

When Emotions Run High: Dealing with Stress in Crisis Management

We often talk about business continuity in practical, pragmatic terms. But it's important to remember that when a crisis hits a company, no matter how well prepared that company is, emotions will run high.

A fire or flood at a company location, a violent incident or a weather catastrophe that hits multiple stores or facilities across a region: any of these things will cause damage, injuries and perhaps deaths. If it's your company, the people in danger are your friends and colleagues. If the disaster extends outside your organization's walls, your family may be threatened as well.

So in business continuity planning, consider not just the practical, but the emotional factors that will impact preparation, response and recovery. Here are just a few examples:

Layering Response and Management Teams. This is both a practical and an emotional consideration. I recommend that companies of any size maintain response teams at different levels in the organization. Ideally, a company will have a local response team (LRT) that acts as your eyes and hands at the site of the emergency; an incident management team (IMT), often at the home office, that comprises subject matter experts like IT, Finance, Media Relations and HR who can provide support to the LRT on site; and a crisis management team (CMT) made up of the senior leadership of the organization, who make decisions regarding policy and the financial aspect of the crisis.

This layering is important for a number of reasons:

- 1) If you can clearly lay out a set of specific roles and responsibilities for individuals at multiple levels during a crisis, not only will you avoid confusion and improve your response, you will help people to concentrate their attention on explicitly defined tasks or goals, which may make it easier for them to focus in an emotionally fraught environment.
- 2) Having an LRT ensures that the rest of the team doesn't have to get their updates from *CNN*; you have a trusted, inside source who can answer specific questions about the situation and the well-being of the people on-site.
- 3) Intuitively, the team responsible for managing the crisis will be worried about the welfare of their impacted friends and colleagues and will want to go to the emergency room to check on them. But unless they're HR, that's probably not their job during the crisis. Well-defined and well-designated team responsibilities help people to focus on accomplishing the critical functions only they can accomplish with the assurance that there is someone else who is responsible for taking care of or checking in on the injured.

Choosing the Right Team Members. The VP of a function may not always be the right person to sit on the incident management team. Don't assume that someone with a senior title won't have a very emotional response to a crisis that will hurt their judgment. The individuals on the various response teams must be able to exercise their subject matter expertise with clarity and calm under pressure. Sometimes that means choosing someone further down the ranks who will be more comfortable performing in a crisis. A high level of comfort under stress can be gained from participating in mock exercises and roundtables. By observing participants in these exercises, you can validate the performance of team members and adjust your plans and teams if necessary.

Having It All in Writing. Team and company roles, responsibilities, policies and procedures must be clearly documented and disseminated to all involved in response and recovery. Because when you're in your first CMT or IMT meeting and your team is frustrated, afraid and anxious about the events happening around them, it will be easy for them to scatter their attentions, emotionally and practically, trying to take care of everything at once. You can keep people safe and on point by regularly referring to a document that says exactly what everyone needs to be doing in the situation. Someone in that meeting must be courageous enough to point to that document and remind his or her partners to stay in their roles when they want to do otherwise.

A crisis never occurs at a convenient time. You may not have all of the incident management subject matter experts in the room during the critical first hours of the incident. Having clear roles, responsibilities and meeting tools in writing will facilitate the effective resolution of an area where someone else has to wear the hat of that function for a short time. This documentation will allow for the crisis management function to become sustainable as a company turns over its talent.

Security directors must be the rock in crisis. It's normal for people to need a few moments to step out of a CMT meeting because they're feeling emotional. We must respect our colleagues' emotions in a crisis, and we must stand behind a strong, defined response and recovery plan to help them manage their responsibilities and our own. **SECURITY**

About the Author:

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