

Managing a crisis requires effective planning and a caring and professional approach to communication with employees and their families.

THE PEOPLE DIMENSION OF A CRISIS

There is no doubt that human tragedy is the most fearful aspect of a crisis. Here, Caroline Sapriel explains why managing public, family and employee communication is an increasingly important component of overall business contingency planning.

Whilst the airlines had procedures in place to manage next-of-kin and employee communication on September 11, most companies in the World Trade Center had little in place to deal with the extent of the human tragedy facing them.

Major world airlines have established processes and ongoing training programs to deal with public, family and employee assistance in the event of accidents. When an accident occurs, airlines immediately activate their passenger information call centers and mobilize and dispatch teams to provide support to victims and next-of-kin at the accident site.

A number of smaller carriers are embracing industry best practice as well. Dragonair, a Hong Kong regional airline, last year embarked on a program called Family Assistance Support Team (FAST), designed to develop and sustain a pool of trained volunteer employees to provide support to victims.

“Like other airlines, we had the systems in place in the event of an accident, such as call centers, processes and trained staff, but in a worst case scenario, we wanted to be able to do more for those who would be most affected, namely the families, so we set up FAST. We take this very seriously and are



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committed to a train-the-trainer program to sustain this capability on a continuous basis,” says Ronnie Choi, General Manager of Customer Service at Dragonair.

Enhanced awareness

Companies across other industries are now embracing the notion that they're responsible for providing support over and above what's done by the authorities. Psychologist Louis Cauffman says “More organizations now consider whether they are adequately prepared to handle communication in the event of a crisis. Reviewing possible scenarios and their likely impact on people, whether they're employees, customers, or the public, is a good way to start.”

In the wake of September 11, even companies in high risk sectors such as oil and gas, who have always had procedures in place to deal with accident victims, are reviewing and expanding the support they provide to manage staff loss at different locations.

Property companies, who own, develop and manage residential and commercial complexes must also be ready for events that could affect tenants and shoppers.

A structured approach

Managing the human dimension of loss requires a well-structured and professional approach that considers multiple factors, including managing the volume of inquiries, cultural differences, stress management, the impact on colleagues, grief counseling, and financial support.

Effective communication in a crisis must be conducted on two levels. First, the management of

public inquiries and second, the management of victims and next-of-kin. Though closely related, both levels must be handled by different teams working seamlessly to provide caring support.

Equally critical is the relationship and level of cooperation between the affected organization and the authorities and rescue services involved. Most legal systems place public emergency services as the authorities in charge of rescue operations. Therefore, it's necessary for the company to check the boundaries in which it can operate.

While the aim is to provide a central point of inquiry for the public, the family assistance team members should not take on the role of grief counselors or therapists. In fact, the next-of-kin support teams must be structured carefully to be effective. Shifts must be established, and the interface with other critical teams and parties defined and practiced.

The size of the company, the nature of its business, its geographical spread and its level of human exposure and risk, must be assessed first to determine what scope of public, family and employee support it should be ready to provide. Once this is clear, the appropriate framework of processes, team definition and training can be initiated. Regular practice must be undertaken.

Responsible crisis management and business contingency planning must establish communication processes that show the company cares. Perception of how a crisis is handled is as important to preserving corporate reputation as the actual actions taken by the company to resolve the crisis. [scm](#)