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People matter

Liz Guthridge

Liz.Guthridge@connectconsultinggroup.com

How to include employees—the most overlooked audience—in disaster planning and response

"The United States has one of the best *emergency response* systems in the world. However, we have a very poor *crisis anticipation* system," says Ian Mitroff, considered the father of modern crisis management.

Both systems share a similar shortcoming—they often forget about the human dimension, especially employees. Just look at the disaster continuity and recovery plans of most organizations, including government agencies.

Employees are generally an afterthought. Plans emphasize data recovery, logistical issues, property protection, environmental safeguards, public safety, community outreach and on and on.

Consider the Sago mine tragedy in which 12 miners lost their lives last January. This past August—seven months after the crisis—a miner who had been monitoring carbon monoxide alarms on the day of the blast committed suicide, according to news reports. Three weeks later in September, another worker, who was maintaining the mine's water pumps on January 2, shot himself. These two suicides tragically show the toll disasters can take on survivors even months after the incident.

Employees are responsible for running their organizations, including serving the public. Employees and their families deserve more attention and care, regardless of whether they are directly involved in the crisis or on the sidelines.

For our book, *Leading People Through Disasters, An Action Guide for Dealing with the Human Side of Crises*, my co-author Kathryn McKee and I examined organizations' actions (or lack thereof) around employees. The five most common mistakes are:

1. **Not doing much planning, especially for employees.** (As an aside, government agencies are much better at planning than many private sector companies, although governments don't always develop contingent HR and communication policies in advance.)
2. **Doing conventional planning, not considering the extreme or absurd.** Just think of Hurricane Katrina last year—the breached levees created more damage than the hurricane's winds and rain in New Orleans.
3. **Underestimating the emotional impact on everyone.** Employees, especially those at "ground zero," may want to serve their publics first, and put aside the needs of themselves and their families. They may not realize the wear and tear they're experiencing.
4. **Communicating more externally than internally.** For example, of the 20 lessons learned from the Sago mine tragedy, which were featured in the September issue of *The Government Communicators Insider*, only two were people-oriented—focused on the victims' families. No lessons related to employees who worked in the mines or government. (Please note the point of this observation is to call out a common occurrence, not to diminish the value of the 20 lessons.)
5. **Moving on quickly, assuming everyone has recovered.** The speed at which people restabilize and resume their lives varies dramatically depending on their proximity to the disaster, their degree of involvement, their self-awareness and self-control, prior experiences with disasters, and many other factors.

So what are communication actions can you take to avoid these mistakes? Follow these three steps.

1. **Partner with your human resources professionals both in planning and disaster response.** Make sure your business continuity plans cover employees. And when a disaster happens, work closely with HR to keep employees informed and involved.
2. **Regularly remind employees to make personal plans for themselves and their families.** Be sure people know about www.ready.gov and all the other helpful resources available for personal planning. Employees need to take an active role too.
3. **Encourage use of EAPs (Employee Assistance Plans) and other behavioral health services.** Research keeps showing the positive value of EAP screening and services, especially within hours of an incident. Be an advocate for these services.

By taking care of employees, you can ensure you and they are serving your publics well.