

BEFORE IT HITS THE FAN

CPABC, June 20, 2017

1. How to create a Crisis Communications plan, and,
2. How to develop an Issues Management program.

For context:

- 50% of organizations don't have a crisis communications plan
- Crises that can destroy an organization don't just happen to big, well-known companies like United Airlines, Wells Fargo, CP Rail or Volkswagen
- All it takes is for something to occur to our organization coming to the attention of your stakeholders and for it to be shared. Media may never take an interest at all...and social media is everything today anyway.

I. Crises Communication Plan – invest in it like an insurance policy

Start by creating a list of potential crisis scenarios (e.g. harassment, unethical behaviour, data breach, earthquake etc.) and customize to your organization/industry

Each of the potential crisis scenarios you identify needs to be fleshed out with these components:

- Pick your crisis team members from across the organization
- Figure out what you would do first
- Set priorities for communication (e.g. who first, second etc.)
- Identify key stakeholder groups in priority order
- Write up potential Questions/Answers and Key Messages
- Prepare holding statements for your website and social media platforms
- Get HS/KM's pre-approved by legal and management. so they can be used immediately when needed.

After your plan is complete: Train your crisis team; rehearse the plan and make sure it integrates into other plans across your organization (e.g. emergency response plans, biz continuity plan and recovery plan)

Final points:

- US Dept. of Labor says more than 50% of companies fail within two years of a disaster -- Example: Vancouver chocolate company targeted by disgruntled former employee and unable to quell the rumour mill; failed in six months.
- Several studies estimate that more than two-thirds of all crises are the simmering kinds that are both predictable and preventable.

II Developing an Issues Management Program

You cannot predict and prevent crisis unless you:

- Identify potential damage/threat of each identified issue
- Identify the type and severity of the issue
- SO...build a matrix...using your list of crises to start...best done visually with colours and at least four boxes

Very likely
Min impact

Highly likely
Could destroy organization

Highly unlikely
Min impact

Unlikely
But could have severe impact

Probability of occurrence (vertical Y axis)
Severity/duration/financial impact (horizontal X axis)

Have conversations with leaders across your organization including C-suite execs, legal counsel, corporate communications, regional management, safety & risk management, HR, IR.

Ask them: what keeps them up at night, what kind of crises do they think will hit in the next year; what operational, communications and biz continuity plans are already in place (if any) and have they been tested, who is in charge and are they integrated across the organization; who speaks for the organization on various issues and are they trained; what HR issues do we have that could turn into public crises (e.g. labour disputes, fractious individuals); how good are our relationships with our key stakeholders (employees, the community, legislators, regulators)

With the information you've gathered, use the matrix to prioritize each potential crisis with respect to a) most likely to happen and b) most likely to cause significant financial damage. Now get your colleagues (perhaps your crisis team?) across the organization to help with an analysis (biz, financial) to estimate the short-and long-term potential damage – using measures like losses in sales and customers; stock price down, lawsuits or class action suits; losing market share to competitors; reputation damage; labour action/strikes; government or regulator investigations; legal fees, fines, settlements; value of management time spent on each crisis.

With these estimates and your matrix forming the basis of your Issues Management Program, brief your senior management and make recommendations for operational crisis management plans and crisis communications plans.

Remember: these documents, plans and programs are organic and dynamic things and are ONLY useful if they are used, practiced, updated regularly and have a champion/leader responsible for them.

Check out examples of organizations that managed crises well, such as:

- Johnson & Johnson (Tylenol tampering) – the gold standard
- McCain Foods (listeriosis)
- Fort McMurray first responders
- Local Chilliwack chicken farm
- BC SPCA (whistleblower)

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