



Be First, Be Right, Be Credible

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Today, organizations must be able to operate even if they find themselves suddenly without offices, equipment, stored data or key employees. When disaster strikes, organizations need to communicate openly and honestly with all their key stakeholders; employees, boards of directors, customers, strategic partners, service providers, government, news media, and the public. The more chaotic things get, the greater the need for communication – at the precise moment when normal communication modes are most difficult or not available.

We know that preparation is the lifeblood of business resilience and leadership occurs through communication. Legendary baseball manager Branch Rickey said, “Luck is the residue of design.” Knowledgeable business continuity professionals design in as much luck as possible into their company’s plans, including how the leaders and others will communicate. Yet, it is estimated that less than 50% of all companies that developed resiliency plans also have a comprehensive Crisis Communications Plan.

The success of any organization depends on the coordination of its activities through communication. This is even truer during a critical incident. Under crisis conditions, two key crisis communications needs are (1) a notification process and (2) the right message content. Since 09/11/01 there has been a dramatic up-tick in the variety and amount of vendor solutions geared specifically at automating the notification process. However, many companies are under the false assumption that if they have a notification process in place they then have a Crisis Communications Plan. No, what they have is a logistical strategy for pushing messages. Another false assumption is that transferring crisis communications to a public relations firm (or department) will take care of the content. No again – this is only a small part of an overall Crisis Communications Plan, because public relations deal specifically with entities outside the organization – it does not address all the stakeholders.

The Crisis Communications Plan (CCP) must be designed in lock-step with the resiliency or business continuity plan. The same situation analysis questions that must be answered to develop a crisis management strategy are also asked for the CCP: What do we know? What are the issues? What are the concerns of our stakeholders? What will people need to and want to know? What are the actions we need to take? What are the messages we need to convey about the situation and our actions? What channels should we use to reach our stakeholders? How can we be credible?

The Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) has developed a comprehensive crisis communications training program for public health officials that can be adapted to any for-profit or not-for-profit organization. They state that “all crisis communications planning must be designed to help you manage the first 48 hours of an emergency ...” Their mantra of “be first, be right, be credible” summarizes this approach.

Being “first” means that if it is your disaster, you need to be the first one to get a message out. This is a huge challenge in this day of immediate “news” from cell phones (including sending pictures) and the Internet. If you are late, others will fill in the blanks with rumors or their own perception of reality, which probably is incomplete or biased. Then you will have to clean up the mess by countering rumors or myths in real-time, which takes time and energy away from dealing with the critical incident. Being first actually carries more weight than all messages that come after, similar to being first to the marketplace with a new product. Speed also counts, even when you may not have all the answers yet. It provides your stakeholders with a sense that your organization is well prepared and cares about its employees, customers and the community. This goes a long way to helping stabilize the situation and move toward complete recovery, not to mention solidifying your company’s good reputation.

Being “right” means that your organization has taken steps to understand exactly what has happened and has the right plan to deal with it. Many advise that less is better. Stay away from too many details too early. Details generate more questions and increase the probability that you’ll say the wrong thing. But don’t purposely mislead by saying less! As Jack Welch says in his book, Winning, “There are no secrets in the world, and everyone will eventually find out everything.” While saying less will appease your attorneys, balance that with what is really needed. Welch went on to say, “The more openly you speak about the problem, its causes, and its solutions, the more trust you earn from everyone watching, inside the organization and out.” So, take the lead and take control. Look at the situation as others see it. If there is uncertainty, address it. Don’t try to operate in a vacuum. Then get out in front early, even if you’re not 100% ready.

To be “credible” means being honest, open, consistent and speak with one voice. One of the worst communication failures in time of crisis is to allow mixed messages from multiple sources, including experts. Mixed messages confuse and lead to doubt and distrust which undermines credibility. Have just one spokesperson or make sure everyone is speaking from the same page. The way to do that is to strictly follow a specific protocol in your Crisis Communications Plan for delivering messages. Other proven ways to ensure credibility are to speak sincerely, express empathy, be accountable, show commitment, use facts (be consistent with these) and show competence and expertise by using trusted sources.

Crisis communications should never, ever be left to last-minute-on-the-spot planning. The Crisis Communication Plan needs to be flexible and simple. It is not just about pushing messages out to the community/media. It is about how you as an organization will continue to communicate to coordinate company activities – both crises-related and on-going operations. Of course this short article cannot tell you everything you need to know about developing a viable Crisis Communications Plan, but my hope is that it will get you thinking that human communication is as much an integral part of your resiliency plan as recovering data and processes.

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