

How Today's Leaders Impact the American Zeitgeist

Frank Washkuch ([00:00](#)):

At the moment, Americans are struggling through work/life balance, exhaustion, a misinformation crisis, and an overload of dark news. And yet, as a society, we are mostly positive about our futures. Why? Today, a new age of business leaders have emerged: leaders who are outspoken about societal issues, who are adaptable to a new digital age, and who are engaged with stakeholders to build an increasingly connected network of meaningful relationships and conversations that all come together to spark true change for the better.

So in this panel, you will hear about the new data that shows how these leaders can maximize their impact to help people within their companies and beyond to improve everything from their careers to their health, to their ability to use new tools, to connect with others. And as a reminder, audience, please send us your questions throughout the panel and we will answer as many questions as we can.

We have a great list of guests for you today: Dr. Kathy Bloomgarden, CEO of Ruder Finn, Damon Jones, the Chief Communications Officer of Proctor & Gamble, and Kara Sakuda, VP of executive and team member communications at Hewlett Packard Enterprises. So my first question is for Damon. Damon, what's the impact of how today's business leaders communicate on shaping positivity?

Damon Jones ([01:16](#)):

Well, I think one of the things that the pandemic has taught or reminded many of us is just how multi-dimensional communications is. Long gone are the days when CEOs were expected to communicate about their business or only speak to their consumers. Everything that we do impacts so many different audiences and people look for their cues from their companies. So I think as we think about the impact of positivity and forward-looking, it really is something that we as communicators need to be mindful of. We see that through how do we talk about business resilience? We see that in the hot topics as we're talking about vaccine and vaccine requirements. All of these different things can come through a lens of because we want to and because we believe it's the right thing to do. Or some of those can come because we have to.

And so thinking about just how many of the different audiences we have to speak to, and frankly being mindful of the many different competing interests that are at play. Again, I'll use many of the pandemic-related topics that we see out there, and you take the topic of vaccines, they'll go right for the controversy. I mean, what is a straightforward science-based discussion for some isn't a straightforward science-based discussion for all.

And so, as we look at communicating to our employees, how do we do so with empathy? How do we do so with respect, respecting the many different points of view that exist on various topics? But also reminding people of the important things that we share in our common objectives. Because I think that is a unique thing that when you look at, in our case, a company that's got more than 100,000 employees, we've got more than 100,000 opinions. But what will unite us, will be our purpose, our values and our principles. And so I think business is in a unique position to really pull in the common threads from a lot of different areas and remind people of that, not only in our B2B communications,

but candidly, how we communicate with consumers. So I think it's a window of opportunity for us to get the small things right, so that we can indeed get the big things right.

Frank Washkuch ([03:17](#)):

Kara, what are your thoughts on this topic?

Kara Sakuda ([03:20](#)):

I think that Damon is spot on. I think as a leader, right now it's imperative to really communicate and it's to help shape the positivity in these challenging times because leaders need to set the tone for the entire team or the organization or the company. Because really the employees are looking to the leader's actions as a model to their own, so it's critical to role model the behavior you want to drive, and like Damon said, I think leading with empathy and communicating even more frequently is important, because the times we are living in are incredibly challenging, and undoubtedly this causes worry and uncertainty, and frankly competing priorities with home and work. So I think empathy is key. And the leaders right now, you just need to help manage the fear and know how to encourage others. And by doing so effectively communicate to their teams because that's when leaders show up is in times like these. But I think what's important, it has to be in an authentic way. It has to be aligned to the culture of your company and to the leader as an individual.

Frank Washkuch ([04:21](#)):

Kathy, your agency has done some really interesting research on this, and found I think some numbers that will actually surprise people on this topic about just how optimistic people are. Can you share a little bit of that with us?

Kathy Bloomgarden ([04:34](#)):

Well, actually we were a little bit surprised that we saw that despite what everyone has been through and the difficult times we're all living through and the uncertainties, and going back to work, keeping getting delayed, 58% of people said that they believed that their future would be more positive even in the days ahead. So they had a very positive outlook in terms of where things are headed. And it's really the roots of the American dream are still holding us together. And it was pretty universal with some differences, but it was really crossing all the demographic groups. We wanted to really look at what is causing this and what is underpinning this new leadership style. You guys have really rightly called out that there is a new style, there's a new stakeholder capitalism. We've all talked about that. There's new sensitivity, a new empathetic leadership, as Damon mentioned, and Kara's focused on increased communication for leaders and something that people really embrace, but what is it that's actually having an impact? And how much of an impact is that really having in terms of the new leadership style? We found three factors were really critical and that was being transparent, having a dialogue; it's not just giving people information, it's really going back and forth and having that dialogue, and really making sure that not let people feel they're getting knowledge; they can make their own decisions, they're better informed. And those three things together really formed a new leadership style that has the most significant impact on positivity of any other factor that we looked at far greater than demographics or geography or any other definition that could influence that.

So the final thing is that communication is at the center, as we know of all those three things. So it really gives communicators a new opportunity, as Damon said, the opportunity is now. It's a new opportunity

for communication to have a seat at the table, and to really be critical, and at the center of how leadership is actually both externally and internally making changes and communicating every day.

Frank Washkuch ([06:47](#)):

Fascinating stuff, Kathy. So Damon brought up one hot topic with back explanations. I'll bring up another. Given the Great Resignation and just how much a movement there is in the job market right now, how must leaders evolve their approach to internal communications. Kathy, let's start with you on this one.

Kathy Bloomgarden ([07:11](#)):

Yeah. So we all know engagement is something that we watch really closely and that with some reporting that two thirds of employees have their resumes out, we definitely have a big challenge at the moment. What we saw was the younger the cohorts, the less engaged and connected people felt. And the more communication, the more of this transparency, dialogue and knowledge that we could actually engage with people on the more inclined they were to become more engaged, more positive, more productive, but at the same time, they're looking for new opportunities.

They're more career-oriented, they're more aspirational about the opportunities in front of them. So that really changes the role of HR. HR has to be constantly looking at how we're going to give people their opportunities within the company, so that they're not leaving for another opportunity, another lifestyle choice to start a startup or to own their own business. So we need to be sure that we shift in terms of the communication levels that we're having with employees, the engagement factor that ensues from that, the connections that we can find looking at cohorts age-wise differently, and also women and parents who've had special needs during the pandemic. So HR has become really much more aligned and closer to the communication function, where it needs to work hand-in-hand with both leadership and communications in order to be able to deal with the so-called Great Resignation challenges.

Frank Washkuch ([08:34](#)):

Kara, what do you think about this topic?

Kara Sakuda ([08:36](#)):

Yeah, I'm aligned with what Kathy says, I think keeping team members engaged is paramount to, to retention and how we're approaching things. I think a big piece of this is not the big 'C' in communications, but it's kind of the little 'c' and using your leaders to, or the direct line managers to effectively communicate with their teams. So we put a lot of emphasis on kind of the frontline management and having, and coaching them to be the frontline in engagement. So it's all about connection.

It's as basic as we're having our leaders meet regularly with team members to keep a pulse on how they're doing, not just professionally, but personally. I think there's blurred lines now in work-life balance and home and life, and so it's important just to, we encourage them to just start every meeting with a basic question of "how are you?". I mean, it sounds silly, but it's just basic cause these one-on-ones are giving leaders a better perspective on where their employee's mindset is at, and it's giving the

employee some personal time to have an authentic discussion with their leader about anything that's top of mind.

So I think with the Great Resignation, it's particularly important that leaders stay connected on their team's career goals. So we encourage leaders to ensure their employees understand that career growth isn't just about a promotion or a pay raise, but it's about gaining new experiences or exploring work in adjacent areas. We have the benefit of a large company like P&G to offer stretch and kind of 'gig assignments' and experiences along with formal learning opportunities. So I think leaders need to understand what their team members want to achieve and then really help them get there as well. Another thing, I was just going to say another thing I think is really supporting wellness in this work-life balance because the pandemic has really contributed to these new work challenges that have, like I said earlier, the blurred lines between your personal life and work life.

And so we're trying to offer even benefits and in partnership with HR to help promote balance and wellness. And so like we've offered these wellness Fridays, which used to be employees with kids taking the afternoon off to do whatever you needed to do to align to your wellness. But, over the summer, we gave two Fridays a month off just to show employees that to give back so they can spend time and focus on themselves or their families, because we're just living in an interesting time. And I think the wellness piece is important.

Frank Washkuch. ([10:55](#)):

Damon, over to you.

Damon Jones ([10:57](#)):

Yeah. I think one of the things that Kara mentions here is really important as is what is important to the employees. At P&G, we're very insights and data-centric in how we engage with our consumers, and we're taking that same approach to how we engage with our employees, like there's a consumer value proposition. We've actually recent refreshed recently refresh what is our employee value proposition. Why does an employee choose to come and why does employee choose to stay, and we recognize that there are different reasons that they answers that they might give to that question over the course of our career. Right? And so staying in touch with that from a very much of an insight standpoint, to understand quality of work, the types of experiences, the ability to share those experiences with friends and family, the ability to live and to thrive during those life moments, whether that is an aging parent, whether that's a new addition to the household, whether that's a kid with two legs or four legs, right?

All of these things are really important to people. And so understanding what does support look like to employees at every step along the way. And as Kara mentioned, equipping our frontline managers with the tools, not policies, not mandates, but what are the tools that you need to offer flexibility to every single employee in a way that is meaningful for that employee.

And so I think the challenge for us as communicators is making sure first, do we really understand our employee base? How is our communication, whether that comes from HR, from the CEO or from communications, how's it landing? What are the signals of feedback that we're getting to say, "Hey, we're really in tune with our employees or we're not." And the ability to just adjust and make sure that

you don't have a one-size-fits all approach to how we engage with employees, really offering up that flexibility to make sure that we can meet the individual needs of employees that vary by geography, vary by life stage, to really do that. So I think that's an important thing, because again, at the end of the day, people just don't leave a company, they leave the people that they're working with, right. They leave for a better experience day in and day out. So, we got to pay attention to the big things, as well as the little things in this type of an environment.

Frank Washkuch. ([13:07](#)):

Okay. That brings us to our next question. And that's how can business leaders communicate health behavior mandates of employees, and how can communications help to make this positive and not a negative? Kathy, I'd like to start with you again.

Kathy Bloomgarden ([13:21](#)):

Yeah. So, we've really vacillated between the carrot and the stick. So first we go off with perks that didn't work so much. And then we went and decided that mandated vaccinations were going to be really the key factor. Well, actually neither of those alone are enough. There is this third factor, which is this transparency and dialogue, and knowledge giving and talking to people that really actually has a greater statistical significance in terms of people's likelihood to get vaccinated. So we saw those folks who felt better connected using that word that, that Kara was using a minute ago, those who felt better connected were 20% in general, more likely to get vaccinated. And in the vaccine-hesitant areas, like rural areas, for example, it was 50% more likely to get vaccinated. So this is a super powerful impact in which, in what is a very challenging situation.

It just sustained instead of at the start when you give people knowledge, it's knowledge to some, and it's not knowledge to others. So, we really need to be sure that we're balancing the conversation and having that real, genuine transparent dialogue. And I would say that the connection factor is also influencing other health behaviors as well. So people's willingness to wear wearables, to take better care of their health, to go see their doctor, to adopt new technologies. So we're, we're in a moment we've talked about a lot of the big challenges that everyone's got facing them, but we're in a moment when everything is shifting and everything is changing. And so how are we going to get people comfortable with that kind of an openness and flexibility? How are we going to be able to move forward with transform business models that have actually changed the way most businesses operate and will continue to evolve over the months since we're not quite out of this.

So I think we need to really sit back and as communicators, we have such an important role in being able to adopt this into the way we act and share it with the leadership team so that we really do become one of the spearheads of making the company successful and engaging employees and outside stakeholders at this moment in time.

Frank Washkuch. ([15:33](#)):

Damon, what are your thoughts on this question?

Damon Jones ([15:35](#)):

You know, it's interesting, right? Because there are some people who just don't want the vaccine, right? Period. Point blank. And I think much like many of the divisive topics that are there, we need to start all

of our communications with a tone of respect and understanding, and empathy for the various motivations and beliefs that people have out there. And so, as I've looked at the communication that we've tried to do here at P&G, we emphasize respect. We'd link in to the greater good, why we are doing what we're doing and encouraging people to get vaccinated and ensuring that we're honest with people and saying that there is a body of evidence that out there that is leading to a choice and a decision about the direction that we want to go and I think it can be tempting for people to say, "Well, science says this, and the government says this, and this person says that." And right, and we just have to acknowledge the world that we live in there's information, there's disinformation, and people are going to believe what they want to believe.

But when we sit back and begin to communicate for the greater good, what we're doing and that when we can implement those policies with understanding and respect, without really othering people, one of the downsides of some of the recent debate on vaccines, as an example, is the othering of the unvaccinated, right? Even calling them 'the unvaccinated' as if they are this monolith who believes all things for a certain reason, and they're bad people, it is off putting. Right. And I believe can have a negative knock-off effect and the relationship that companies have with their employees.

So really taking time, like I mentioned a minute ago, just sit down and understand what are the thoughts and motivations of the people that we're talking to. And then what are the alternatives, right? You know, whether that is wearing masks, whether that is testing, I mean, there are alternatives that are out there. And I think companies have to acknowledge true diversity that exists out there. But again, I'd come back to empathy, I'd come back to respect. But at the end of the day, where there is institutional fortitude to say, "Hey, as a company, we believe this, and this is what we're going to, the path that we're going to go in," we need to say it and say it with our chest and to be bold and have those conversations with the people.

Damon Jones ([17:45](#)):

But, I think this is one where we can't try to, again, do a one-size-fits all, communicate all in one way to everyone, because that's just not effective than any campaign that I've ever done. So a lot more empathy. And this is where communications really needs to be tied in really tight with HR, really tight with company leadership, because I think we can brainstorm with those voices into the room to ensure that when we do get to a decision point, whatever your decision point is, we can ensure it lands with greater impact.

Frank Washkuch. ([18:15](#)):

Kara, your thoughts.

Kara Sakuda ([18:16](#)):

I mean, I agree. I think communication on this matter is best done in a transparent, empathetic, and respectful way. And also, I think the frequency is important in the way we've communicated this, we tried to focus on the positive by reinforcing why these measures are in place, and really clearly outline the steps that are required by each employee, because historically we've never mandated health initiatives, but we've always tried to remind employees of the health benefit and the resources that are available to them. So, we've encouraged them to take advantage of these benefits and programs by sharing the benefits.

But, the exception for us at HPE was the vaccine for COVID. So, as kind of the efforts continued around the world and cities, and we're starting to mandate and states and businesses and governments, we also changed kind of, we did mandate vaccines for in the office work or to attend any of our events. So we'd really, we know this is not a one size fits all, and not everyone is going to agree with this, but we really tried to focus our communications for the vaccine requirements by just reiterating the critical role that everyone needs to play in keeping employees safe and the community safe. So, we just communicate this on kind of as transparently as we could, and as frequently as we were able to.

Frank Washkuch. ([19:32](#)):

We have just a few minutes left in this session. So I want to ask Kathy specifically, and then get everybody else's thoughts on this, but Kathy, your report also has 10 lessons for business leaders that come out of the research. What stands out to you from the top 10 lessons for business leaders?

Kathy Bloomgarden ([19:53](#)):

Well, I think embracing this new leadership style is actually the most important thing. And it really seems obvious, but it's kind of not because a lot of the leadership personalities are such that they're used to another way of operating. And I do have a lot of CEOs who asked me, "Do I have to speak up on these issues?", "When do I speak up on which issues," there's a lot of uncertainty about how to embrace the kind of the new model going forward. So I think the most important thing is really to recognize and adopt something where we are basically shifting toward more dialogue, we're shifting toward more empathy. It's less top down, there's more connection and engagement as an outcome or a deliverable. And it's not just performance and productivity that are the highest elements on the agenda.

And what Kara and Damon have both talked about is really taking the time to be sensitive to each individual's needs and changes in their life journey, which is not easy for a big company to do either. So, there is actually a shift that needs to happen. And I think that Kara and Damon, which is why it is so great that are so great, they're on this panel, they are lucky to be working for CEOs who really get it. And I've already moved into the spot and are exemplary in adopting this new leadership approach.

But, there are many more who haven't. And I think the most important key learning here is that there is an important element and it's really crucial that we move and shift the leadership style right now, and we can build. We talk about being tribal. We talk about being divided. There is something that unifies all of us, and it is these roots of the American dream that the future is going to be better tomorrow. And even through, it shows how adaptable we are even through this pandemic. And whether you look at floods, fires, pandemics, I mean, who would have, who would have believed this novel, we would never have read it and believed it. And yet we've retained our very positive outlook. So I think there is a unifying factor that we can all build on and that communications can actually foster.

Frank Washkuch. ([22:10](#)):

Kara, what do you see as some lessons for leaders that have come out from either the research or from the pandemic at-large?

Kara Sakuda ([22:18](#)):

Yeah. I mean, I think, like Kathy said, I think right now we're living in such an interesting time that there's so many topics, societal issues and, and finding the right places where your leaders should take a stand or should speak up. Because I think there's fear to say something wrong, to say that you're not going to please everybody and there's noise coming in from all directions.

But I think what's important is if you, finding the leaders who are willing to take a stand, but keeping it authentic to who they are. I think you can't align to the culture of the company and your values of the company. I think you can't speak up on every matter. It's just not possible, but in finding the right lanes to kind of, to play in and to speak up on, I think it matters. And having a leader who's willing to do so is important. Because, I know it's a scary time and it's scary for people to say the wrong thing or I think they're living in fear. So I think leaders stand up, and finding the right places that are aligned to who they are as an individual and to the company

Frank Washkuch. ([23:20](#)):

Damon, your thoughts.

Damon Jones ([23:22](#)):

I think in terms of an enduring lesson that we can take away as communicators, there's some great insights into the research, but I don't think we need to fall. We should fall into the trap of thinking that there's a standard playbook that works for everyone in everything, right? I mean, who knows where we'll be at with the pandemic a month from now, a year from now. So really making sure that we are principle-based and the communications that we do, again being insights-driven, and whether we're speaking up on topics, controversial topics or brands or whatever the topic may be, continuing to learn and understand how audiences are engaging now, right?

I mean, there was a time when people welcomed companies and company voices into many of these conversations today. Some people do when there's a growing number of people who don't want companies involved in certain aspects of civic life, right? And so understanding how to read their room is a critical skill that I think we as communicators must master to be able to bring in those insights, to help our leaders and our organizations navigate that. And with those insights, I think we can avoid frankly stepping into it, but importantly, finding the lane and that builds our brands, built, builds our equity and builds trust with all the stakeholders that we need to.

Frank Washkuch. ([24:36](#)):

Well unfortunately, that's all the time we have for today's session. I'd like to thank all of our terrific panelists: Kathy and all of Ruder Finn, Damon, and Kara. And thank all of you in the audience for joining us at PR Decoded – goodbye!