

EXPERT VIEW

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Take time to communicate in a crisis

Where do crisis communications sit in relation to BC/R? An essential part of the BC/R manager's skillset, something to collaborate with comms colleagues or to outsource?

As crisis PR advisers brought in to help organizations facing sudden events, such as industrial accidents, catastrophic fires or terrorist attacks, we know that the answer varies depending on the client.

Many BC/R managers are outstanding natural communicators, which, combined with excellent project management skills, means they have a very clear sense of what information key audiences need – and when they need it – when significant disruption arises. And all but the most flimsy of BC/R plans devote significant space to the communications element needed to guide them on the way.

So on paper, the delivery of the plan and communicating it should be beautifully aligned. But in practice, it can fall short – usually for one of three reasons.

Planning

The Q3 edition of *Continuity & Resilience* highlighted that 'planning' was the most important attribute for a BC/R manager. This goes for comms as much as anything else. Practical 'how to' guides to managing the communications demands of a crisis should be created in advance. But because the information is often similar to that found elsewhere in the BC plan – checklists, contact details,

etc – assumptions can be made that no more is needed. This can overlook the need for additional information – scenario-based media messages; advice on deferring to communications from emergency services; navigating tricky legal constraints; and more. There should really be a separate crisis communications plan alongside the BC/R version.

Victims

BC/R plans include much indispensable hard information. What it is unlikely to contain is advice on the emotional and psychological needs of individuals affected by a sudden incident. If there are fatalities, that means the families of the deceased, but they could be injured people or those who are merely inconvenienced. The way they are communicated with will have significant bearing on how smoothly the operation goes. This means having a clear organizational view – developed in advance with lawyers and insurers – about saying sorry, alongside considering what practical support can be offered. One client generated huge goodwill by organizing and paying for travel and accommodation for families to be near the scene of an industrial accident, for instance. But such gestures have



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implications and must be thought through.

Media handling

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While many can be anticipated in advance, some clients struggle with the overwhelming nature of media and social media attention, which can engulf them at a moment's notice. The way a story is covered is framed by the content and tone of the early messaging, and correcting inaccuracies

in the mainstream media 'in real time' is essential too, given the pace at which news spreads. On the other hand, pressure to respond to social media provocations should almost always be resisted. These are areas where specific training, preparation and having contacts in the media make all the difference.

Some BC teams will have the skills, contacts and experience to deliver the communications element alongside the main plan. But given the time pressures and the varying nature of the demands for information, the complexities mean this is clearly an area that is ripe for collaboration too.

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