



A Practical Guide to Emergency Communication

By Karen Garavatti

It is a time-honored adage that CEOs repeat: “People are our greatest asset.” But it is more than folk wisdom. Research has shown a link between superior human capital management practices and superior shareholder returns. As important, it is estimated that the value of intangible assets in the U.S. economy in the year 2012 was \$14.5 trillion. Chief among those intangibles: human capital. Along with the intellectual and knowledge property they create, human capital has become the most important intangible asset that a corporation can possess. Yet the great paradox is how little time is spent on human capital issues in corporate boardrooms.

Information and technology are transforming the world of work, giving rise to both challenges and opportunities. From an abundance of social media platforms to customer surveys populating nearly every website we visit, the average individual has never had so much power to make changes in society. Technology is enabling a virtual and flexible workforce where work can be done in distant places and time zones. At the same time, security, cyberattacks, data breaches and other enterprise risks are everywhere. Thus, we are seeing a significant shift even in well-established enterprises that have been operating for decades. These innovative startups are finding niches that exploit or protect companies, data and employees.

HR leaders are at the center of this storm. In addition to creating and managing a completely new talent ecosystem, HR must be ever vigilant in protecting people. A quick read of the newspaper on any given day illustrates how challenging this has become. We are constantly bombarded with stories ranging

from workplace violence to natural disasters. Such incidents not only threaten individual lives, but also the security of the company through business interruption, regulatory fines and litigation.

Communication: The Essential Tool for Leading Through Crisis

Information is the life blood of an organization, this is especially true in a crisis situation. Whether it's a need to evacuate, shelter in place or take any other action, the easier it is to deliver actionable information to personnel the better they can be protected. This makes a strategy crisis communication plan a must-have for any organization.

When that crisis strikes, however, it can be a challenge to reach even the most essential personnel. A recent survey revealed that on average an enterprise requires 16 key employees to enact an emergency response plan, and reaching even 80 percent of those individuals requires between one and two hours. When an emergency requires the immediate alerting of dozens or hundreds of employees, time becomes a critical challenge. Employees may be in the office, working remotely, or in conference rooms. Thus, while there are more ways than ever for us to communicate with one another as the Internet of Things expands, it has become more difficult to actually reach someone quickly with the assurance that they will receive the information.

This is the reason a strategic crisis communication plan is so important. HR must partner with leaders throughout the firm to develop, refresh and execute a crisis plan as circumstances dictate. Scenario building will insure the plan is ready to respond to a variety of situations that require fast communication and action.

Making the Case for Strategic Crisis Planning

If you look at your organization's to-do list, you'll probably see line items such as "increase profits" and "raise customer satisfaction." It's unlikely to include an item such as "deploy a new emergency communication system" or "spend money to improve safety for an emergency that may never happen." It may be difficult to make the case to develop, upgrade, or fine tune a communication plan. Spending money on something that operates behind the scenes, and indeed may never be used, is always unpopular with shareholders.

HR needs to use metrics and analytics to make the case for improving the organization's emergency communication capabilities. If you have a system in place, chances are it consists of several distinct tools that each require time to engage them and send out notifications. The longer it takes to inform employees about an emergency situation, the longer it takes to resolve the situation. In addition to the actual salary waste of paying employees for time they aren't working during an emergency, the network outages that can result from emergencies (and employees unable to resolve the issue) average \$5,600 per minute for enterprises (Lerner, 2014).

New technologies are emerging that can leverage existing systems and processes. Networked crisis communication systems are available today that take advantage of existing hardware, tying them together rather than requiring the installa-

tion of all new hardware. Finally, such a wide-reaching tool has uses beyond emergencies, helping management contact all employees any time immediate action is required.

As you plan your emergency communication strategy, consider the following four steps. If you already have a plan, use elements of each step as a best practice checklist.

Four Steps to an Effective Crisis Communication Planning

Step 1: Form a Team

With management buy-in secured, the first step to improved crisis communications is developing a plan. As the needs of the entire company must be represented, a cross-functional team is ideal. With a designated HR staff member acting as team leader, build the team as follows:

A representative of the legal or compliance department should be included. This helps ensure that all activities meet legal and regulatory requirements to protect employees as well as the company.

Include a security officer from the IT department. An emergency communication system that works with personal and corporate data requires a high degree of security.

Organizations with Successful Crisis Communication Plans

UCLA

As a major university, UCLA has a large number of students and staff members to keep safe during an emergency. The university implemented an alerting system called Bruin Alert that allows them to send out alerts via email, text message, social media, radio, cable TV, sirens and desktop computer pop-ups. The Bruin Alert system proved useful when a water main broke near campus, spilling 20 million gallons of water that damaged campus property and put people in harm's way. The university quickly used its alerting system to send out alerts to more than 60,000 people and warn them away from the affected area, keeping them safe.

Microsoft Japan

The Tohoku earthquake and resulting tsunami devastated large areas of Japan and left many businesses in a state of chaos. One organization that was well prepared to maintain contact with its employees during the crisis was Microsoft. When its 3,500 employees in the country were unsure whether to come to work and what routes were safe, Microsoft HR used its mass notification system for two-way communications to distribute updates. Each employee received the information necessary for his or her situation throughout the cleanup and recovery, promoting safety and preserving productivity.

One or more emergency planning coordinators should participate in the group, in order to carry out specific planning and coordination efforts on an ongoing basis.

The team leader should also consider including members of different corporate divisions or departments to voice concerns and provide feedback during the planning stages, potentially saving time revising the plan later.

Step 2: Evaluate Your Current Capabilities and Risks

With the team in place, your first objective should be to evaluate where you currently stand with regard to crisis communication. Ask yourself questions like these.

If we had an emergency right now, what tools do we have in place to alert all our employees? This is at the core of your crisis communication strategy. Consider all the tools at your disposal from emails to texting to PA systems. You may even have sirens, digital signage and radio capabilities. Each of these should be considered an asset.

Can people respond to emergency communications with additional information that can help resolve the emergency? Being able to send messages to your employees is one thing. But if you are unsure they are receiving those messages, your efforts may be in vain. If they can give you additional information about their circumstances, that aids the decision-making process.

Do we have the ability to physically locate all of our employees to ensure they are safe? If your building needs to be evacuated, or if you have legal accountability requirements, you should have a way to keep track of the physical location of your employees.

How easy is it for us to contact other organizations such as emergency services? Dialing 911 is easy enough. But if you have an emergency like a fire, can you contact neighboring organizations to warn them? In the event of an emergency like a hazardous materials spill, can you contact the local government and media to get the word out to citizens?

With answers to these questions, you are prepared to gauge your current risks. Each business has unique risks and emergencies that are more likely to happen based on their physical location, type of business, and history. Begin by reviewing any records of past emergencies your business has faced, and list ways improved communication might have helped resolve the situation more easily.

Then, consider other crises you might face. For example, you may live in an area prone to earthquakes or hurricanes. Or you may process hazardous chemicals, or your employees may regularly use heavy equipment. Consult with representatives in different areas of your business to get an idea of what hazards your employees face.

Step 3: Determine Your End Goal

Now that you have an idea of where you currently stand regarding potential emergencies, as well as your ability to communicate with employees during a crisis, it's time to set some goals. Each company will have a different mix of results they hope to achieve from its crisis communication system, but here are some potential goals to consider.

Be able to reach 90 percent of employees within 10 minutes.

This is an excellent goal for the initial implementation of a crisis communication system. Once the system is in place, it can be refined to overcome technical hurdles and approach 100 percent.

Create a central authority for alerting activities. In the midst of a crisis, competing voices can cause dangerous confusion for employees. Establish a single authoritative voice that employees know to trust for information and instruction in an emergency.

Use as many alerting systems as possible. If you already have systems in place designed to communicate with employees in an emergency, the quickest and most cost-effective path to deployment is to keep those systems intact and instead focus on bringing them together through centralized control. This should include text, voice and visual alerting channels that are already in place.

Ensure that employees can talk back. The people making decisions aren't necessarily the ones with the most knowledge about the situation. Enable employees at the location of the emergency to provide additional insight into the situation for a more complete picture.

Collaborate with other organizations. Create a cooperative network between your company and other organizations in the community. Utilize technology to maintain the security of your contact information while being able to share information in an emergency.

Step 4: Put the Pieces Together

Once the plan is in place, you should evaluate several solution providers to determine the best fit for your company. Work with their sales and support team to install and test the system and ensure that it will meet your needs. Just as important, however, is training staff members and operators to familiarize them with the use of the system. Arrange drills quarterly or monthly to ensure the system is fully functional before it is needed during an actual crisis.

Keys to Success

It is often said that the planning process is more valuable than the plan. It is critical to engage leaders and employees in anticipating potential threats and emergencies and planning appropriate responses. When an actual crisis occurs, the plan will invariably be modified to fit the exact circumstance—but the fact that stakeholders have developed processes beforehand will increase the chances of successful outcomes.

Crisis planning is an ongoing, dynamic dialogue within an organization that creates a culture of collaboration and anticipation. Indeed, the process is as important as the plan. ■■

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