

ADDRESSING THE PEOPLE SIDE OF CRISIS PLANNING AND RESPONSE

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ABSTRACT

Expectations are high that organizations will not only take reasonable measure to prevent catastrophic incidents, but will also be prepared to respond to them effectively—including attending to their emotional impacts on people. Thus, disaster planning must not only deal with physical issues but also include structured protocols for addressing the “people side” of crisis events. Attention to the people side will accelerate employees’ return to pre-incident productivity. It can also have profound long-term positive impact on affected organizations and their constituencies in terms of reputation, resumption of normal activity, and restoration of morale and shareholder value.

Disaster plans should include the establishment of Humanitarian Response Teams, as distinct units within organizational crisis response structures, to focus specifically on the people-side impacts. Their duties might include such issues as, ongoing communications to and from impacted constituents, palliative care to those in need, assistance for families of seriously or fatally injured persons, support for employees involved in recovery and business continuity efforts, facilitating return to work, etc.

The presentation will provide an introduction to the human-side of crisis management, sketching the structural essentials for Humanitarian Response Teams, such as, who should comprise them and how they should be trained, and their operational parameters in actual disaster-response situations. In connection with the latter, a brief overview of the evolving controversy over the standard practice of “debriefing,” and the alternative resiliency-based model of post-crisis support, will be presented. Attendees will leave the session equipped to critique their own disaster planning for its attention to the essentials of humanitarian response.

DISCUSSION

Ultimately, crisis management is all about people. Whether the crisis is within your IT department, throughout a neighboring community, or spread worldwide through the media, the bottom line of crisis management is to effectively manage the reactions of people. In spite of the severity or tragedy of the crisis, the reactions of people can bring about negative consequences or positive outcomes for your organization.

Empirical and independent studies of organizations served by Atlanta-based Crisis Management International (CMI) following both Hurricane Andrew and the Oklahoma City bombing showed that effective and compassionate management of impacted people significantly raised the morale and loyalty of employees beyond pre-crisis levels. In 1989, a delivery truck from a popular bever-

age company hit a school bus and killed 23 children on their way to school. Following a comprehensive response to a traumatized and grief stricken community, sales increased beyond pre-incident levels in the surrounding community. There are literally hundreds of cases in history that similarly demonstrate that attending effectively to the human side of crisis pays dividends in both reputational and financial respects.

Conversely, catastrophic workplace incidents not handled effectively will impact people in ways that can have lasting negative consequences. We won't point fingers at ill-prepared companies who have responded poorly in the past to the people-side of crisis. Instead, we can identify what causes outrage and blame, which invariably increases the severity and damage of any crisis. Impacted people will respond negatively if they believe the company does not care about them. Additionally, the anatomy of blame includes the belief that the company in crisis did something unjust, intentional, or foreseeable that caused harm. Any of these beliefs directed toward your organization by impacted constituents will likely cause your crisis to escalate in severity and duration. The key is to be prepared for the human side of crisis.

In a major multi-company debriefing of lessons learned in NYC following 9/11, the conclusion was that companies were most unprepared for the people side of crisis response. Effective response requires an understanding of what people need from management, and how to provide it.

WHERE DO YOU START?

Start with what you know. Take a hard look at crises and near misses within your company, as well as within your industry and various locales. What crises, both large and small, have affected your business (and others) over the past ten years? History is a solid predictor of the future. Certain risks can affect any company—the sudden death of a valuable employee, natural disaster, workplace violence, and of course, terrorism. Others are unique to your industry and business.

After considering what could happen, have a multidisciplinary team of internal and external experts consider the myriad groups of people who might be impacted by each foreseeable crisis that could affect your organization. Imagine yourself in their positions. What would be your concerns, issues, questions and needs if you were in their shoes?

Then consider what is needed to address these people-related complexities and issues. Again, start with what you know. What plans and controls already exist? Are you adequately prepared to address the needs of impacted people, from employees and families, to community members and shareholders? Who on your crisis management team would specialize in helping impacted people,

without being distracted by other responsibilities, like addressing the media and or protecting the incident site for investigation?

The trend in a growing number of crisis-prepared companies is to establish corporate and site-level Humanitarian Response Teams (HRT) to address the myriad people-related complexities that invariably accompany critical and traumatic workplace incidents? Certainly, this team would need policies that cover levels of authority and responsibility. For example, while institutional investors may have fears and concerns related to a crisis, it would be inappropriate for the Humanitarian Response Team to address these concerns directly. But, the HRT could be invaluable to the CEO in anticipating and addressing the emotional and attitudinal reactions of institutional investors, shareholders and customers.

THE POWER OF QUESTIONS

During the planning process, anticipate and question how possible reactions of people can increase the severity of each foreseeable risk your company faces. Ask yourselves, “How can the reactions of various impacted constituents cause our crisis to escalate in severity?” Also, an effective way to discover what needs your attention and what needs improvement in your organization is to play “what if”.

For example, a large division of an oil company may have a number of employees who regularly work in South America. A kidnap and ransom crisis is a very real threat. In the “what if” game you begin to brainstorm the reactions of different constituents. Let’s take a look at how this might play out.

Constituent	Questions / Concerns
<i>Kidnapped Employee</i> What if I am kidnapped?	What is the best way for me to survive? What should I do? What should I not do?
<i>Employee’s Family</i> What if our loved one is kidnapped?	We want accurate, timely information. We want to know the company is doing everything in its power to safeguard our loved one.
<i>The Company</i> What if employees are kidnapped?	We don’t want the family to go to the media. We don’t want the family to fly to South America. We don’t want anything to happen that might drive up the ransom demands or compromise our employee’s safety.
<i>The Kidnappers</i> What if we were to kidnap employees?	We want to get the ransom as quickly as possible. What company and location is the best target?
<i>Other Oil Companies</i> What if additional kidnappings occur?	Why were we not targeted? Could we be next? What precautions should we take?
<i>The Media</i> What if there are facts behind the scenes that could make this a bigger story?	We want the facts and we want them now. We want to talk with witnesses, families and hostages, when released.

Anticipating and addressing the human side of crisis certainly applies to your own employees. Kerr-McGee Corporation, the global oil, gas and chemical company, was widely and publicly recognized for outstanding crisis response and recovery follow-

ing the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building. Like so many organizations in Oklahoma City, Kerr-McGee had multiple windows blown out of their building and hundreds of employees deeply impacted.

In addition to rapid repair of their building, the people side of crisis was of primary importance. As the most severe terrorist act in America at that time, the crisis had deeply affected the entire workforce. Kerr-McGee management quickly implemented a Humanitarian Assistance Program to address the people-related needs of their workers and their families. Community service, communications, psychological support, briefing meetings, and highly visible senior management contact was adeptly orchestrated to quickly demonstrate the caring and compassionate concern of management toward their people and the Oklahoma City community.

As learned by so many companies following 9/11, a structured and sophisticated approach to the human side of crisis is a common weakness in crisis preparedness and planning. Following traumatic incidents, the “walking wounded” are experiencing varying degrees of traumatic stress, sleeplessness, concentration difficulties, grief, blame, outrage and sinking morale that can disrupt a workforce. Beyond employees reactions, a Humanitarian Response Program can be expanded to address the concerns, questions and issue of “key relationships,” e.g., institutional investors, customers, business partners, etc. Ultimately, crisis response is about addressing the needs and concerns of people. What’s needed, as Kerr-McGee successfully demonstrated, is a well-developed crisis management system that has people issues at the foundation of their response efforts.

WHAT DO EMPLOYEES NEED?

What do employees need—beyond basic survival—following a workplace disaster? They need:

- Contact by management (high visibility);
- Assurance of safety and organizational stability;
- Accurate and timely information;
- A way to express their concerns (to feel heard and understood)
- Ongoing support until recovery and control can be attained; and
- A return to productivity as soon as appropriately possible.

Other constituents, like family members, institutional investors, customers, suppliers and distributors, also have variations on these same needs.

There are right ways and wrong ways to provide for these needs. Prepared organizations will establish in advance, a Humanitarian Response Program, which is equipped and poised to address specifically, and only, the myriad human reactions of all impacted constituents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the aftermath of a significant and distressing crisis, human complexities must be prepared for and managed. Typical approaches to crisis preparedness and response have tended to concentrate on the urgent, tangible challenges: putting out the fires, literally or figuratively; getting emergency medical care quickly to the wounded; securing sites and ensuring that there is not a cascade of related incidents; handling the media; and so on. With multiple distractions that demand attention, it is easy for corporate managers to inadvertently only skim the surface of the human-side needs. Often important employee-related responsibilities are inappropriately relinquishing to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). But a well-developed crisis management

system takes into account the people issues that follow horrific incidents. You must be prepared to effectively address the myriad and disruptive people complexities that need full management attention. This can be accomplished by through a dedicated Humanitarian Response Program and team.

A multi-disciplinary Humanitarian Response Team is most effective. Representatives from line management, human resources, medical, security, legal, communications, and other appropriate disciplines may be included. An experienced external crisis psychologist can bring additional value and input to the team. The HRT should be well prepared with clear guidelines and areas of responsibility for its members. The HRT should be integrated with the company's broader crisis management team with a liaison serving as intermediary.

Since response to employees will be a key constituent of the Humanitarian Response Team, let's look at some of the responsibilities as they related to an impacted workforce in the aftermath of a crisis.

IN THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH ...

1. *Gather employees into a secured area.*

There may still be dangerous conditions elsewhere at your location, which could risk workers safety. A crime scene must not be contaminated by the presence of employees. Accountability is an immediate concern in traumatic incidents and can best be achieved when employees muster together. Media representatives and overly eager plaintiff attorneys may approach employees if they are not protected from outsiders. And finally, you can communicate with your work force and address their needs. Assessing the well being of employees is another advantage of gathering employees into a secured area. Having everyone in one place, when possible, makes those functions possible.

2. *Enlist co-workers to stay with those who are especially distressed.*

Your management team members will not likely be able to closely monitor everyone who is distressed by what happened. Asking co-workers to "buddy-up" is a solution with several advantages. The very distressed are not left alone and unattended; the less distressed feel involved and useful, and if the distressed person needs management assistance, the "buddy" can let you know.

3. *Don't let employees leave until released by management.*

Arrange a gatekeeper for assessment. Make contact with everyone to make sure that all injuries are identified. Some may be too distressed to drive safely. Arrange transportation, as needed. Find out where people will be in the next 24 hours and gather contact information, in case communications need to go out before they return to work.

4. *Hold an Employee De-escalation Meeting before your employees go home.*

De-escalation meetings are typically short in duration, but address the following important issues. This is your opportunity to acknowledge the shock and disbelief in a caring manner. It is the time to quickly reconstruct the facts of the incident, to minimize misunderstandings and rumors. Remind employees that it is best not to talk to encroaching reporters, which could cause unsuspecting harm to the organization and their own reputations. Then, open the floor for any questions or concerns employees may have. Also, announce that you will hold an Employee Briefing Meeting with up-to-date information when people return to work—hopefully the next day. Their extreme need for timely and accurate information will bring them back to work.

5. *Make contact with family members.*

We have learned from the commercial airline industry that a trained team of "Family Representatives" can be very effective in addressing families of seriously or fatally injured people. Family reps consist of teams of your employees who volunteer to be trained for the important job of making contact with families in high distress due to an organizational traumatic incident. Their primary job is to serve as a conduit of communication between the management and the impacted families. Additionally, family reps facilitate the show of "corporate caring" by assisting with palliative and practical needs of family members. This is a very specific area of responsibility—requiring enormous clarity of purpose, compassion and tact—and just as the airline industry has done, family reps should be trained in advance to make contact with family members of casualties, whether at the hospitals, homes, airport or other appropriate locations.

IN THE ENSUING DAYS ...

1. *Hold an Employee Briefing Meeting when workers return to work.*

These meetings are conducted by management for employees when the first return to work following the crisis event. They can be held in large forums or repeated small group sessions. Openly review the facts of the incident as they are now pieced together and understood. Explain what measures management has taken to deal with the situation. Tell people what to expect in the near term, and on what timetable. Answer questions, hear concerns, and address rumors openly.

2. *Provide group and individual sessions to address employee resiliency and recovery.*

It is helpful to offer people the resources they may need to recover emotionally from the shock of the incident they experienced. For many years, it has been a standard practice to provide Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) sessions, in which they recounted what they experienced. Mounting worldwide research now indicates that, while well intentioned and often well received, traditional group debriefings can in some cases exacerbate the distress people are feeling. Some research indicates diagnoses of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder are more likely—while there is no objective evidence that debriefing actually accelerates people's recovery processes.

Many EAPs and mental health practitioners are still ignoring these risks, and are using the potentially harmful CISD approach. New resiliency-based models are emerging that provide assistance for employees on-site following traumatic incidents, which are similar in appearance to the traditional group debriefings. They have gained widespread acceptance in the crisis psychology arena, which is in the process of transitioning away from the CISD approach. Training is presently being provided to crisis mental health professionals worldwide. Make certain that any crisis mental health professionals who provide post-crisis services for your organization are certified in evidence-based resiliency methods for corporate crisis response.

3. *Provide timely follow up to assure employee recovery*

Research indicates that it is important to provide a reliable and valid assessment of employee well being approximately two to four weeks post incident. There is no method to assess which of your employees will have difficulties coping or are at risk of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder until a few weeks after the incident. The assessment can easily and quickly be delivered via email or other non-intrusive method. Additionally, it is important to have

only skilled crisis-management professionals provide follow-up assistance to employees who show difficulties in recovery.

No one likes to contemplate the effects a catastrophic incident might have on people, especially those that your know and care about. But there is no question that good planning can minimize the damage to people—and that a broad awareness of the impact crises have on people must be central to that planning. By ensuring that the needs of people impacted by your crisis are addressed effectively and quickly, you are efficiently managing your organization's most important core asset (it's people and key relationships). The human-side of crisis cannot be over looked during crisis preparedness, response and recovery.

Further expanding the necessity of crisis preparedness to overall corporate worth, Oxford University and the Sedgewick Group released a study analyzing the impact of catastrophes on shareholder value. They found that the companies that responded well to crises experience recovery, while those companies that did not respond effectively experienced further decline. There was a 22% difference in stock price for the recoverers vs. the non-recoverers.

As the Oxford study states, "Although all catastrophes have an initial negative impact...paradoxically they offer an opportunity to management to demonstrate their talent in dealing with difficult circumstances."

CONCLUSIONS

The fact is that there are myriad incidents that could greatly affect people important to your organization. How you deal with them

can be the key to your post-crisis reputation, financial impact and business recovery. Take all types of crises into account when you are reviewing or creating your Humanitarian Response Plan. The old mantra of "it can't happen here" has been solidly replaced with "it can happen anywhere, anytime . . . and to our people." Once you understand and accept that, the humanitarian side of your crisis preparedness can begin.

BIOGRAPHY

Bruce T. Blythe, is CEO of Crisis Management International, an Atlanta based firm. Blythe has worked with hundreds of companies dealing with the people side of crisis planning, response and recovery. His most recent book is: *Blindsided: A Manager's Guide to Catastrophic Incidents in the Workplace*.

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