisis management, already habitually used by the company? Or should they innovate with a communication process adaptable to that specific situation, treating it as something different and innovative? This choice became vital to minimize the impacts of the pandemic in and out of the company's “walls”.

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A BUSINESS FROM THE SEA

The essence of GDC Alimentos comes from the sea. The company, through its brand Gomes da Costa, represents one of the largest industries of the canned fish products of Latin America. It is part of the Spanish group Calvo since 2004, an organization present in more than 70 countries and that employs more than 5,000 people around the world.

In Brazil, in 2019, GCD Alimentos completed 65 years. It had three factory units in Itajaí, SC: one unit specific for the industrial processing, one industry responsible for packaging and, lastly, one distribution center. In São Paulo, there was an office that contemplated the commercial areas, marketing, trade marketing, controllership, and finance. Furthermore, the organization had regional offices spread around Brazil, where the negotiation and selling activities with suppliers and partners were concentrated. Although the organization presented business units geographically installed in different locations, all of them followed the strategic directives of the Calvo Group, being up to the units, through executive directors, from human resources, industry, logistic and acquisitions, to implement these strategies and adapt them, when necessary, respecting the local culture, always with the aim of conducting the corporate strategic directives more assertively in front of the more than 2,000 collaborators that represented GDC Alimentos.

Calvo Group had recently structured a new strategic positioning for its subsidiaries, the Calvo Excellence System (CES), which presents directives for periodic reviews of the production and operation strategies, as to allow for the adaptation to the different circumstances imposed by the complexity of the current market. With this premise, Calvo Group elaborated strategic planning 2020-2025, directing its efforts to the consolidation of the company as a global power in the food industry. The directors, however, did not expect a pandemic situation, which, consequently, would drastically impact this planning.

IT ALL CHANGED, WHAT TO DO NOW?

In December 2019, an outbreak of a virus unknown by science started in the city of Wuhan, China. A disease caused by the coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, which presents a variable clinical condition, from asymptomatic infections to severe respiratory conditions, COVID-19 spread throughout the world quickly. Thus, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency, at an international level, due to the virus. The pandemic advanced in the world and, in February 2020, emerge the first suspect COVID-19 cases in Brazil. Something that seemed so distant from the Brazilian perspective was already in our midst, resulting in a situation of alarm for the company. The vertiginous increase of confirmed cases led to the intensification of the preventive measures in all Brazilian territory through publicity campaigns of the Ministry of Health, broadcasted on open TV, radio and the internet.

In the company's main factory unit, the production kept a journey of 24 hours a day, divided in three shifts, but the planning already considered a possible reduction in the number of produced cans. In this case, any loss in a process that delivers more than 2 million canned fish products for distribution per day could already represent a rupture in the food supply levels to the Brazilian market.

The increase in cases in Brazil and, above all, the dissemination of the virus to other locations created a great repercussion in the media and social networks, signaling a scenario of preparation for what would soon reach all four corners of the country. It finally came, bringing to reality what until then was only on the news.

On March 17th, 2020, the government of the state of Santa Catarina, through Decree nº 515 (Decreto nº 515, de 17 de março de 2020), declared emergency in all catarinense territory with measures to guarantee social isolation and reduction of economic and commercial activities. The fact that GDC Alimentos belongs to a Spanish group anticipated this theme in the routine meetings in Brazil, even before the state decree, since the company suffered the impacts of the pandemic in Spain, where the situation was critical, before the advance of the disease in Brazil. Thus, the lessons learned in Spain influenced in the company's reaction in Brazil, which was obliged to change its planning in order to absorb the changes caused by the pandemic. Because of that, still in February, the factory's crisis committee, in addition to having company executives, had

the aid of specialists of human resources, health, safety, legal and communication sectors, who were preparing to manage a wide contingency plan, encompassing the operational and human aspects, as the company had more than 2,000 collaborators in Santa Catarina acting in three shifts (morning, afternoon and night), which guaranteed the functioning and operation of the factory 24h a day, 7 days a week.

In the agendas of the committee meetings, themes were present such as: pandemic status; advance of the disease through the country; implementation of immediate preventive measures; intensification of the sanitation of the company spaces; canceling trips and in-person meetings and any event and/or training with a crowd of people; home office for administrative areas; restriction of visits and access for external suppliers. Following the advance of the disease in the world, it was not difficult to predict the quick advance in the number of cases in Brazil. In light of this, all possible actions were needed focused on precautions to avoid the dissemination of the virus.

There were countless uncertainties brought about by the disease, leading organizations to adopt, each day, new measures and, consequently, make new plans and directives within the company. Thus, GDC Alimentos needed to stay ahead, taking every safety measure so that the whole factory's production system was not interrupted. Therefore, daily meetings with all the sector leaderships, new channels of communication, adapting the work formats, reorganization of priorities, clinical health, and psychosocial appointments for people, answering external organs and the press, creation of multidisciplinary teams, among many other actions, started to outline the new scenario of the organization. The pandemic turned the page on the GDC Alimentos strategic planning and since then pages of a new history began to be written. During all these events, communication emerged as the protagonist of this new plot, since the company was aware that, despite adopting all possible procedures, there would be misinformation. That is, wrong perceptions of employees could put the whole planning at risk.

GOOD COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Due to being a food factory, GCD Alimentos was considered an essential service and maintained its activities even with Decree nº 515 (Decreto nº 515, de 17 de março de 2020). There was no time for long reflections, decisions were needed, and, with each new directive, a great communication effort was indispensable. The managers transmitted the idea that people should be united so that production would not be interrupted. However, at the same time, people were apprehensive with this "new normal" that required so many adaptations in the more relevant routines.

With the intent of maintaining the communication channel the most agile and transparent possible and, in light of the several changes in the day-to-day of the employees, GDC Alimentos, in addition to using the formal channels of communication, such as e-mail, meetings (online), intranet, physical murals corporate TV, began to also adopt informal channels of communication, not previously used, such as WhatsApp. However, despite the directors keeping an open policy, in general, they still followed the communication model from information, centered around the organization's directors committee.

Besides the pandemic scenario faced by the whole population, the managers had two great concerns: the first was to keep production going safely to preserve the health of the collaborators exercising their activities, and the second was how to make the collaborators aware of precautions in and outside of the company in order to minimize absence due to sickness. How would they have control over this unimaginable situation? Thus, in this angry sea the organization was in, communication became vital in managing the crisis, but it was still needed to find the "best model" and, with that, avoid generating attrition between managers and collaborators.

Felipe, occupational health manager, needed to schedule an urgent meeting at 08h on Wednesday, March 18th, in order to plan actions in light of the new changes. Apprehensive, Felipe could not stop thinking about how communication to the team should be conducted: "Should we pass the information on exactly according to the directives from the chiefs and directors, as thus we will have less interferences and a faster and more precise decision-making, or should we adopt a method more adapted to the situation to transmit the information, making the process more open, since this way, there could be more interaction with the collaborators and, thus, use the relevant ideas within the current context, stimulating a greater commitment from all?"

The online meeting with the team was already part of the measures adopted by the managers in this new scenario, that is, there would be no more in-person meetings. Felipe beings the meeting questioning:

- We need to reposition in order to act on the contingency of this crisis. Besides creating preventive measures, we will also have to think about the problems caused to our collaborators, such as the great insecurity and uncertainty that is part of their daily lives.

The meeting went on for hours and of Felipe's team worked on measures that would guide the collaborators in this large organization change, but being careful that they not suffer more psychological impact. One of the points highlighted by the manager was in relation to the quality of information, since many myths, reflected in fake news, would create doubts and even inappropriate behaviors. Felipe closes the meeting emphasizing:

- Let's do our part. Let's be persistent in our mission of promoting a healthy work space. This is a situation we never experienced, we will work on a new scenario, new challenges and, with that, we will develop new opportunities for action.

Despite the meeting being productive, Felipe continued having doubts regarding how this process should go forward along with the collaborators, but he decided to wait to receive the initial feedback from his team on the process of conducting activities in the occupational health sector.

Human resources director and in charge of managing this crisis, Vivian scheduled a meeting with the people in charge of each area of the organization, in order to seek better measures to take in that context. Thus, a cycle of daily meetings with all the company's leadership began. In the days that followed, the online meetings established a space of exchange, co-creation of measures, of collaboration among the leaderships of each area, responsible for the teams doing remote work as well as the several people that continued working in the production units. There a genuine feeling of building solutions so that the activities were not interrupted.

In the first meeting, March 19th, at 14h, 73 professionals of different areas were online. When beginning, Vivian reveals that the pressure of that moment was stirring emotions, complementing that, more than solutions, they should seek the safety of all. Surprisingly, and contradicting the expectations of a crisis management meeting, in which decisions are laid out and how these are going to be implemented, several leaders narrated their personal doubts and insecurities. There was an evident understanding that, before laying down measures, it was needed to take care of people. Vivian, who was at the front of the situation, reinforced:

- We need information to reach everyone, that the messages are understood and passed on without noise and doubts about the situation and what is being done by the company.

Felipe, representative leader of the occupational health sector, emphasizes:

- Our communication must be comprehended by everyone, we need to have great commitment from the teams, as well as a path to follow so that the decision-making in this highly volatile scenario can be clear and precise.

In this meeting, a good deal of time was dedicated to measures of orientation and communication to the several collaborators of the company.

In a certain way, the meeting also had the objective of quelling any communication noise occurred and remained from previous ones. What also occurred in the meeting conducted by Vivian at the beginning of the process, on March 17th, with the objective of guiding the collaborators in relation to all the measures that would be implemented at GDC Alimentos. The leaders of each sector, for the first time, were in a previously unimaginable situation. They did not know how to were going to apply the changes and how the collaborators of each sector would react.

The leaders pointed out some issues of extreme urgency at the meeting, some defended the idea of continuing with the top-down model for communication with the collaborators in passing information along, something more formal, with rigid procedures and fast decision-making. Other believed that, in light of the situation, the ideal would be to adopt a more adaptive model, that met the company's needs, but that presented more empathy towards the collaborators. Rogério, manager of the logistic sector, defended this idea:

– I believe that an adaptive communication model, more adjusted to this pandemic, seems to be the most adequate. We must act as facilitators in this process of transparency, with that, I believe we will make a more malleable and pleasant environment for everyone, especially when emotions are high.

– I disagree, said Patrícia, manager of the industrial sector. We need to have a more consistent decision-making and communication process, and with the least amount of adjustments possible! At this moment, we need fast decision-making, with the speed the moment requires, which should be made by the manager who already have experience with this. We do not need to complicate the situation even more, we should follow the company's directive without question.

– But Patrícia, having a model adapted for the company, we could achieve a greater commitment from the teams, making the whole communication process more efficient – observed Rogério.

It was an uncertain and difficult scenario for everyone who was experiencing the situation. The meeting went on for hours. The managers tried to find the best solution for the good of the organization – all arguments had great worth. After this meeting, in an effort to concentrate and consolidate information, the communication sector coordinated the elaboration of a complete guide containing orientations about COVID-19 and all directives, protocols and flows necessary to face the crisis. It was important to have clear instructions gathered in a single document, which would bring a better alignment of information, even in matters of safety. This document would also serve for managers to more clearly guide their teams, each within the specificities of their sector. Thus, this material was made available in several communications channels, such as intranet, WhatsApp, e-mails, and Knowledge Portal (an online space where a lot of content regarding COVID-19 was made available).

GCD Alimentos quickly implemented new protocols, aiming to keep the production process with the least risk of contagion possible. Therefore, immediately after Decree nº 515 (Decreto nº 515, de 17 de março de 2020), all collaborators in the risk group were kept away with salary and benefits guarantees, so that, in addition to the psychological impact, they did not suffer financial impacts. Furthermore, at the entrance of the company, the collaborators started to have their temperatures checked, the sanitation of the uniforms was suited to a deeper sanitation level, the spacing between chairs and benches in the collective areas was widened to increase distancing, in 48h all units received plaques and banners with instructions about preventive measures and, in addition, groups would be chosen randomly to have COVID-19 tests.

From this moment on, according to Felipe, the feeling was as if “we lived a month in a week”. This perception of such intensity was evidenced at each meeting or even during the execution of activities. There was a feeling that there was a great effort involved to guarantee the safe continuity of activities; in this case, the need to keep operating one of the largest food factories of Santa Catarina imposed a level of responsibility above normal on the team leaders.

Days of hard work and decision-making followed, and the cycle of meetings kept this team in constant activity. Elaine, despite young, does not hide the level of stress and worry that the situation has been causing not only her, but all employees, who live, in this pandemic beginning, with dilemmas that go beyond their control: contagion risk, new hygiene habits, new ways to relate to people, economic instability, new patterns and routines to which they had to adapt, restriction of freedom as individuals and so many other aspects that made the scenario vary distant from what one would imagine a few months before. Another work day came to an end, Elaine changes out of her uniform and questions her colleague:

– How will tomorrow be? With so many uncertainties, I don't know how we will manage to remain calm to deal with this situation and not let our despair show to our colleagues. More than ever, we will need to keep calm and be wise in light of this circumstance.

Thus, restless, and apprehensive, Elaine says goodbye and goes home, where she lives with her parents who, as the rest of the population, try to understand the new moment they are experiencing.

UNCERTAINTY LEADS TO DOUBTS

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic brought drastic changes in several segments of society, not different from the organizational environments. If communication was already seen as fundamental in the day-to-day of companies, now it is vital and it becomes the master line of all steps taken. The moment requires that a transparent posture be adopted, agile and highly flexible, both in tasks and human relationships. The time ballast between decision-making, communication, action and measuring of the results gained challenging outlines with the pandemic. A lot of that came from the need and eminence of maintaining an agile communication flow, above all so that, operationally, the company does not suffer even more impactful losses in the execution of activities.

In an informal conversation, Vivian, and Felipe, at the front of all measures taken by the organization, were worried about the uncertainties of the future. Used to always dealing with problems and being able to find a solution, now they did not know what to do.

– I am worried with the company situation, there are several rumors, fake news, and distorted information, we need to make the right information reach all levels of the company. In addition to the whole current situation of the organization, we still have to worry about the company's economic scenario, states Vivian.

– This are uncertain times. I believe we have to pass along all needed information to create the engagement of our collaborators, always trying to keep them aware of the scenario we are experiencing, but without scaring them even more. With that, I believe we can minimize the effects of this crisis within the factory, reinforces Felipe.

– Information arrives daily, new changes, new protocols and, sometimes, I don't even know where to start implementing them or how to communicate it to everyone, exposes Vivian in a worried tone.

The managers were already seeing, especially in the factory floor, the dissemination of fake information, but used to following the downward model of information, they were not sure what they could do to find the starting point and stop this process of passing along fake news, which caused even more fear on the collaborators. However, they were certain of one thing: they needed to find a solution to this problem, solving this situation in the company's production process.

Thus, after this conversation, question emerged with no answers, but that served as a sign of the complexity of the scenario that was being managed. The company was faced with a dilemma: which path should it follow? Choose a tradition crisis management, following the top-down model, focusing on guaranteeing production and supplying the market? Or bet it all on a crisis management adaptive to that situation?

Considering that the procedures needed to be fast and could not decrease company productivity, in addition to those naturally caused by the pandemic period, which would be the best path to follow?

And, thus, days went by. A lot of work and reinventing how to work and live in society. New and different directives emerged almost daily. The world felt the voracity of an, until then, uncontrollable virus; however, the beginning of chaos started to give way to a climate of a lot of worry, but, at the same time, of encouragement to keep going, despite the adversities. We live in a period of disruptive changes in how companies are communicating with their employees and vice-versa, which by itself already presents a paradox: the greater the imposed social distancing and limitations, the greater the need for closeness and open dialogue between the companies and their teams.

In light of this scenario, the company was in a dilemma between a risk management with strict procedures for production control or a more adaptive management for a better alignment between the procedures and the employees' needs. A stricter management does not seem to be the more adequate for the moment, but could less flexibility minimize errors and employee insecurity regarding what must effectively be done? A more adaptive risk management to understand the moment seems to be more adequate, but will it occur at the speed necessary to implement the production control procedures, without causing a reduction in company productivity below the natural decrease due to pandemic issues?

TEACHING NOTES

Rough sea: communication driving navigation

Abstract

This teaching case is focused on the dilemma of which communication model to adopt for managing the crisis caused by COVID-19, given the need and imminence of maintaining an agile, transparent, and effective communication flow in one of the largest industrial factories in the segment of canned fish from Latin America, in Brazil. The history of GDC Alimentos completed 65 years in 2019, and it had three units in Santa Catarina – Itajaí. It is a solid business with a strong market presence, but one that was not immune to the devastating power of the COVID-19 pandemic. This virus has globally changed beliefs and perceptions about public health and, in a few months, has drastically impacted the routine of people and organizations. The case enables the analysis of the scenario and identification of alternatives for the direction of the company, and the strengthening of the relationship between the leadership and employees in the face of uncertainties and instability caused by the crisis. It is proposed that the case be applied to undergraduate and graduate courses in the area of administration and communication, in disciplines such as Business Management, People Management and Organizational Leadership.

Keywords: Teaching case. Communication. Pandemic.

Mar revolto: a comunicação direcionando a navegação

Resumo

Caso para ensino focado no dilema em torno da escolha do modelo de comunicação para a gestão da crise causada pela COVID-19, tendo em vista a necessidade e iminência de se manter um fluxo de comunicação ágil, transparente e eficaz em uma das maiores fábricas do segmento de pescados enlatados da América Latina, situada no Brasil. A história da GDC Alimentos completou 65 anos em 2019, à época a empresa possuía três unidades em Santa Catarina, Itajaí, com um negócio sólido e forte presença de mercado, mas que não estava imune ao poder devastador da pandemia do novo coronavírus. Um vírus que mudou globalmente as convicções e percepções sobre saúde pública e que em poucos meses impactou drasticamente na rotina das pessoas e das organizações. O caso possibilita a análise do cenário e identificação de alternativas para o direcionamento da empresa, bem como o fortalecimento da relação entre a liderança e os funcionários diante de incertezas e instabilidade ocasionadas pela crise. Propõe-se que o caso seja aplicado para cursos de graduação e pós-graduação nas áreas de Administração e Comunicação, em disciplinas como Gestão Empresarial, Gestão de Pessoas e Liderança Organizacional.

Palavras-chave: Caso para ensino. Comunicação. Pandemia.

Mar embravecido: comunicación que dirige la navegación

Resumen

Este caso de enseñanza se centra en el dilema de qué modelo de comunicación adoptar para gestionar la crisis provocada por la COVID-19, dada la necesidad e inminencia de mantener un flujo de comunicación ágil, transparente y eficaz en una de las mayores fábricas de conservas de pescado de América Latina, en Brasil. GDC Alimentos, que cumplió 65 años en 2019, tenía tres unidades en Itajaí, Santa Catarina. Un negocio sólido con una fuerte presencia en el mercado, pero que no fue inmune al poder devastador de la pandemia del nuevo coronavirus. Un virus que ha cambiado globalmente las convicciones y percepciones sobre la salud pública y que, en pocos meses, ha impactado drásticamente la rutina de personas y organizaciones. El caso permite analizar el escenario e identificar alternativas para la dirección de la empresa, así como fortalecer las relaciones entre el liderazgo y los empleados ante la incertidumbre e inestabilidad provocadas por la crisis. Se propone que el caso se aplique a cursos de grado y posgrado en el área de administración y comunicación, en disciplinas como Gestión Empresarial, Gestión de Personas y Liderazgo Organizacional.

Palabras clave: Caso de enseñanza. Comunicación. Pandemia.

Educational Objectives

After reading and discussing this case, the readers should be able to:

- Understand the organizational communication process and the strategies used to achieve effectiveness;
- Recognize the challenges of the communication process faced by the organizations in a high-complexity situation;
- Evaluate organizational communication models used in the companies and, thus, understand the process of dissemination and transparency in the transmission of information.

Recommended Use

This case was developed to be applied in undergraduate and graduate *lato-sensu* programs in the Business Management field, in courses such as Business Management, People Management and Organizational Leadership. Therefore, the case can be applied in courses that involve themes such as communication, crisis management and leadership. For the application of this case, it is recommended to provide support materials so that all students comprehend the business experience or in order to deepen their academic knowledge regarding the themes in question, such as recent studies on the theme by Abrashi (2018), Kunch (2018), Rego and Cunha (2020), and Story (2020).

Data Sources

The data for elaborating the case were obtained through interviews with GDC Alimentos managers carried out from May to July of 2020. The interviews were carried out specifically with the Director of Human Resources and with the Manager of the Occupational Health Sector. The names of the characters in the case are fictitious, in order to preserve the information sources of the real case. Additionally, data about the pandemic divulged by the WHO were collected, aiming to correctly identify and report the elements referring to COVID-19.

Class plan

To apply the case in class, we suggest that the professor provides theoretical material that teaches the students about the theme to be studied and that a previous reading of the case be performed, solving the questions, handed out at the beginning of class, making it possible to perform an analysis of the student's progress throughout the discussion of the case in class.

We propose that the professor makes a brief explanation of the theories discussed in the case, with the objective of resolving doubts referring to the questions answered at home. Then, we suggest that the professor divides the class in four teams: 1 – high administration; 2 – human resources sector; 3 – occupational health sector; and 4 – operational sector. Thus, the debate within each team should be mediated based on the transition questions (TQ), which will be presented later in this study. In addition to the TQ, we suggest that the professor mediates the discussion in each one of the four teams based on two points: how will the situation impact each company sector; which measures could be taken to make the changes less frustrating to the collaborators.

In light of this, after the debate among the small groups based on the TQ, the professor should bring the debate to the large group, simulating a crisis management meeting among these sectors, mediating it based on the discussion questions (DQ) aiming to analyze the reflection and positioning of each student when faced with the classmates' questions. It is important to highlight that the professor can also intervene and make questions that stimulate the reflective process of the students regarding the focus of the case that aims to analyze the "organizational communications process".

Below, we present a set of DQ that can be used to stimulate the analysis of the case during the group discussion stage:

- Question 1: how could GDC Alimentos strengthen the relationship between leadership and the collaborators, minimizing the effects of the crisis in the country's pandemic scenario?

- Question 2: what communication strategy can be used by GDC Alimentos to potentialize the organizational results, clearly and transparently, in all organizational levels?
- Question 3: how would you define GDC Alimentos' communication management model? Do the managers present a proactive behavior that allows for the engagement of the teams?

Question 1

How could GDC Alimentos strengthen the relationship between leadership and the collaborators, minimizing the effects of the crisis in the country's pandemic scenario?

The objective of this question is to foment not only a debate among the students about the importance of communication in the context evidenced during the case – when communication became the main factor for organizational success or failure –, as well as strengthening, through communication, the relationship between leadership and collaborators. Therefore, TQ 1.1 is proposed.

TQ 1.1: Perform an analysis of the scenario and identify at least three actions to strengthen the relationship between leadership and collaborators.

The COVID-19 pandemic advances through the world. In Brazil, the suspicion of cases starts in February of 2020, which results in a situation of alert for GDC Alimentos and requires the implementation of immediate preventive measures. In this context, actions are needed to strengthen the relationship between leadership and team to deal with the insecurity of a new virus whose reach and severity are unknown. Thus, the role of the leadership becomes fundamental to guide people and disseminate the company's strategies. Being faced with an unimaginable scenario brings up several questions in the organization, for example: choosing the adequate model to manage the crisis (top-down or adaptive); how to contain the disseminations of fake news, how to keep the collaborators committed, continuing with the factory process with no interruptions. Thus, it is up to the leadership to take actions that aid in the resolution of these questions.

The first action to strengthen the relationship between leadership and employees involves the demonstration of security and credibility by the leaders to disseminate the company strategies, in order to show confidence to the team, which is bombarded by information that, often times, can create misinformation. One example of this was the case discussed by Vivian and Felipe, which required them to change tactics to contain the crisis, in addition to the creation of preventive measures, which would bring security and confidence to the collaborators. Story (2020) reinforces that the leaders need to show confidence, with vision, new values and courage when telling the truth and making decisions quick, with compassion, patience, and empathy. In consonance, Rego and Cunha (2020) state that it is up to the leaders to face these realities with tenacity, courage, integrity, and a spirit to learn from mistakes. For Fragouli and Lazaridou (2019), this leader must be influential, inspiring, and favorable to the members of their team.

The second action performed by the organization refers to the preparation for the changes that will occur in the internal and external environments and requires to seek the aid of its partners and employees in order to minimize the impact within the organization. For Story (2020), in COVID-19 times, the leaders should prepare the organization to learn and, at the same time, guarantee the support of the stakeholders during this transformation. For Cunha (2017), after the awareness stage, communication needs to be worked through key-messages of transparency and confidence, which, consequently, can be retransmitted to everyone who, in some way, have a relationship with the company.

In the third action, the leadership should guide people towards an important change in behavior as a consequence of this pandemic, as well as keeping the team informed, considering the large number of fake news creating misinformation and, consequently, panic and inadequate behavior. Through events experienced by Felipe and Vivian, we can observe the concern in relation to the dissemination of fake news. The characters were worried about passing along correct and needed information to all levels of the company, so that all collaborators were aware of the reality experienced by the company. Cunha (2017) highlights that the way this leader deals with or transmits company information directly affects the employees' perception, the team's performance and, in turn, the presented results. Abrashi (2018) reinforces that communication strategies are essential

to any organization; thus, it will be prepared to act during a troubled time and, also, stop negative publicity from forming and other consequences to the organization. For Stam, Knippenberg and Pieterse (2018), the leaders should use communication aimed at prevention as support for the management in times of crisis.

Therefore, Felipe and Vivian need to seek the best way to face the problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in the organization, keeping in mind that GDC Alimentos is a company with a high number of collaborators and high demand for production and selling their products, which increases the need to present a strengthening of the leaders before their collaborators. In this context, the meetings became a great ally, seen as, through them, it was possible to align the rules established by the state's government with the needs of the collaborators and the organization.

Question 2

What communication strategy can be used by GDC Alimentos to potentialize the organizational results, clearly and transparently, in all organizational levels?

The objective of the second question is to identify how the upper leadership can use communication to strengthen the results and what strategies can be applied so that this communication presents transparency and linearity in the information. With the objective of guiding the discussion, three TQ are proposed: TQ 2.1, TQ 2.2 and TQ 2.3; described below.

TQ 2.1: In your perception, should GDC Alimentos use the top-down communication model, or should it bet on an adaptive model?

The analysis should be based on the perception of the student about the case and on their notes about the advantages and disadvantages of each communication model.

The top-down communication model follows a line in which, according to Corrêa and Caon (2002), the themes and content to be shared flow from the “macro” to the “micro”, from the “top” “down”, that is, from the upper management to their subordinates. Among the advantages of this model, we can highlight the alignment of the communication with the company strategies and the possibility of managing the themes to be communicated in each scenario. In the case of GDC Alimentos, this model was already used by the organization before the pandemic and, in addition to being known, it brings advantages to the company, as proposed by Patrícia, manager of the industrial sector. Such model encompasses a more consistent decision-making and communication process, with the least amount of adjustment possible; fast decision-making, with the speed the moment requires, which should be made by the managers with experience. However, it is not flexible, and it has some disadvantages, such as the difficulty in creating new ideas and bottom-up messages or “emerging strategies”. Valgueiro, Castro, Boas, and Carmo (2010) emphasize that the top-down model uses a unidirectional method in the formulation, development, and application process of the elaborated strategies, causing lack of creativity and proactivity in strategic decision-making.

In Rogério's perspective, the organization should adopt a new adaptive communication model, through which they would be able to adjust to the pandemic scenario. The manager of the logistics sector pointed out some advantages to this model: possibility of the leaders acting as facilitators within this transparency process; being more malleable and flexible in the decision-making process; able to achieve a greater commitment from the team; presenting a more efficient communication process. According to Obadia, Vidal, and Melo (2007), the complexity of the changing process is present in different organizational environments, so much so that they occur dynamically, unpredictably and at an accelerated pace, magnifying the diversity of internal and external factors that interfere with the organizational performance, as well as the degree of interdependency between them. This context of a permanent need for change imposes that organizations adapt to the conditions imposed to reach their objectives.

TQ 2.2: In an unstable and highly volatile communication context, how can managers use communication to create engagement and potentialize results?

During the pandemic period, the uncertainties, the stress, and the panic make it difficult to communicate, creating confusion between the management and the employees, which makes it difficult to make the right decisions. While the organization is involved in a crisis, the people responsible for management must have skills to predict the possibility of new crisis and the organization's weak points (Abrashi, 2018).

To create engagement, the company's management should activate its crisis committee, as occurred in the company still in February 2020. This committee, in addition to the company executives, has the aid of professionals from the fields of human resources, health, security, to manage their contingency plan. According to Cunha (2017), this committee is, for the upper management, one of the crucial factors in planning their actions, seen as it is one of the pillars of any successful plan, a facilitator of the communication between leaders and collaborators.

Considering that the company has more than 2,000 collaborators, defining a communication strategy is essential for GDC Alimentos to be able to engage the team and, thus, potentialize results, or even to be able to stay in the market in light of the uncertainties. Abrashi (2018) reinforces that the way the organization communicates, or does not communicate, with the target-audience during the crisis will have a decisive effect in the result of the efforts to overcome instability. As every crisis is different, it is difficult to predict what may happen in an organization.

For Cunha (2017), the leaders should have enough information to communicate periodically with their subordinates about the current situation of the company. Information such as: what is the crisis and what are its impacts, what are the challenges to be faced by everyone, what is won and lost with this situation, an estimate of the consequences and incentive to focus on the solution of such scenarios. Thus, Vivian and Felipe need to be ahead of all information divulged by the government, deal with all the rules and required preventive measures, seeking a balance between control regarding the dissemination of the virus within the organization and maintaining the production process, and also be able to transmit the information and adopted regulations to the collaborators without the occurrence of noise (or misinformation).

To potentialize the results in the COVID-19 scenario, the company must anticipate threats, prepare the leadership and the teams for the new challenges, and also try to seize the opportunities that appear. In the case of the organization, due to being a food company, it must adopt communication and marketing strategies that allow the crisis to become an opportunity to be explored. Rego and Cunha (2020) highlight that, in a moment of crisis, leaders must transform poison in medicine, that is, their behavior and their attitudes are important compasses in creating resilience.

TQ 2.3: What strategy could be used to guarantee transparency and linearity of information during this crisis, above all from the role of the leadership, considering a view in which the meanings and narratives are actively constructed by people?

When dealing with transparency and fluidity of communication, it is worthwhile to ponder on the strategic function of communication, which, according to Garcia-Carbonell, Martin-Alcazar, and Sanchez-Gardey (2016), allows managers to create and manage decision and communicate in a language accessible to all publics, which strengthens a communicative culture permeating the most diverse spheres of the organization.

Felipe and Vivian's initiative of performing several meetings with the objective of communicating the measures that will be adopted by the organization allows the communication at GDC Alimentos to present transparency. That is something considered primordial in crisis situations and uncertain scenarios, such as the one experienced in the country due to the pandemic. Therefore, communication is seen in a more robust and wide scope, according to Schöeneborn, Kuhn, and Kärreman (2019): manifestations go beyond the transmission of messages, giving form to a process of collaborative construction of meaning. It is pondered that meaning and construction are intimately linked to the way of planning and executing a strategy that allows the leadership to strengthen the protagonism of people in an unstable situation, as is the case of crisis they are experiencing.

Several changes occurred at GDC Alimentos due to the state's government demands and COVID-19, causing apprehension in the collaborators and fear in relation to the measures that would be taken by the organization. At the beginning, it was possible to observe an intense search for information and understanding of the situation by the employees. Thus, Felipe and Vivian, the representative leaders in the meetings, sought to keep informed of all the changes imposed frequently by the state's government. However, there was worry about how they should pass this information along to their colleagues and what strategy and communication model they should use to do so. According to Lemos and Barbosa (2017), there are new communication possibilities in the organization environment that aggregate to the strategic action of leadership. The authors highlight that there is a plurality of possibilities to be explored, especially on the concept that communication is present in organization in several contexts, from the internal environment of interaction to the external relationships of the organization with its publics.

The employees' level of engagement provides an environment with more effective communication, and, according to Ruck, Welch, and Menara (2017), it can be stated that the engagement of the employees is increasingly more valued as a factor that contributes to the institutional strengthening in innovative and competitive organizations.

Acuña, Domínguez, and Navarro (2017) highlight the importance of associating the internal communication with a bridge that connects the employees to the strategic management and the organization objectives, which makes all actors responsible for the success of the actions. The characters evidence, in this case, concern about transmitting information to the collaborators, for believing that what is communicated can directly affect the collaborators and, consequently, the organization's production process. Felipe defends the idea of transparency and that all needed information should be transmitted to the employees, for a better performance of the company in light of the measures and changes that were being implemented at GDC Alimentos. Guedes, Silva, and Santos (2015) complement that, due to its own nature, communication implies mutuality and sharing with the other, characteristics present in the dialogical processes and needed in this process of crisis management.

Question 3

The objective of the third question is to debate about the management model used at GDC Alimentos, so that the students reflect on the model used and analyze the quality of information exchange among the managers, in order to do that, we suggest TQ 3.1.

TQ 3.1: Is the communication management model adopted during the crisis period efficient, considering people management and the engagement of the teams in supporting the factory operation?

Although undesirable, the possibility of a crisis occurring, of any nature, is inevitable for organizations since we live in a dynamic and uncertain world. In this scenario, it is worth highlighting the intensification of formal communication at GDC Alimentos in all levels, as reinforced in the text, since the company in general still followed the top-down communication model of information, which were centralized by the directors committee of the organization and then transmitted to the collaborators of lower levels. According to Sá (2021), these organizations structure their information sharing process around a mechanist logic, which proposes that the transmission of information be done vertically, obeying a top-down direction. This communication model, based on establishing unilateral channels, refers, according to Kunsch (2018), to the perception of communication as power, as a link, in its varied forms.

However, it is possible to note that the company, in order to make the communication channel the most agile and transparent possible, and in light of the several changes in the day-to-day of the employees, in addition to using the formal communication channels, such as e-mail, meetings (online), intranet, physical murals, corporate TV, started to also adopt informal communication channels that were not used previously, such as WhatsApp.

In this sense, communication had a central role in the dialogues between the directive body and other members of the team, being present as a basic process, inherent to human relations, and not only as transmission of information. Still from the perspective of Kunsch (2018), organizations are discovering that communication is an integral part of the social system, seeing that they have responsibilities and commitments that go beyond manufacturing products or providing services.

Therefore, using the top-down communication model may not be the most efficient for the organization's situation, seen as it is a more bureaucratic and complex model, with a greater consistency in the processes, but that does not allow the performance of adjustments and adaptations in decision-making. In this sense, Kunsch (2018) reinforces that classic, instrumental, exclusively technical, and operational communication does not meet the current demands of organizations.

Thus, in a highly dynamic environment, as a pandemic, it becomes necessary for leaders to have more autonomy in the decision-making process. The adaptive model suggests that communication be done horizontally, in a way that all actors involved share information. For Sá (2021), in the adaptive model, the participants of each team must be up to date in order to incorporate the changes and build ideas, so that, when using this model, the organization will achieve more effectiveness in the communication process with its collaborators.

Still in this context, we can highlight that the leadership role is an essential part of the crisis management process, especially in strengthening the relationships and engagement of people to the organizational objectives. According to Bunn and Fumagalli (2016), leading consists of the capacity of influencing people in different situations and contexts – in our study, we are discussing a scenario of fear. Still according to the authors, when genially executed, leadership stimulates the commitment and engagement of the people in the team.

Another relevant aspect of this reflection, according to Cunha (2017), it is the importance of the alignment through internal communication that will subsidize the leadership with information and instructions, so that they have a foundation and support tools for managing their teams and make decisions. Therefore, the collaborators' engagement is linked to the fact of the leadership being armed with enough and periodic information to transmit to the employees.

CLOSING THE CASE DISCUSSION

Closing the case, we suggest that the professor maps the students' discourses, relating them to the main theoretical concepts underlying the case and provokes reflections on the posture of other companies in the pandemic context.

We also propose that the professor closes the class elucidating the main discussed topics and the most important measures evidenced during the explanations in class. It is emphasized that the suggestions can be modified at the professor's criteria. In order to apply the case, we recommend the following time distribution.

Box 1
Suggestion of time distribution for the application of the case

Activity	Duration (in minutes)
Exposition of the concepts and theories presented in the case.	25
Separation of the students in 4 groups.	05
Debate among the students of each group about the measures that could be taken.	30
Simulation of the meeting with the sectors.	30
Closing the class explaining the main topics discussed in class, relating the situations experienced in the case with the theory.	30
TOTAL	120

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

CASE CLOSURE

Six months after Decree nº 515 (Decreto nº 515, de 17 de março de 2020), which drastically modified the routine of companies and their collaborators, the sea remained troubled. The protagonists of this teaching case continued their activities and, despite a scenario of peaks in the contamination curve at a national level, the organizational climate and the employees' behavior showed that the immediate action in light of the facts, the teachings and the crisis management with the promptness required at that moment were key points so that the navigation stayed its course safely, even in troubled waters.

These six months required a restructuration of the communication process in several sectors – from the transmission of information and sanitary protocols to combat COVID-19 contagion, the motivation of the employees to keep them focused on production, the delivery of thousands of boxes of products per day that contributed to supply the country with food, to all the routines that are a part of the operational management of a company.

From this moment on, from the perspective of the managers and the national population, the virus stopped being an unknown villain, vaccination was already seen as a possible solution and people were more prepared to live with the “new normal”. A lot of work would come in the following months, but it was clear that communication would continue to be an important guide for a safer navigation for everyone and that would help GDC Alimentos to remain strong even in troubled waters.

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