

A RESPONSE TO 9-11: CRITICAL ELEMENTS OF A CRISIS RESPONSE PLAN

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ABSTRACT

September 11, 2001 has had a profound effect on the world. Our lives have changed. 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.

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September 11, 2001 has had a profound effect on the world. Our lives and our career have changed. 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.

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 [2, p. 17]. Human resource professionals are usually already responsible for the training of departmental employees as well as handling all personnel issues for the employees. 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 [2, p. 17]. However, this plan needs to be carried out at the departmental level. Every department needs to be responsible for carrying out their crisis response plan. There may be many elements of every department's plans which are similar but there may be some aspects that differ between departments. For example, an R & D department plan, where all employees work in one location, may differ from a sales department's plan, where most of the employees are working out in the field. The human resource department will be instrumental in assisting departments in creating these plans. The human resource department should also be responsible for alerting departments of the components that are necessary in their plans. Also, HR should be able to greatly assist in creating the portions of the plans that are similar for every department and help managers to figure out how their department plans need to differ from other departments. Needless to say, in order for human resources to play such a large role in the crisis response plan, they need to be a strategic partner. They need to "sit at the table".

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 need to be in place. There have been surveys showing firms are still not prepared for a crisis [3].

It is important to note that though throughout this paper many examples will be used from 9-11, this paper is not meant to address only terrorist attacks. A good crisis response plan should enable organizations to respond to all crises that occur. Whether they are natural disasters, workplace violence, fires, factories blowing up, or terrorist attacks organizations need to have a crisis response plan in place that will allow them to respond to any crisis. It is not inconceivable that we will have another terrorists attack. A recent survey found most Americans felt there would be another terrorist attack in America but it would not happen in their regional area.

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. A communication plan for locating all employees. 2) Records. Complete records of organizational personnel and equipment 3) Space. Temporary work space. 4) Alternative plan. Plan for how organization can continue operations. 5) Family. A method to contact employee's families. 6) Evacuation. An evacuation and relocation plan 7) Tracking. A method of tracking the cost of the disaster. 8) Yell. Communicate over and over again with all of your stakeholders.

LONG TERM

The long term items will include R.E.S.P.E.C.T. 1) Response. New crisis response plan. 2) Economy. Economic downturn. 3) Security. Security of workforce and workplace. 4) Psychology. Psychological effects on HR professionals 5) Employee rights. Employee privacy. 6) Community. Diversity issues among employees. 7) Toll. What is the toll on your employees and organization as a whole?

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 [1]. 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 [4].

To help business continue moving forward, HR professionals will help workers continue to cope. Even in businesses where they have not been actively involved in business planning, many are beginning to have a "seat at the table." People issues are on everyone's minds since 9/11, and HR is often seen as the link between the business and the people.

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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