

CREATING A CRISIS ROADMAP FOR PEOPLE

BY STEVE TIMMONS, PHD

With the scope, type and frequency of crisis events expanding at an exponential rate, most organizations recognize the need to take a more holistic approach to crisis survival, integrating many elements into a viable continuity of operations solution. Most of these same organizations would readily acknowledge that the most challenging elements to address are the human factors...



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...the ability to prepare, support and help their people recover from a disaster. This is because people are the only asset of an organization that, in addition to physical impacts, can also suffer psychological and emotional impacts. This factor alone has the potential to make a return to normal operations difficult if not impossible.

In recent years, a “new” type of crisis event seems to be emerging. These events (natural disasters that do much more damage to people than infrastructure, terrorist acts or threats, the possibilities of a global pandemic, etc.) tend to focus their impacts on people,

and bring to light three areas that most public and private sector emergency planning and management activities need to address:

1. The proactive preparation of people before a crisis event
2. The support of people during a crisis event
3. The recovery of people after a crisis event

Addressing each of these areas individually, then integrating them collectively will produce a crisis roadmap for people, ensuring that an

organization's personnel are prepared, protected, and supported to the greatest possible degree in an emergency.

Step One: Proactively Preparing People before a Crisis Event

Effective crisis survival begins with proactive preparation of key personnel in advance of a crisis event. First, companies need to address the following elements:

- *Design and deploy a robust crisis communications model.* This goes far beyond the traditional call tree. You need to proactively define what needs to be communicated, who you need to communicate that message to, both internally and externally, how and when that communication will take place and the failover protocols and feedback mechanisms you need to ensure vital communication will take place before, during, and following the crisis event.
- *Identify the special needs of key response/continuity/recovery/personnel.* Understanding the support needs of key personnel and their families is important in any crisis event, but vitally important in one that has a high degree of human impact. Defining the key personnel your organization needs to remain operational in a crisis and identifying what proactive preparations you can make to increase the likelihood of their ability to participate in the response and recovery efforts is important to effective crisis survival.
- *Define and communicate crisis compensation and benefits policies.* Part of the advance preparation for an event should be to ensure employees clearly understand what your organization will – and will not – provide in terms of crisis compensation and benefits. How long will you pay employees? Will you compensate those employees you ask to work at home the same as employees expected to participate in your emergency response operations? What will you provide to employees during an actual event? How will employees get assistance with special situations in a crisis? Providing a clear understanding of these and other available support

solutions will give employees greater confidence and increased morale in a disaster event.

- *Evaluate and enhance the employee assistance program(s) of your organization.* Historically, we have relied on employee assistance programs (EAP) to provide employee support in times of crisis, but what would happen in the case of an extreme disaster event? Most EAPs do not go far enough in their ability to support key personnel and their families in a severe crisis, especially in the case of a regional disaster event where many organizations and personnel are impacted. Identify in advance of an event what your organization's EAPs will and won't (or can't) provide in a disaster, and design internal support offerings to bridge the gap.
- *Deliver tactical awareness and operations training.* While comprehensive response / continuity / recovery team-specific training and general organizational awareness programs are a great idea, at a minimum training should be provided on organizational crisis survivability. Employees must know what they should do, what they should not do, and what support will be provided to them prior to an actual event. This becomes even more critical in events with significant impacts to people.

Step Two: Supporting People during a Crisis Event

The second step to creating a crisis roadmap involves defining the support structure that will be available to personnel and their families during an actual disaster. In the area of crisis support, you should address the following elements:

- *Create an Employee Crisis Support Team (ECST).* This team, deployed and operating under the Emergency Operations Center in a crisis event, is focused on supporting response, continuity, and recovery personnel. The ECST should ensure the organization is proactively prepared to support the special needs of key personnel, be available to assist employees in dealing with the emo-

tional and psychological impacts of a crisis event, provide logistical support to employees (food, lodging, transportation, finances, etc.), and serve as the liaison for communication with family members through the Family Crisis Support Team.

- *Create a Family Crisis Support Team (FCST).* This team, also deployed and operating under the Emergency Operations Center in a crisis event, is focused on supporting and protecting the families and personal assets of employees. The FCST should ensure the organization is proactively prepared to provide pre-defined support to the personnel's families in a crisis event, coordinate EAP services on a family's behalf, assist family members with the emotional and psychological impacts of the disaster, and provide the same types of logistical support identified above. In addition, the FCST will serve as the liaison for communication with personnel actively working the organizational crisis event through the ECST.

The proactive preparation and training provided in Step One, above, coupled with the effective deployment of the ECST and FCST teams during a crisis event, will elevate both organizational and individual levels of confidence in the organization's ability to survive through an emergency situation.

Step Three: Helping People Recover after a Crisis Event

The final step focuses on taking the right steps to help people recover from the event as quickly as possible. This is where you must address the psychological and emotional impacts mentioned earlier. Here are some of the key steps an organization can take to help it (and its people) recover from a severe crisis:

- *Understand the key differences in emotional response to Acts of God vs. acts of people.* People tend to heal faster from events that were beyond their control than events caused by malicious actions or human negligence. However, even Acts of God can have

HUMAN CONCERNS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 81

severe psychological and emotional repercussions, especially if people perceive a lack of preparation or improper response. The level of emotional impact to people will have a direct correlation to the required levels of support the organization needs to provide following an event.

- *Avoid assessing any organizational situation through your personal frame of reference.* If you find yourself in the driver's seat of helping your organization recover from a crisis event, remember that how you see the event or experienced the associated level of impact can be far removed from how the event impacted others. It is very important to assess and deal with individual situations in a crisis event and not take a one-size-fits-all approach to organizational response.
- *Allow the organization to find its own path in the healing process to the greatest degree possible.* Just as an organization develops its own unique culture, it will define its own informal response to a crisis event. Plan for informal meetings and water cooler discussions, temporary shifts in levels of performance and grassroots suggestions for getting back to normal operations. Allowing the people of the organization to find the best approach to healing their own wounds can have significant benefit in terms of mitigating long-term operational impacts.
- *Remember that in a crisis situation, internal communications are the most vital part of the crisis communications model.* While communicating to key customers, vendors and regulatory agencies is important in a crisis event, the most vital communication is to your own people. Failing to effectively communicate internally in a disaster to keep employees informed and assured may make any other communication a moot point in the long term.
- *Be sensitive to the negative neuro-associations surrounding the physical location of a violent or traumatic incident.*



Courtesy of FEMA. Photo by Andrea Booher

In a highly emotional situation, such as experiencing a disaster event first-hand, what our senses experience can create anchors to negative neuro-associations, in turn feeding emotional trauma and fear when those anchors are subsequently triggered days, months or even years later. Especially common in crisis situations is the fear of returning to the physical location of a traumatic event. Be sensitive that for some personnel, returning to the physical site of an event may require professional counseling and time to effectively re-frame the negative neuro-association.

- *Move as quickly as possible toward a return to normal operations.* Things as simple as re-opening the company cafeteria, re-starting regular meetings or teleconferences, or even getting back to publishing the company's internal newsletter can have a tremendously positive impact on employee morale. Getting back into a normal routine as quickly as possible provides a sense of moving beyond the disaster event.

There is nothing more important to effective crisis survival than proactively preparing, supporting and assisting people in recovering from a disaster event. If an organization does nothing else in terms of proactive preparation and planning, creating a crisis roadmap

for people will go a long way to ensure people will perform effectively in a crisis and move as quickly as possible in recovering from the event. Even in a situation where there was insufficient planning in other operational areas, the organization will have its people and knowledge capital intact to be effectively reactive in a crisis.

The events of recent years serve as a warning of events to come, and a call to action for those organizations willing to move out of the state of denial (it won't happen here, and even if it does, it absolutely, positively won't happen to me) and get in front of protecting their people, their stakeholders, and their future.

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