

ENSURING ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE AND HUMAN CONTINUITY THROUGH CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

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INFORMATION – THE LIFE-BLOOD DURING A CRISIS

Whether it's a family, government agency, or place of employment, most organizations could improve their plans for communicating during a crisis.

Comparing the workplace to a living system, the information which flows within departments might be considered the blood that keeps the system functioning. And just as a patient may need multiple transfusions after surgery, a company may need to repeat their communications efforts in order to be effective. In addition, accuracy is vital, as providing the wrong information during a crisis can be as damaging as carrying out a transfusion using the wrong blood type. In order for information to be of significant value to any system at times of crisis, it must have the following qualities:

- **CONSISTENCY:** Information must be consistent and accurate from source to source.
- **REDUNDANCY:** A variety of sources for accessing information should be available. Emails, website postings, "800" numbers to recorded messages, face-to-face information sessions, newsletters, and texting are viable methods.
- **FREQUENCY:** During crises information changes quickly. Therefore, it is important to update messages frequently.
- **CIRCULARITY:** Communication is a circular sharing of information. There must be a method of receiving

people's concerns and questions and responding back with reliable, consistent information.

- **CONTINUITY:** Oftentimes at the beginning of a crisis there is a flurry of information, which then drops off. As will be discussed in the next section, crises can tend to roll on for awhile, and people need different types of information from stage to stage. Maintaining communications continuity during all stages of a crisis is critical.

In addition, it is essential to communicate clearly and consistently with a wide range of stakeholders and to assume that it will find its way to the media. Stakeholders include employees, customers, government and community leaders, families of employees, insurance companies and lawyers.

Objectives of Workforce Continuity Communications

The challenges associated with achieving workforce continuity during an unplanned event are significant, and can include the following:

- **A DISPERSED WORKFORCE:** Employees may be located globally, traveling, or working remotely from home or elsewhere. This makes the task of delivering ongoing, timely, effective communications significantly more complex.
- **A NEED TO SUPPORT A SIGNIFICANTLY GREATER SCOPE:** There will likely be larger groups of people and a longer period of communications, which can last for months or even years in some cases.
- **THE VARIABILITY OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR:** It's difficult to determine how people will behave in crisis situations. The way one person responds to a disaster or a crisis is most likely very different from how your colleague will respond, making effective communications design a non-trivial challenge.

With these issues in mind, communications designed to overcome the barriers to workforce continuity should fulfill the following objectives:

- **INFORM AND EDUCATE (PRE-CRISIS):** A critical activity of workforce con-

tinuity communications actually occurs before the crisis. Informing and educating the employee base about programs, threats, expectations, accepted behaviors and actions will increase the likelihood that the intended response to an emergency will be achieved by making these situations at least a bit more familiar by way of repetition.

- **ACTIVATE AND INSTRUCT (INTRA-CRISIS):** At the time of the incident, communications are used to move employees into action, whether activating teams to manage the crisis or instructing employees to take specific action.

Account and adjust (post-crisis): Post-event communications focus on accounting for losses and lets employees and others know you are operating under normal business conditions, providing updates as normal business activities resume.

Finally, there are many notable reasons why workforce continuity communications is critical to organizational resiliency. Here are a few:

- Decreases downtime and helps mitigate loss of worker productivity
- Helps gather information on employee whereabouts and work availability
- Provides useful information during an incident, such as HR policies, employee assistance programs, and public sector updates
- Helps to allay fears and avoid the rumor mill internally and externally
- Assists in deployment determinations for available resources to keep key business functions running

Workforce Continuity Communications: Best Practices

How can organizations begin to optimize their critical communications toward the human side of BC? The following sections highlight some steps to help protect, connect and account for your people in an unplanned event.

Best Practice 1: Develop a Solid BC Communications Plan

A solid, well-publicized crisis communications plan will help keep people calm informed and connected. This can help mitigate loss during a crisis. In

addition, clear policies and protocols make it easier for people to know what to do over the course of an unplanned event. A well-defined communications plan will cover:

- Who needs notification? Who decides notification is required? Who will be the spokesperson?
- What needs to be communicated? What do you want people to do? What are the triggers?
- When do you start calling? When do you stop? When do you update?
- How will you inform your people?

Best Practice 2: Message Management

During an emergency, people may be confused and distracted. Precisely what you say and how you deliver your message is critical to ensure clarity during an emergency. Recommendations in these areas include:

- Provide regular update and status information.
- Avoid over-communicating – it dilutes important information.

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- Send time-critical messages by phone.
- Send follow up messages or non-critical status messages via e-mail.
- Reference other available device channels in all communications to ensure employees have these in mind during a very stressful time.
- Pay specific attention to tone of voice and pace. The simple sound of a known voice speaking calmly and deliberately can reduce uncertainty and stress.
- Engage the executive team for collaboration and decision-making. It is important to involve them in test exercises and run-throughs to ensure that they are familiar with the plan, and are clear about its objectives and their role.

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Best Practice 3: Testing – and Testing Again!

Consistent, regular testing is essential to the success of any communications plan, regardless of design. During testing, you will test the plan itself, the physical infrastructure, as well as familiarize employees and other potential (external) notification recipients.

When you test, it's important to simulate real conditions. It's critical to find a balance between having people accustomed to the system and having them ignore it because it's so routine. For this reason, raising awareness of what a test vs. an actual event sounds and looks like is key. Finally, it's extremely valuable to create venues for participant feedback. By giving participants input into the actual deployment, it invests them and makes them more committed to the plan's overall success.

Some testing steps include the following:

- **INTERNALLY MARKET THE COMMUNICATIONS CAPABILITY:** Make employees and other stakeholders thoroughly aware that a communications system exists, how to access it, how it's used, etc.
- **MEASURE RESULTS:** How many people got the message? How many people responded? How many messages bounced due to bad contact information? What percentage of people were ultimately reached?
- **TEST EXPECTED AND UNEXPECTED SCENARIOS:** Set up and test scenarios for weather incidents, IT/network outages, transit strikes, pandemic flu, power outages, etc.
- **TEST ACTIVATION METHODS:** Ensure that the activation of the crisis communications system works every time. Ensure that there are multiple methods of activation (via Web, phone, PDA, etc.), and that there are a number of designated people responsible for activating it.
- **CONFIRM DATA ACCURACY:** Regularly ensure that contact data is up to date and valid by enabling self service updates for employees, regularly researching bounced messages and obtaining new information for those contacts, ensuring that your communications system

Advantages of Automated Critical Communications

Employees who have identified themselves by accessing an automated inbound system can later be contacted to help co-workers who live nearby.

Members of response teams can be directed to begin, refocus or suspend their efforts based on the data received from the field via automated inbound communications.

Organizations can upload maps to a Web-based inbound service to provide evacuation plans or directions to new employee work sites.

Employees can call in to update their contact for more accurate outbound messaging.

Organizations can contact authorities and mobilize appropriate resources for employees who need help.

Employees can call in for corporate network status information. If the network is down, the company can let employees know when it is restored so that they can resume their responsibilities.

is fed by an up to date system (e.g. a HR information system).

- **SOLICIT FEEDBACK:** Incorporate feedback from recipients into your BC plan.

Best Practice 4: Leverage Technology to Enable Human-Continuity Communications
Using an automated communications system, management can stay abreast of a developing situation in real time, perhaps automatically bridging key executives into a conference call for live real-time collaboration and decision making. The fast, flexible decision-making this system enables can prove invaluable during the fluid, shifting nature of most emergency situations.

Additionally, interactive capabilities make it possible to create an audit trail of their decisions, e.g. "press one to confirm that this message should be sent to all employees". This will require that executives are included in the training and testing of the service, and perhaps more importantly, are bought into the communications plan.

Automated communications associated with workforce continuity planning must blend both inbound and outbound communications capabilities to link the organization together. Blending ensures more resilient business communications

by providing a "social" infrastructure that offers a soft landing in hard times. This blended form of communications is particularly critical during a large scale event. During these events, it's imperative to close the loop – to obtain reports back from outlying staff and other stakeholders, as well as provide information back to those individuals.

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