

CRISIS MANAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

You might say we are well beyond crisis management planning some weeks after COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). While the assessment of our pandemic preparedness as a society will be the subject of considerable future scrutiny, the likely duration of the crisis still allows individuals and organizations to implement some basic crisis management best practices. These best practices can be applied whether you are leading a small organization or a big one.

Preparedness and Scenario Planning

The COVID-19 crisis will likely last several months. While we may be comforted that it will have an epidemiological end, its impact on your organization may be different at different points of time. In this early stage many of us have been consumed with mobilizing our business to run in drastically altered operating conditions or on entirely new platforms. In most cases, the impact of COVID-19 will potentially severely impact revenues, distract and demoralize workforces and fundamentally alter how products and services are delivered.

These effects will impact your organization differently at different points along the life of the crisis which may alter your crisis response from that in its early days. As the coronavirus becomes less prevalent (as is now being seen in China) decisions will also have to be made around returning people to the workplace and how operations can continue without encouraging a resurgence of the virus itself.

Given the fluidity of this crisis, there's a tendency to concentrate on the "today" when your organization needs to both concentrate on the "here and now" as well as how the organization may be impacted in the future.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

This has always been an important cornerstone in crisis management planning. Its importance has increased tenfold in a crisis where physical distancing is integral to the crisis coming to an end. Organizations need to prioritize the health and welfare of their employees. One way of doing that is to promote transparency around the organization's response. Employees are nervous and afraid.

They are concerned not only for their health and safety but also their financial futures. Whether the message is good or bad, transparency around the organization's response is vital to maintaining your employees' mental health and enhancing trust and confidence in the employee employer relationship.

These messages will be different for different employers as some employees must continue to work but frequent communications coming from managers who are highly visible is a critical step. Coupled with your internal communications strategy is also a strategy to address the concerns of customers, regulators and other stakeholders like investors. Keeping those with whom you work aware of your current status as well as your contingency plans will enhance those relationships over the long term.

Reputation

In a crisis people are rarely prepared to forgive insensitivity or arrogance. This particularly applies when public safety is at stake. As an example, the Premier of Ontario recently condemned price gouging on disinfectant wipes at a Toronto grocery store. At this time, all steps that you take should be sensitive to the circumstances we all find ourselves in. The crisis does, however, present opportunities where you may be able to identify gaps in the market that your organization may be able to fill.

A crisis often leads to innovation and should your employees have downtime it is a good opportunity to reinvent aspects of your business. Above all, but particularly in a crisis, your organization must remain steadfast to the principles and values upon which the organization was built.

Best Practices

Most crises offer an opportunity to identify the gaps in the organization's crisis management planning. This crisis may, in fact, be the ultimate test of your previous planning efforts.

Throughout the crisis take note of the problems that have been encountered, note the interim solutions and how might the organization have been better prepared in the future. Record these observations everyday as they will be incredibly useful as the organization looks back on its response. There is little doubt that crisis management planning will take on greater importance when this crisis comes to an end. The emphasis on preparedness will not only be a priority for governments but for all organizations, big or small.

These are difficult times. Managing this crisis will test your skills and your organization's strength. If your organization was not prepared, as many were not, there still remains the opportunity to implement good crisis management practices to improve your response to this crisis and those others that will inevitably come.

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