


# NAVIGATING COVID-19 THE CHANGE

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## MADANO MINDSET SERIES



‘We are all facing the same storm, but the boats we are in are all different...’

We don't have all the answers, but we'd love to hear from you or just continue the conversation.  
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## Edition 3: Communicating through furlough and beyond

It is hard to believe that it is only in the last 10 weeks that businesses across the UK (and around the world) have been really wrapping their heads and arms around the organisational and financial crises caused by the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus.

The pace of change is genuinely astonishing. A number of CEOs have said that they've made a decade of change in that 10 weeks.

Amongst a raft of UK Government measures to support business announced on 20th March, the Chancellor's Job Retention Scheme (JRS) has been a buoyancy aid of stupendous proportions. According to recently published ONS statistics, over 20% of the UK workforce (about 8m people) may have taken furlough leave, representing an eye-watering estimated cost of £40bn+. The end date of this programme has been extended from 31st May to the end of June (so far...)

Now pages on-line and in newspapers have been written about the JRS itself, so we don't intend to go over that ground.

However, we have given some thought to the communications challenges inside organisations as the effects of furlough unfold, Many of these challenges are found in the context of remote working and lockdown, and how they are handled has real potential for shifting public sentiment.

Communications  
into furlough



Staying  
connected



Lockdown  
easing &  
the end of  
furlough



Of course, no two organisations nor the circumstances of individuals within them are identical, but the following are some of the things we've learned supporting clients, assimilating broad feedback from business leaders and partners, and from our own experiences.



## Communications into furlough

- Furlough discussions were generally framed within the context of developing an overall sense of understanding as organisations scrambled to create some order from the operational chaos.
- Employees seemed to understand the need to protect... 'we're all in this together'...'let's beat the pandemic'...even 'we want to trust in hierarchies to do the right thing'.
- With some sensible context setting and sensitive individual handling, the new process of communicating with people regarding furlough seems, in the circumstances, to have landed ok.
- Perhaps it was relief that it was not restructuring but rather a genuine attempt to protect the people and the organisation and buy-time and start to see a new horizon, post-lockdown.
- Of course, for individuals approached to furlough, there may have been a sense of why me, what does this mean for me, even concerns about a stigma being attached. And while the furlough may have happened, there can be no assumption that the underlying fear and uncertainty is gone.
- The sense of 'we're all in this together' even permeated those who were continuing to work. They have tended to be fully occupied taking on their own responsibilities and filling the gaps where others have left. In picking up the slack there has been no time to think.
- Add to that, those who continue to work have often had to deal with the immediate vagaries of remote working (MMS Edition 1 link) and concerns of their home/work environment, for some the challenge is coping with children in the house, for others it may be space, or access to the world outside.

Again, little time to think, lots of underlying pressure that may go unnoticed.

- We should not underestimate the challenges that face those remaining in the workforce as much as those adapting to the new world of furlough and we need to think about communications solutions accordingly.
- We often hear the phrase used that we are all 'in the same boat', but it's probably better to think of it as: 'we are all facing the same storm, but our boats will all be different'.





## Staying connected

- For many individuals (and their organisations), we wonder if the Easter break marked something of a transition from the initial phase of fear and uncertainty and a move towards a 'new routine' – establishing a strange pattern amongst ongoing instability? Maybe it's nothing to do with the long weekend and just the end of a (un) natural period of adjustment.
- And as such we need to be thinking about transitioning to new communications and engagement considerations.
- Inevitably all communications with teams occur in a societal context and it's interesting to see how the public discourse is already beginning to shift. Are we moving into a more 'constructively critical' transition as Sir Keir Starmer described it?
- Certainly, with the PM continuing to recover from his COVID-19 infection, the Government is feeling some heat on a range of subjects from death rates, testing regimes and PPE delivery to failures in care home settings, OBR economic impacts, concerns about the speed of business loans and calls for an exit strategy.
- Against this evolving backdrop, organisations are having to work harder than ever to keep their teams engaged.
- For those on furlough, talking about work is an absolute no-no. Yet, at the same time we want to keep people connected. That may be through social 'events', continued training and participation in webinars.
- And there may be a difference between those who are on a short-term furlough and those on more extended breaks from the organisation which have to be factored in.
- While many who have been on short-term furlough may be anxious to get back to work, for others a return to the 'workplace' can be fraught with its own uncertainties.
- Whenever a new government initiative goes live that involves payments, there is always a concern that it actually delivers the right money to the right places – in this instance ahead of the month end salary runs.
- For organisations, big and small, there may be a cashflow reliance on the JRS funds hitting at the right times and therefore scrutiny over roll-out will be intense – and organisations must be prepared for communicating the unexpected. We all know topics like delayed salaries are really difficult to communicate and manage, even in the best of times!



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## Staying connected

- For those continuing at the coalface, communicators need to be prepared for a mix of feelings and behaviours as they engage with stretched staff. We can envisage a strong sense of continuing to do the right thing and a bit of relief but that could easily be countered by a resentment of being left 'to get on with it', may be exacerbated by a pay cut and longer working hours.
- With all these variables, it is vital to retain carefully managed team communications, with a positive and transparent approach and above all tip-top listening. At these points of inflexion, we honestly believe it is as important to listen as much as you speak.
- After all we have two ears and one mouth for a reason!

And do beware the '**dip**'. We are firm believers that individually and collectively we will hit a significant downswing as we navigate this process of change.

For some this might be just a day when things aren't working quite right, for others it may be more significant.

Whatever the symptoms look out for that slump (which admittedly may be significantly more difficult to see in a remote work setting) and make sure you stay in touch with your teams.



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*We'll be covering 'working through the dip' in a separate edition of the Madano Mindset Series.*





## Looking ahead to the end of furlough and lockdown easing

- With the potential lockdown easing – perhaps the hardest phase of internal communications and engagement will be upon us all – as furloughs inevitably come to a conclusion and we strive to find a different way of working and being.
- And it's interesting that new realities do start to dawn quite quickly.

It was instructive how the Government moved on 17th April to extend the JRS for a month to the end of June 2020. This was a day before the technical countdown of 45 days for initiating redundancy consultation (for more than 100 people in an organisation) which would have loomed based on the programme ending on 31st May.

- So, while the extension has provided another welcome cushion for a further month, the challenge still remains as to what organisations will do at the end of June. Companies inevitably react to the next set of operational horizons as they see them. Will they have enough visibility to return to a 'new normal', or not and how do we communicate that transition?
- Amongst employees returning from remote working, will there be an overriding sense of safety first – with a complex mix of questions to answer – do I want to travel, do I want to be in my place of work, how safe do I feel, do I want to do this at all?
- Those who've continued to work through may be really jaded. They need holiday having taken no time off during the lockdown – how will organisations manage as they try to ramp up productivity?
- What will happen to those on furlough? How will they be brought back into the workplace?
- Will the JRS be extended again, either wholesale or attempting to further protect those industries hardest hit by 'social distancing' tools? If not, will we see a shift to restructuring as organisations scramble to right-size for the new environment. Of course, we don't yet know the answers to these questions and therefore don't fully know, how and what we'll be communicating.
- But as we head towards this gateway, we must all be cognisant of that fickle thing called public sentiment and how it can change ever so rapidly. It won't take much for the tide to turn and impatience rise.

Are we really all in this together? Will a core sense of inequality (that arguably fuelled much of the Brexit debate) may come back with a vengeance as tough decisions are made?

- Above all, as organisations reach this point will they be seen to do the right thing with their staff and other stakeholders?

**How senior management navigate these transitions may just be the start of the real reputational crises for organisations around the world. On that basis, maybe we've not seen anything yet?**

