

WHAT DID HRM LEARN FROM 9-11? A CRISIS RESPONSE PLAN: H.R. S.A.F.E.T.Y. & R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

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ABSTRACT

September 11, 2001 has had a profound effect on the world. One of the groups of employees who had to perform their roles in organizations quickly after 9/11 was the Human Resource Professionals. In the short term they needed to decide how to locate people, provide workspace, communicate with their employees etc. In the long term they face important decisions regarding security and disaster plans.

INTRODUCTION

It is imperative that we try to learn from this terrorist attack on the United States. Organizations need to have comprehensive plans to respond to, not only terrorist attacks, but many different types of crises. There are many aspects of crisis that are consistent with one another. Organizations do not need to develop a plethora of plans, one for each possible crisis that may occur. A well-developed comprehensive response to crisis plan should enable all organizations to respond to unexpected disasters or crises. It would be wise for organizations to utilize their human resource (HR) departments in orchestrating these plans [8]. Every department in an organization needs to be prepared for a crisis. However, human resource departments are in a unique position to facilitate implementation of crisis response plans. Human resource departments should already have in place relationships with all departments in organizations. These relationships should be used to help departmental managers prepare and train their employees for a possible crisis [6]. This paper will describe the elements human resource professionals need to incorporate into a company wide response to crisis plan.

An organization needs to have an organization wide response to crisis plan [6]. However, this plan needs to be carried out at the departmental level. The importance of having a crisis response plan in place cannot be underestimated. While there has been a large body of research drawing this out, 9-11 (and now Hurricane Katrina) shows the unpreparedness of many firms to respond to a crisis. The fact that for some firms it was extremely difficult to account for their employees on 9/11 is an example of how crisis response plans are needed. There have been surveys showing firms are still not prepared for a crisis [10]. The most important parts of a crisis response plan will be the immediate actions needed in the short run. However, there are also long term aspects of crisis response that human resource professionals need to have at least an outline of once the short term issues are in place.

A well-thought out crisis response plan will have 7 short term actions items. The acronym for the elements in the plan is H.R. S.A.F.E.T.Y.

1) Human Contact. The first and foremost action in a crisis response plan is to locate all of a firm's employees. Organizations need to devise a plan to contact all employees that realizes different crises may create different obstacles to contacting employees.

2) Records. Complete records of organizational personnel and equipment. Employees will not be able to contact their employees if they do not have current lists of their employees and ways to contact them.

The hardest part of this step is the word “current”. Not only do employee’s whereabouts change daily in organizations but the employees themselves change.

3) Space. Temporary work space. Once many of the people issues are addressed, the next concern for companies facing a crisis is finding a new workspace. Getting a company up and running after a disaster is any company’s ultimate goal. This may mean just finding a way to continue paying people, as Aaron Feuerstein, owner of Malden Mills Industries, did after a fire destroyed his mill in Massachusetts [7], or it may mean running a smaller operation, or it may mean becoming fully functional by the next day.

4) Alternative plan. Plan for how organization can continue operations. Organizations need to have a plan as to how they will get their company up and running as soon as possible after the crisis. An integral part of this plan will be having alternative workspace and having the equipment needed to get the company working again.

5) Family. A method to contact employee’s families. Employees may need flexible schedules to allow them to respond to their family’s emotional responses to the crisis in addition to their own. Many employees may feel the need to work at home [6].

6) Evacuation. An evacuation and relocation plan. In the World Trade Center, Morgan Stanley had repeatedly seriously rehearsed their plan for a crisis. On September 11 the Morgan Stanley employees were instructed to follow their well rehearsed crisis drill [4]. Morgan Stanley also had in place three alternative sites for their work activities to continue in case of a crisis. Employees knew about the three alternative sites before 9-11 happened. They were to continue working at these sites if a disaster occurred [4].

7) Tracking. A method of tracking the cost of the disaster. Organizations need to have a way of calculating the costs of the crisis to the firm. A law firm in the World Trade Center maintained a database that enabled them to determine which of their files had been destroyed. They had an insurance policy which covered loss of files and recreating files [2].

8) Yell. Communicate over and over again with your stakeholders. Communication may be the most important element of this plan. Department managers need to know all details of the crisis response plan and they need to communicate this to their employees.

LONG TERM

The long term items will include R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

1) Response. A new crisis response plan. First and foremost a new plan needs to be developed. Each time a crisis response plan is used, and we would hope that was never, a new plan needs to be developed. This plan should include learning experiences from implementing the previous crisis response plan. Organizations can learn from crises and always improve their crisis plans [1].

2) Economy. Economic downturn. Following any crisis, organizations can expect at least an economic downturn in their organization if not in their region or country as a whole. During an economic downturn, HR professionals are often involved in lay offs.

3) Security. First and foremost, greater emphasis will be place on security. This emphasis can be seen in aspects of everyone’s daily life. From airport security checkpoints, to increased security guards at shopping malls and loading docks, Americans are paying more attention to their environments.

4) Psychology. Psychological effects on HR professionals. HR professionals were one of the first groups called on to perform their roles in their organizations on 9/11. Despite their shock, many HR professionals were the first back to work. Because HR professionals were among the first back to work, many may not have had opportunities to deal with their own emotions. “People who hold their emotions in check are much more likely to experience post-traumatic stress complications... That includes CEOs, HR Managers and others in a position of responding. In the short term, they’re busy. They don’t have time to deal with all of those emotions. They need very purposefully to make sure they take the time to

be debriefed” [3]. HR professionals will continue dealing with their own emotional responses while getting everyone else back to work.

5) Employee Rights. Employee privacy. Nowadays there is a huge issue of employee privacy and prescreening to prevent attacks in organizations. Many organizations have initiated steps to find out more about a potential employee’s background than they had previous to 9/11. However, there have been many challenges to these practices. Potential employees have complained of invasion of privacy and that employers are legally overstepping their legal rights to conduct background searches on them.

6) Community. Diversity. One effect of 9/11 will be anger and violence against innocent people of Arab origin or the Islamic faith based on feelings of outrage and newfound patriotism. “This will pose a significant challenge for employers who still must strive to foster harmony in the workplace, and must work to ensure the fair and equitable treatment of all of their employees” [5].

7) Toll. Crises take a terrible toll on organizations. Organizations should employ programs such as stress management and employee assistance after a crisis to reduce the psychological toll on their employees [9]. A crisis creates many psychological effects in organizations.

CONCLUSION

The sentiment throughout many companies was that the HR professionals, working as a team member with other functions, were essential to coping with the tragedy, and getting organizations up and running. Several CEOs commented that the HR teams will now have a “seat at the table,” because when dealing with issues that affect all of their people, HR professionals are the ones with the knowledge [3]. HR professionals reported, one year after the attacks, that HR is relied upon more now for its expertise and input and HR has had a greater presence over the past year [11]. The total impact of the events of September 11th on people and businesses has yet to be seen. The attacks have and will continue to affect people in their home and work lives, and has affected the way businesses operate and treat their people. HR professionals have and will continue to have a significant role in the changing work environment and decisions made in their organizations.

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