

Expert: Leaders Need to Invest in Online Learning Content, Communication During a Crisis

corpmagazine.com/industry/technology/expert-leaders-need-to-invest-in-online-learning-content-communication-during-a-crisis

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April 16,
2020

In times of crisis, people need to learn new skills and coping mechanisms, especially when you are in a leadership position. And, right now, those new skills need to include online teaching for an audience that includes everyone from students to employees.

Cleary University's Provost and Interim President Emily Barnes and her staff are experts in establishing remote education and how to manage virtual classrooms. To that end, Cleary professors have been offering free training to any educator in how to navigate the world of online learning – and those same lessons can apply to business owners who are looking for advice on how to connect with home-based workers or even how to help their home-schooling kids.



Emily Barnes

Create consistency. One key element to effective online learning is creating a consistent approach, Barnes said. When Cleary establishes a new class, everything associated with that experience works in one unified way – in other words, everything looks the same, works the same and feels the same across classes.

“The majority of our students are trying to manage their time and accommodate learning during the week,” Barnes said. “With our model, they know what to expect, know where to find the items they need and they know the teacher’s expectations because it is consistent across the board.”

Pick your platform. For business leaders, that means using one platform or one method for online training or communication. If you use Zoom and everyone is used to that, don’t suddenly switch to another service and throw everyone off track. And if you want people to turn in assignments on Google Classroom, then everyone in your school should use Google Classroom.

When it comes to meetings, whether it is for a class or a business, people should feel like they’re together and connecting, Barnes said. So there shouldn’t be one person monologuing at the group or everyone staring at a single leader. There should be a fluid

approach to the communication where people feel like they're sitting in a room together, everyone has a voice and there are natural breaks within the lesson or meeting.

In other words, don't have just one person talking AT people, Barnes said. She once sat in on a remote meeting where one person was joining it remotely and everyone else was physically in the room. The "on the ground" folks sat facing the screen, making the remote participant feel singled out, which can create an uncomfortable experience. Rather than leave that person alone on an island, Barnes moved her chair in a way that made the remote participant feel like she was sitting next to them and seeing the same things. It changed the whole tone of the meeting, Barnes said.

Create a natural conversation. That moment when everyone feels equal and the mood is casual is where the relationship piece comes in, creating a kind of comfort, Barnes said. You don't want a teacher preaching at a distance – you want the mood to feel like everyone is on the same page and at the same level so communication occurs naturally and organically.

Create an engaging conversation. This is where Zoom and related platforms are better than sending emails or doing big conference calls. With these online programs, people can see one another, check out expressions as well as body language and hear each other's voices in context of an equal situation, Barnes said. Having voices, faces and video engagement is an effective way to create a connected learning environment.

This is also effective because the Zoom organizer or leader can stop occasionally, ask a question or suggest the listeners or participants write down a reaction. That keeps everyone listening and connected in a fluid way.

"You want to have (a world) that's engaging and where people are participating versus a 'talking head' approach," Barnes said. "You can even do that with recorded videos by integrating stopping points where students are encouraged to write things down or interact by printing something out or filling out a form while watching."

Invest in your tools. Finally, Barnes recommends investing in good communication tools, especially with Generation Z participants. They're used to the best of the best when it comes to videos and video production, Barnes said, so giving them a choppy video that you threw together just isn't going to cut it with this savvy crowd.

"They've got one of the most robust interactive media tools right in their pocket," via high-end smartphones "so they're looking for your content to match the world in their everyday lives," Barnes said. If the quality isn't there, they're likely to question your content or disengage.