

# HOW TO ADD 'PEOPLE' TO YOUR CRISIS PLAN

Crisis documents have lined the shelves of many organizations for decades. Then why, when a crisis occurs, do crisis plans so often look like best-laid plans. Because they don't take employees into account.



By **Liz Guthridge**

**T**he Sago Mining Disaster. Hurricane Katrina. Enron. All crises—natural and manmade—share a common trait.

They touch people, often hurting them and their families, physically and emotionally, and sometimes killing them.

Yet, most crisis communication and business continuity plans focus on dimensions other than the human element. Corporate leaders tend to concentrate on the physical, financial and operational hazards. Humans are the missing link in these plans, which is ironic considering people make organizations run.

Since crisis is inevitable, it's time to add people to your plans. If your organization expects to maintain its performance and reputation, it runs a great risk if it considers its people only after a disaster strikes.

Because each person reacts uniquely to a disaster, you can't predict which employees will be physically and emotionally ready to return to work after a crisis and perform their job duties. And in an extreme case in which you've done little to no planning, you won't even know who's survived or even in the vicinity to return to work, especially if you don't have a way to find them.

How do you prepare for and >

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deal with the human side of crises, particularly if you want to avoid all the problems Charles Pizzo described in his article, “Would You Have Been Ready for Katrina?” (*JECM*, March/April 2006)?

## Adopt a new mindset

First, change your mindset in three ways:

- Consider yourself to be in the *people* profession as well as the communications profession. If you take care of people first, your actions also will support the business.

- **Lead**, don't follow. You need to be a leader both in preparing for disasters, and dealing with them when they happen. And if you get push-back in planning, deal with it, too. (See “Dealing with Pushback.”)

- Recognize you're **adding value** to your organization by preparing. Even if a disaster doesn't happen on your watch, your planning can expose a number of vulnerabilities that if addressed, will strengthen your organization.

## Take these five actions

These five actions will help employees recover and return to work faster. And the business will be able to control absenteeism rates, workers' compensation claims, and insurance claims, and experience fewer employee relations problems.

**1 Plan.** Don't deny the value of planning. As you're planning, make distinctions between the types of disasters you may face. While disasters share some similar traits, there are differences.

Disasters caused by Mother Nature are not as predictable, although if you live in a hurricane

or earthquake zone they should be on your radar screen. As a rule of thumb, acts of nature can cut a wide and deep swath across society with more devastating and longer-lasting effects than a company-specific problem such as a plant explosion or building fire.

The bird flu pandemic could have similar adverse effects as nature. You should consider to what extent you can keep your business running with a reduced staff. How many of your workers have young children who may be susceptible to the disease? Are you able to have people telecommute? What happens if a large percentage of your executives or call center employees couldn't work for a period of time? What if you can't get needed supplies because of transportation or other breakdowns? Do you have a process for identifying employees who become ill?

As for human-caused problems, such as company scandals, safety violations or product tampering, there probably were early warning signals. To what extent were you and others in the organization aware of them? Consider this as you plan.

### 2 Collaborate as you plan.

Partner with Human Resources, Safety/Security, Operations and others responsible for planning. Work closely, not just developing the plans, but also testing their vulnerabilities. There is no room for silo thinking or acting in disaster preparedness and response.

### 3 Participate beyond your traditional role.

Besides collaborating, add value in more ways. For example, work with the planning team to integrate communication plans for internal and external audiences with the overall plan in a seamless

manner. Also help the team develop (or at least vet) contingency HR policies that will become operational when a disaster strikes.

As for contingency HR policies, consider your demographics, culture and values. Do you want to encourage employees to open up their homes to other employees? Or do you want to have a block of hotel rooms available in key markets? How long do you pay people if they can't get to work? How do you get people to volunteer for hazardous duty pay after the sixth hurricane of the season? What about timekeeping? Do you give people time off to take care of personal matters, and if so, how much time? How do you recognize heroics? How do you communicate these policies once a disaster hits?

### 4 When a disaster strikes, balance the needs of employees with the needs of the business.

Recognize that your primary goal during a disaster is to ensure the safety of employees. You're in the people relations business now. You need employees to survive, return to work and start the healing process if the business is first to stabilize, then to recover and also maintain its reputation. Keep this top of mind in all actions you take—think about Maslow's hierarchy of needs. People need to make sure they have the level one basic needs: food, water, shelter, clothes on their back for them and their family—before they can even think about working.

### 5 During a disaster, partner closely with HR to support employees.

The initial communication should focus on the safety of employees and their families in the disaster area, and all the “me” issues, such as: “Do I come to work,

where, when, what's happening to my benefits, what about filing insurance claims for damage to my home? Can I take time off from work for that?" Continue communicating these "me" messages and other updates.

## Recognize differences in communication

In your plans and response, recognize that communicating from the people perspective during a disaster is different in these three ways:

- **More prescriptive.** You're telling people what to do. This is not business as usual. Some people who have never experienced a disaster will not know what to do. Others may know what to do intellectually, but they could freeze from fear. So you've got to give simple directions, often.
- **More personal with an advocacy component.** You're watching out for people's personal safety and security. A lot of people underestimate the emotional impact on themselves and their families. In your employee communication role, you should be an advocate for psychological screening and support services. In most organizations, these services are available from Employee Assistance Programs. Since 9/11, research has validated that these services play a crucial role in helping employees recover faster and be resilient. For example, employees who received psychological counseling shortly after 9/11 have lower rates of alcoholism, drug use and depression than those who did not get counseling.
- **More communication, rather than less.** The rules about information overload go out the door. People are often concerned, possibly confused and generally feeling out of control. The more communi-

cation they get the better, especially face-to-face.

Being prepared for a disaster is good not only for the business, but also for employees—especially if anyone in your company ever says that people are your corporation's

most important asset. Do your employees a favor; give them the same consideration as all your other assets. In return, your people will help you save the business and its reputation. **J**

## DEALING WITH PUSHBACK

What if your management team doesn't want to plan for unknowns? Respond by:

**Saying that many organizations have recently faced disasters outside of their control.** Thanks to Mother Nature, hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, floods, fires and earthquakes have recently occurred. If your company has multiple locations, there's a good chance that one of them lies in a danger area. And organizations have also faced manmade crises too. Remember all the stolen laptops with employees' personal data, the Post Office shootings and ethical lapses? Regardless of the type of disaster, those organizations that have prepared for the worst can recover more quickly. This is not about being a company with a warm soul; this is about protecting the viability of the business.

**Sharing research results that show companies with crisis plans are using them, which supports the first point.** Of the 600 IABC members who responded last December to a survey sponsored by the IABC Research Foundation, about 66 percent had a formal crisis communication plan in place in advance of a crisis. Of those with a plan, 69 percent implemented it last year. Of those who used their plans, 99 percent said their plans were effective for managing and responding to the crisis. (See Robert J. Holland, ABC, and Katrina Gill, "Ready for disaster," *Communication World*, 23(2), 20-24, March-April 2006.)

**Acknowledging that one of the roles you play is to help mitigate risks for your employer.** So calculate the return on investment involved in planning. If you spend 200 hours planning, assuming \$80 an hour, that's \$16,000 in time in soft dollars. How much would you lose in hard dollars if the business were down for a day? Three days? A week? (So how can taking the time to plan be a waste of resources?)