

# FORTUNE

## The war in Israel is already an issue inside workplaces. Here's how leaders can talk about it with employees

BY [LILA MACLELLAN](#)

October 10, 2023 at 4:46 PM EDT

Amid a flood of horrific news and images of ongoing violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories, business leaders from Elon Musk to [Bill Ackman](#) have made public statements about the conflict.

They're part of a larger trend over the past few years, in which companies and managers have increasingly been asked to speak to the public and their employees about major events, from the end of [Roe v. Wade](#) to the [Supreme Court's decision to strike down affirmative action](#) at universities.

The latest conflict in the region is the [worst violence in many years](#), and people around the world are watching anxiously as the war unfolds. After Hamas [killed more than 1,000](#) and [took more than 150 people hostage](#), Israel has responded by drafting 300,000 military reservists, carrying out [airstrikes on Gaza](#), and announcing a “complete siege,” cutting off food, water, and electricity from the densely populated Palestinian territory.

Finding the right thing to say to workers can be challenging. It's easy for leaders to offend, alienate, [and demotivate](#) people if they get it wrong. On the other hand, remaining silent can also be read as insensitive and overly cautious.

*Fortune* spoke with communication experts to get advice for managers about how to address the war in the workplace.

**Do say something.** It's tempting to avoid any talk of violence in the Middle East, a complex topic about which people have strong feelings. But "it's imperative that you speak to your employees," wrote Richard Edelman, CEO of global communications firm Edelman Associates, in [a public statement](#) advising managers on how to respond. "Don't be silent."

**Keep it simple and focus on employee safety.** A communications specialist in the U.S. with experience at Fortune 50 companies advises focusing on messages about the safety of employees in the region, their families, and any employees who may have been traveling near the sites of the attacks. Let employees know that everyone is safe, if that is the case, or that the company is checking in on staff. If your company operates in the area affected by the conflict, let the staff know whether you're still doing business there. Otherwise, avoid making a statement about the larger geopolitical situation.

**Acknowledge suffering on all fronts.** "Be sure to acknowledge innocent lives lost and hardship on both sides," [Randall Peterson](#), a professor of organizational behavior at London Business School, told *Fortune* in an email. "Show humanity for those who are suffering and leave it there," he added.

**Allow employees to have flexible schedules.** Let employees who have close ties in the area work when it makes sense for them so they can make calls to friends and family in the region, says Peterson. "What most people need is an acknowledgement that something is happening, even if we cannot do anything about it."

**Remind workers of counseling resources.** Many companies offer free or subsidized mental health services to employees. In any communication, you can remind people that there are resources available to them if they're looking to speak with someone.

**Use email.** Avoid sending your message out through platforms where employees may respond (such as Slack or Workplace) and unwittingly or intentionally start a conversation that could stir tensions.

**Consider the long-term impact.** How you respond to this conflict will "play a material role in how employees view an organization's culture and core values," says [David Almeda](#), professor of practice at Boston University Questrom School of Business, in an email. "Get it right [and] employees will feel aligned with the organization's culture and values. Get it wrong [and] employees may distance themselves from the organization philosophically, reduce the amount of discretionary effort they put in, and, in some cases, may consider finding a place to work that more closely aligns with them as an individual."

**Stay nimble about the future.** As the situation changes over the next few days and weeks, workplace managers will have to get ahead of additional issues, said one expert. For example, employees may ask for extended time off

to deal with personal fallout from the conflict. Some may even request time off for military service overseas. Be ready for anything.