

# ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS RESPONSE PLANNING AND 9/11

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## ABSTRACT

The attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11) on the United States had a profound impact on organizations both immediately following, as well as, six years after the attacks. This study focuses on the impact the attacks of September 11, 2001 had on the Human Resources (HR) function within organizations. Discussions focus on the way that the HR function has been affected and how HR departments have dealt with the issues of crisis response plans, crisis communication plans, and succession planning.

## INTRODUCTION

The attacks of 9/11 changed America, the work environment, employers, and employees in the workforce, and human resources departments in organizations. It is estimated that 2,825 people died on September 11, 2001 in the World Trade Center attack. This includes 343 Firefighters, 23 police officers, 658 Cantor Fitzgerald employees, and 78 employees of the Windows of the World restaurant located at the top of the North Tower [5]. The people who were killed that day "were bond traders, chefs, firefighters, computer programmers, administrative assistants, custodians, vice presidents and flight attendants." [3, p. 35].

The attacks of 9/11 showed that innocent civilians performing their daily work routine can be victims of terrorism. The attacks were not expected, and they were not planned for. Ian Mitroff categorizes these types of attacks as "abnormal accidents" [6]. These abnormal accidents or "intentional attacks" include kidnappings, bombings, cyber or internet attacks (e.g. viruses), stealing and lying. In short, they include any attack or event that is performed out of betrayal or sabotage [6]. Mitroff also categorizes many events as "normal accidents" which include: floods, earthquakes, human error and system breakdowns. While these events are not necessarily expected, they may be better prepared for than abnormal accidents [6]. According to Mitroff, after 9/11 "businesses had no alternative but to think about and to prepare for the abnormal... ..It is estimated that up to 80 percent of all terrorist acts happen to private businesses and not the government. Thus, business has to do its share, if as a society we are to be better prepared to handle the threats posed by terrorism." Companies were forced to look at their crisis response plans, succession planning and crisis communication plans in order to cope with the attacks of 9/11, but also to help them prepare for the future. These three activities of Human Resources (crisis response plans, succession planning and crisis communication plans) became priorities for HR professionals following 9/11 [2].

## Crisis Response Plans

Crisis response planning, often called scenario or crisis planning, is a roadmap for employees when a disaster strikes. As described in the article "Lessons from 9/11," a typical disaster plan outlines how employees should evacuate the work place during a disaster, where employees will work if they cannot return to the workplace, food and shelter plans in the event that employees cannot leave the work

premises, and where back up records and files will be located [1]. More specifically, there are three types of crisis response plans organizations can implement to help with the short and long-term effects of a crisis; they are business continuity, one to three year operations planning, and strategy.

### **Crisis Communication Plans**

One of the most critical lessons learned from 9/11 was the importance of employee communication and the role of Human Resources professionals in crisis communication plans. As Ramon Venero states in an article by Diane Cadrain [3], "HR is going to manage all the internal communication. They're the keeper of the keys. They have all the privacy information, they have to deal with the IT people, they know who to contact, and they have to be able to manage communication with employees en masse. It could be a very significant role, depending on the size of the organization." Much of the research on the topic of crisis communication plans focuses on the importance of strong communication during a crisis and identifying the most appropriate communication channels during the crisis.

### **Succession Planning**

"A Total of 343 firefighters, nearly 30 times the number ever lost by the department in a single event were killed in the attack. The dead included five of the department's most senior officials, including the chief who specialized in directing rescues from collapses of this sort" [4]. Along, with many lives lost, "The FDNY estimates that it lost 4,440 years of experience the day of the attacks" [5]. The massive losses experienced by the New York Fire Department illustrated to businesses in all industries the important role succession planning plays in a comprehensive crisis response plan. Succession planning is the process of identifying leaders who can step up and take a leadership role on short notice. In addition, the identified leaders are given the training, knowledge and tools to be able to take on a leadership role. The events of 9/11 have demonstrated that "companies cannot afford to have small numbers of people with skill sets that are not shared by others" [2]. Despite its importance, many companies still do not have succession plans in place. HR Magazine reported that: 43% of the respondents had no process for the transition of a CEO; 84% had confidence in their current management team; 25% did not know the strengths of the managers two layers below their own job; 40-60% of CEO's leave within the first 18 months. [7].

Overall, research has shown that crisis response plans, crisis communication plans, and succession planning all play an important part in a company's recovery after a disaster. Nonetheless, many organizations still have not created or updated their crisis response plans, crisis communication plans, nor their succession plans even after the events of 9/11. No organization could have been prepared for the catastrophic events of 9/11. In retrospect, 9/11 truly proved the importance of planning and of expecting the unexpected. This research study was conducted to assess the current state of organizations' crisis response plans, crisis communication plans, and succession plans.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Research results have shown that 9/11 has had a significant impact on the HR function in organizations. Although some HR aspects were more influenced by the impact of 9/11, overall, it was found that 9/11 truly changed HR practices and the workplace as a whole. Past research indicated that crisis response, crisis communication and succession planning were important to organizations. However, little or no action was taken to change, review, create or increase budgets for these three activities. The results of this survey contradict previous research since the respondents indicated that their organizations took action to improve, create, and increase their budgets, training and planning for crisis response, crisis communication and succession plans since 9/11.

## REFERENCES

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