## LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATIONS

MAKING (AND BREAKING) REPUTATIONS WHILE NAVIGATING THE COVID-19 CRISIS





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### **Executive Summary**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, companies have been grappling with tough decisions and how to communicate them.

How businesses and their leaders behave today will have long-reaching consequences for their future reputations. Smart leaders today are taking a hard look at their public narrative and actively working to make sure it remains positive in the eyes of the people who matter most: their employees, clients and partners.

This report provides ten important best practices (plus a bonus tip) for business leaders to follow in communicating during this, and any, crisis. The overarching theme across the entire list is for leaders to bring compassion and transparency to their approach and to put people first.

During this crisis and beyond, leaders'—and their companies'—reputations will hinge on how they communicate. Today's world needs leaders who speak with empathy, who are not afraid to have tough conversations and to make mistakes, and who bring their humanity to everything they do. Leaders who can do that will emerge from this pandemic stronger than ever, and poised to lead their businesses into the future with kindness and compassion.

## Communications is Leadership

Throughout the global COVID-19 pandemic, many companies are going through tough times and making very difficult decisions.

Over these last few months, however, the way companies have handled those decisions, and how they've communicated them, has varied widely. Those varied approaches are going to leave lasting marks—for better or for worse—on the reputations of companies and their leaders.

Communications has never been more important than it is right now. Over the last few months, reputations have been *made* and reputations have been *broken*. As we start to emerge from this pandemic into a new normal, it's not just the personal brands of leaders that will be affected by their actions during this crisis—companies' very *cultures* will hinge on their leaders' approach to communication. Today, communication *is* leadership. In the face of that reality, how can leaders make sure their reputation lands on the positive side of the fence?



### What's Your Narrative?

The first step in strengthening your company's reputation during this crisis is to assess your current narrative.

Your narrative is made up of two things:

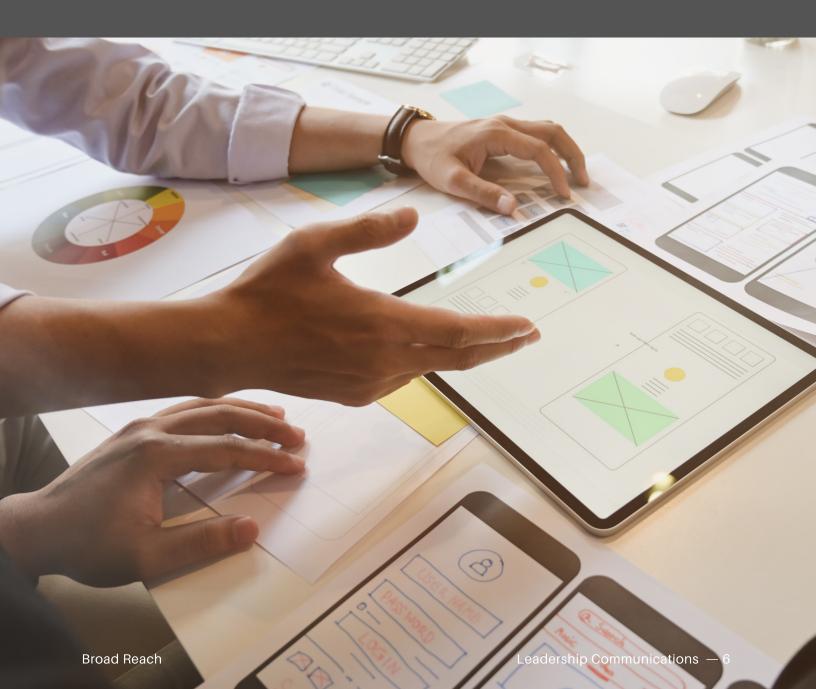
- **People's personal experience with you.** If you sell terrible food, there's nothing you can do to turn that into a positive narrative. If your service is slow, people will remember that.
- What people say to others. The difference between "I really like that bike shop, let's go there" and "Let's not go there, their staff isn't very welcoming" can mean the difference between a successful business and one that flounders.

Everyone has a narrative. Your business, your community, your family, even COVID-19—all of these have their own narratives. And everyone's narrative has positive and negative elements; the trick is to manage that conflict by feeding the positive and behaving appropriately in the face of inevitable negatives.

A crisis can very quickly take charge of your narrative. During a crisis, the public is on high alert, watching carefully for who's behaving well and who's not. People crave stories of good guys and bad guys; if they brand you a good guy, you may be lucky enough to hold onto that reputation. But they also won't hesitate to put you into the bad-guy column, and it can take many positives to overcome one single negative. A crisis on this scale makes it incredibly difficult to establish and maintain a positive narrative.

But that's your job.

Your job is to lead your company in a way that takes control of the narrative and demonstrates that the positive story is who you truly are. Making a tough decision doesn't make you a villain. What can make you a villain is choosing to communicate that tough decision without empathy or transparency, hiding behind spin, or staying silent altogether. By deliberately choosing to communicate the right way and showing your humanity in every interaction, you can keep negativity from dominating the conversation and steer your narrative toward the positive.



# 10 Best Practices in Crisis Communications

Let's be clear: effective crisis communications is not about sending perfectly groomed and edited emails.

It's about bringing your people and your stakeholders along on a mutual journey. It's about letting them know where things stand, and where you expect them to be in 30, 60, 90 days. It's about admitting when you don't know something or when you've made a mistake. It's about checking in with your employees, clients and partners and offering to help them—professionally and even personally.

Honesty, transparency, compassion and empathy: these are what matters right now, and what will determine your reputation for years to come. Communicating effectively in a crisis is indeed a careful balance, but it's not difficult, and it's not magic. You have it in you to get this right.



Here are 10 things you can and should be doing right now to establish a positive narrative that will last long into the future.

### **Live Your Company Values**

Your company values are your true north, so sticking to them is absolutely critical right now.

Your employees need to see that your actions and communications are consistent with what you have said in the past. If your company values are constantly reinforced, modelled, and used to develop talent and evaluate performance, they become your competitive advantage.

If you don't yet have a set of clearly articulated values, now's a good time to create one. Look to other companies for some great examples:

- Read Broad Reach's charter.
- Watch <u>LinkedIn's Executive Chairman and former CEO Jeff Weiner describe the power of his company's six core values</u>.

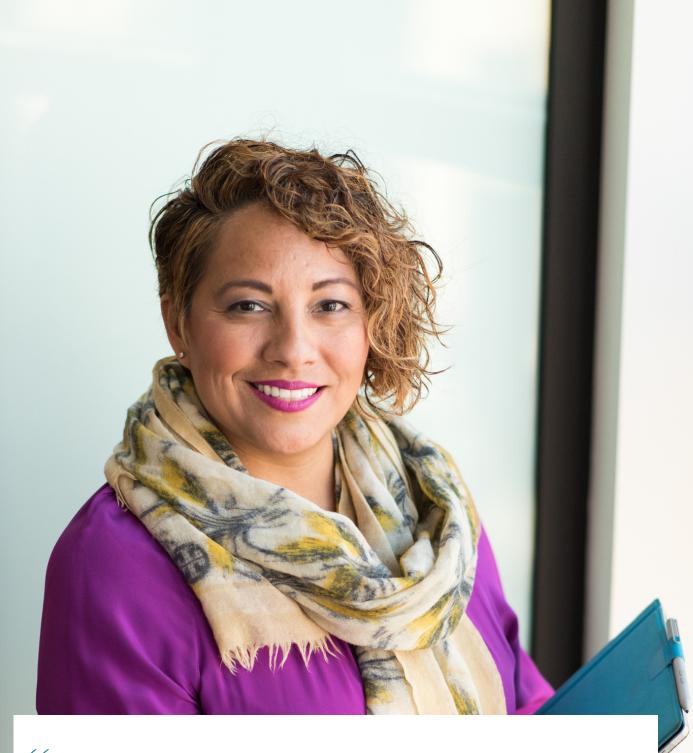
As Apple CEO Tim Cook says, "This is the time to truly act on your company's values, purpose and mission to deliver on customer needs, and align to your brand. Your employees and customers will want to know what you stand for as a company and how your company is a good corporate citizen during the pandemic."

## Bring Humanity to Your Communications

Leaders need to start being real, worrying less about "massaging the message" and more about showing their true selves.

Consider world leaders like New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Sint Maartin Prime Minister Silveria; they have embraced this approach and have been praised for their honesty and empathy and their capacity to build trust. Now is *not* the time to hide behind corporate speak, spin or puffery.

Be willing to have the tough conversations, openly and honestly. Speak from the heart, acknowledge how hard things are, demonstrate empathy for your people—and make sure they know how much you appreciate their efforts. Make your communications direct, clear, and brief, and be truthful and speak from the heart. Imagine the long-term effect if, instead of rolling their eyes and thinking, "Oh, great, another company COVID update," your team started to say, "Wow, that was a really personal conversation I just had with my manager," or "Wow, our CEO was incredibly real in today's virtual town hall." That would bring a tremendous shift in connection and engagement to your culture.



Speak from the heart, acknowledge how hard things are, demonstrate empathy for your people—and make sure they know how much you appreciate their efforts.

Don't be surprised if the conversation shifts dramatically, as it did several months into the pandemic when protesters took to the streets in the U.S. and around the world to demand an end to police brutality and racial inequality—and be ready to shift with it. Stay on top of what's most important to your stakeholders, and be willing to talk about difficult issues directly and from the heart.

Of course, actions speak louder than words. An executive team that protects its own salaries while cutting others' will be seen as self-serving and elitist. (And believe me, that reputation will stick.) But leaders who take pay cuts along with their employees (or even before their employees, or who take bigger cuts than them), or who increase pay rates for front line workers given the risks they face, will generate tremendous loyalty. Get out there and work alongside your people, while leading the way in following public health guidelines for social distancing and mask-wearing. You need to show that you're personally invested in their health and wellbeing. Consider what actions you need to take because they're the right things to do.

And it's okay if you don't have all the answers to your team's questions. No one is expecting you to. An honest acknowledgement that you don't know something can gain you tremendous respect.

For more on this, listen to Broad Reach's podcast, <u>On Point: Bringing Humanity to Leadership Communications</u>.

# Act Fast and Avoid Predictable Missteps

In a crisis, your first foot forward sets the tone for everything to come.

Customers and employees are very quick to form opinions, but if you act responsibly and quickly, any initial negativity can quickly fade into renewed loyalty. To do that, you need to be prepared: anticipate various types of crises, create and test a comprehensive crisis plan, draft statements in advance, and identify crisis team members and roles.

We've clearly seen that a swift response works: New Zealand's Ardern closed the country's borders and instituted lockdown measures earlier than most and quickly communicated the rules to citizens, enabling the country to declare itself COVID-free in early June.

Your crisis communications plan should include a specific outline of basic behaviours that your entire team will follow. While these might seem intuitive now, they may not be in the moment, so planning for them makes very good business sense.

- **1. Face the problem directly.** Ignoring an issue only prompts the media to keep asking more questions.
- 2. Make sure you comment. Being silent only invites others to interpret your thoughts and actions for themselves; get out in front and communicate what's important; avoid "no comment" responses entirely.
- **3. Get statements out as early as possible.** Prepare communications in advance so you can respond quickly.
- **4. Acknowledge the severity of the problem.** Be candid about how serious the situation is, letting people know that they can expect candour from you.
- **5. Take control of the story.** Don't just let the story evolve; own it from the start, explaining what's happening and what you're doing about it.
- **6. Correct lies and misinformation.** Narratives change throughout a crisis, but make sure yours remains true.
- 7. Tell the whole truth. Commit to honesty and transparency at all times, across all audiences. Lies or half-truths are hard to recover from once they're discovered.
- **8. Don't play the blame game.** Vow not to create hostility by assigning blame or avoiding responsibility. Take ownership and be accountable.
- **9. Speak plainly and openly.** People can spot false optimism or "spin" in an instant; it will almost certainly come back to bite you. Talk like a human being and speak with empathy.
- **10. Make the executive team visible.** The more leaders are seen, the more people know they care.

## Communicate Transparently and Don't Sugar-Coat

A crisis can test your relationships with all of your stakeholders, including employees, customers, investors, board members and even the media, so communicate with them early and often.

Be calm, confident and empathetic in every interaction.

Choose direct language that can't be misinterpreted. For example, rather than saying "These are challenging times," say specifically what is challenging: that you've experienced an X% drop in revenues, that you've had to lay Y people off, or that you've had to reduce wages across the company. Don't sugar-coat and don't hide from the truth.

Given the diversity of stakeholders you need to communicate with, be sure to use a variety of channels to reach them. Consider having discussions in person, reaching out by email or phone, broadcasting on social media, or using webcast or video technology. Being visible across multiple platforms ensures that nobody is missed.

### Do Your Best, Admit Your Mistakes and Focus on What's **Most Important**

There's no COVID-19 communications handbook.

You won't always know what you're doing. Some of the communications you try will work out great; others won't. And that's okay. This is uncharted territory for all of us. Don't beat yourself up if something doesn't work; just try something else. Do the best you can with the information you have in the moment. Speak plainly in a way that's accessible to everyone, repeat messages often, and apologize for being wrong when you need to.

Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Teresa Tam is a great example of that. She does her best, and she doesn't offer certainty where there is no certainty. She has made mistakes, admitted to them, corrected them and moved on. Another example to emulate is Dr. Bonnie Henry, British Columbia's provincial health officer. She presents a sensible, flexible approach, even using humour appropriately and putting her emotions on plain display. Like everyone else, our top doctors underestimated how the pandemic would unfold. But they acknowledge that fact openly and change course as needed.



This is uncharted territory for all of us. 99



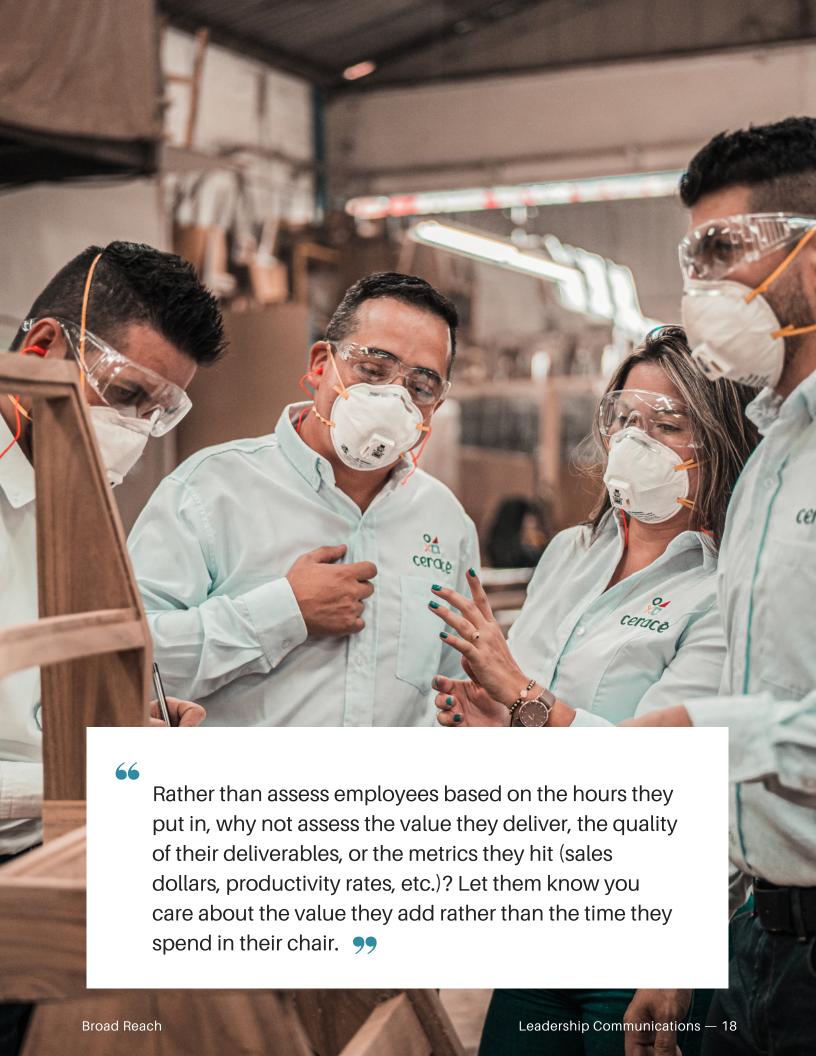
### **Prioritize Your People's Needs**

This is the perfect time for companies to rethink how they measure an employee's contributions.

Just before an employee gets on a call with you, they might be doing math with their child or submitting an assignment to a teacher. They might be caring for an aging parent or grocery shopping for a neighbour. All of this may mean they have to work longer hours than before to get all of their own work done, and that they can't be in front of their computers every time you reach out to them.

So it's important not to expect your employees to be at their desks from nine to five. You could lead the movement to reinvent the 9–5 workday. Rather than assess employees based on the hours they put in, why not assess the value they deliver, the quality of their deliverables, or the metrics they hit (sales dollars, productivity rates, etc.)? Let them know you care about the value they add rather than the time they spend in their chair.





Beyond family obligations, encourage employees to take time for themselves during the day. No company should be policing employees or expecting them to justify every break they take. In fact, the best leaders are *telling* their people to go out for walks, work out or just take the time they need to avoid burnout. Modelling that behaviour yourself can go a long way, too. Be open about the bike rides you take with your kids or the workouts you complete during the workday, and talk about how they're helping you stay healthy, sane and productive.

As employees begin to return to work, provide protective equipment and put plans in place to keep people physically apart. Perhaps more important, consider whether they need to be back in the office at all. Are you compelling people to come back to work even though they can easily work from home? Think about what that says about your company, and what such actions could do to your long-term reputation.

Tobi Lutke, CEO of e-commerce giant Shopify, recently said, "The era of office centricity is over." The company, along with others like Kobo, Google and Facebook, has decided to keep company offices closed for the rest of 2020 and allow most employees to permanently work from home after that if they choose to. Instead of mandating a path back to work, ask your employees for their input, and be open to creating individual solutions based on individual needs.

### **Listen and Get Personal**

After so many weeks of communicating to employees, it's time for CEOs to *listen*.

Don't assume you know what's on your people's minds or how they're feeling—ask them. As companies survey their employees and hold virtual coffee meetings with small groups, here's what some of them are finding:

- The idea of going back to work—even in a few months—is creating anxiety for many.
- Employees' biggest fears centre on public transport, elevators, bathrooms, common areas and kitchens.
- People don't want to jeopardize their family's health to go to work.
- Others don't want their kids to go back to school and would prefer to homeschool them.

Listen carefully to what your employees want their new normal to look like. Respect each employee's personal situation, their anxieties and their fears, and ask how you can help them feel comfortable and safe. Think carefully about how you can adapt to their needs and plan for a different future.

Leaders who aren't used to having personal conversations with their teams will have to build that muscle. There's simply no other way anymore.

## Inspire Your People Through Your Actions

Inspirational leadership comes from action.

Look to leaders like Shopify's Lutke, who is clearly committed to the greater good well beyond his company. He has not waffled in making bold decisions like having employees work from home permanently and giving his people money to get themselves set up. He's also promoting Canada as a great place to work and hasn't waited for someone to tell him what to do. Through his commitment to real, substantive changes that make a tangible difference for people, he's taking bold action to define the future of his company long into the future.

Consider how you can get into the trenches with your team. If your team is working outside their homes, make sure you do, too. That's what leaders do. You set the tone for the business; what you say and where you show up matters. And your actions speak just as loud as your words.

So put some thought into what actions you can take that will really benefit your employees and customers in this moment. Are you really demonstrating to the world that you're thinking about the future in a different way, and are you working to improve your company's culture?

Everything you say and do today will absolutely be remembered tomorrow—and long into the future.



# Don't Proactively Communicate with Media—Unless It's Related to the Current Situation

If you're making adjustments to your processes to help the current situation—if your product or company is helping fight the virus, protect communities or educate the public—then let the world know.

MasterCard and VISA, for example, increased tap limits to help people shop securely with more peace of mind, and many food and furniture delivery companies are offering contactless delivery or curbside pickup. Those are the kinds of actions you should definitely be communicating.

But when the world is completely focused on major, defining events, any effort at self-promotion can come off as tone-deaf. If you have nothing to say that's relevant to what's currently happening, don't reach out to the media. This is not the time to talk about your new facility or product. The media is focused on bigger issues—even sports and entertainment reporters have been redeployed in many cases. Protect your relationship with members of the media by respecting their priorities.

It's okay not to have news right now. The public is focused on critical world events at the moment, too.

# Focus on Mental and Physical Health: Yours, Your Family's and Your Team's

This could really be the first tip on the list, because without our health, none of the rest of it matters.

There's been a lot of talk about wellness in the workplace in recent years, and this crisis takes that discussion to a whole new level. First of all, take care of yourself. Your own physical and emotional wellbeing need to be your first priority, because if you aren't doing well, you won't be of any help to anyone else. Be vigilant about monitoring the health of your children and other family members, too, paying particular attention to everyone's mental health, which can be significantly impacted during this extended time of isolation. If you have questions or concerns, don't be afraid to seek professional help, perhaps through your company's employee assistance plan, if one is available.

Leaders don't traditionally play the role of health and wellness coach for their people, and you may feel a little out of your comfort zone by taking it on, but right now it's expected, and it's critical. Leaders currently have a passport to provide health advice, and it might be exactly what your team needs. Make sure your employees know that their health, both physical and mental, is your priority, and look for ways that you can support them in maintaining it. It could be as simple as sharing tips for healthy cooking or links to free video workouts. You can also highlight how they can significantly boost their immunity through food, sugar reduction, exercise and sleep.

Find sources you trust and share them broadly, starting with the latest updates from your local health authorities. Consult the world's leading health experts for resources that can help support your health and that of your team, such as:

- Sleep expert Dr. Michael Breus on <u>How You Can Use Sleep to Fight Back Against Coronavirus</u>.
- UK health expert <u>Dr. Rangan Chatterjee</u>'s interview with psychiatrist Dr. Judson Brewer about <u>How to Manage Anxiety in the Face of a Global Pandemic</u>.
- Immune-boosting advice from innovative healthcare companies like Maple (<u>Protect Yourself From Coronavirus By Boosting Your Immune System</u>) and the Cleveland Clinic (<u>Strengthen Your Immune System With 4 Simple Strategies</u>).
- Healthy recipes from UK wellness activist and "cancer thriver" Kris Carr.
- YouTube favourite <u>Yoga with Adrienne</u> for at-home yoga classes that anyone can do.
- BODYCOMBAT mixed martial arts workouts by <u>Les Mills</u>.
- Talks on radical acceptance and compassion by psychologist and meditation teacher <u>Tara Brach</u>.

The world is changing. Some of these disciplines might have seemed somewhat "fringe" or beyond the mainstream a few years ago, but they are now emerging as some of the best ways for people to take care of themselves and each other. It has never been more critical to be intentional about health.



## Bonus Tip: Encourage Connection and Fun

Helping your team stay connected is more important now than ever before.

Checking in with them once or twice a week with no business on the agenda (and maybe a funny image or video on your Zoom background) can go a long way toward maintaining connections. Encourage your team to take calls outdoors if they can, so they can get fresh air and exercise at the same time.

Help your team see the lighter side of things, too, by sharing a regular dose of humour and fun. Team challenges or contests can be great stress-reducers; one company is running an at-home beer-brewing competition, for example, with a taste test planned for whenever the team is back together. Another is hosting a talent show with the winners receiving a gift card of their choice. There are lots of things you could do to put a smile on your team's faces, and this is a great time to focus on creating some joy.

### You Can Shape the Future

How you communicate with your people, your clients and your other key stakeholders during this crisis will establish your—and your company's—reputation for years to come.

Today's world needs leaders who work side by side with their people. Leaders who share tough news with compassion and empathy, who make transparency their top priority, and who are clearly working hard to help their people through this. We need leaders to finally be *real people* who are comfortable making mistakes and who aren't afraid of showing their humanity.

When this pandemic is over, those are the leaders and companies who will have made a lasting impact, and who will emerge far stronger than they ever were before.

### **About the Author**

Broad Reach President Andrea Lekushoff has more than two decades of experience as a communications strategist and trusted advisor for some of the world's most respected brands.

She has deep experience counselling C-level executives, mid-level managers and boards across a range of industry sectors including professional and financial services, legal, insurance, real estate, technology, telecommunications, mining, manufacturing and energy. Before founding Broad Reach, Andrea was a strategy consultant at Deloitte, held successively senior roles in the public relations industry, and worked in the public affairs division at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C.

Committed to her community, Andrea serves on the boards of Women of Influence, an organization dedicated to the advancement of professional women, and the Boost Child & Youth Advocacy Centre. She also recently held a board position with the Toronto chapter of the Young Presidents' Organization (YPO).

Andrea holds an MBA from the Ivey Business School, a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from Western University, and Strategy and Leadership Executive Education certificates from Harvard Business School.



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## COVID-19 Thought Leadership

Long before the COVID-19 outbreak, Broad Reach was a leading voice in guiding the communications of Canadian companies and their leaders through crises and out the other side. As the pandemic has evolved, the company's advice has been featured in publications across a broad range of industries, including mining, automotive, accounting, investment and entrepreneurship. Visit our COVID-19 page for links to bylined articles, interviews, webcasts and podcast episodes featuring Broad Reach President Andrea Lekushoff.

## Broad Reach's Podcast

As we slowly emerge from a worldwide crisis, one of the most important ways business leaders need to adapt their communications approach is to start showing their humanity. In <u>On Point: Bringing Humanity to Leadership Communications</u>, Andrea Lekushoff interviews thought leaders, best-selling authors, executives, academics, and health and wellness experts to explore the role of communications in a time of crisis and how leaders can—and must—evolve their approach.



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COMMUNICATIONS

<u>Broad Reach</u> is a full-service PR agency that creates powerful campaigns to help organizations elevate their brands, build their reputations, engage influencers and drive business results. Since 2008, Broad Reach has represented an impressive roster of global clients and has earned shelves of coveted industry awards. Outperforming our peers by being "<u>In a League of Our Own</u>," Broad Reach is a fast-growing, innovative, entrepreneurial agency staffed by the industry's top talent. Our people enjoy a flexible, team-spirited environment where they can really connect with clients, feel valued and supported, and produce their best work.

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