How effective communication can mitigate fallout from crisis situations.

INTRODUCTION

Let's start with a question. What exactly do we mean when we say 'crisis'? The Oxford English Dictionary defines it in two main ways, either 'a time of intense difficulty or danger' or 'a time when an important or difficult decision must be made'. Stemming from the Greek 'krisis' or 'decision', it's as much about how we react to an event as the event itself. Which brings us to the main problem with the definition - people.

We're all different. Different cultures, backgrounds, upbringing - we all react to events - good or bad - in different ways. Not only will we react to 'crises' differently, with a broad range of emotional and practical responses, we'll also have radically different understandings of what we each consider a crisis in itself. Understanding this - that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' way in which we deal with the world around us - can help us better prepare for the unexpected.

In this article, we're going to look at how people react to different kinds of events, some trivial, some world-changing, and examine the real cost - emotional, psychological, and financial - of not being prepared for the bumps in the road. We'll examine what can we do to cope with crises and question whether communication and technological solutions such as incident management tools might hold the answer to preparing for the unexpected. Because the cost - both immediate and long-term - of doing nothing might be more than you'd imagine...

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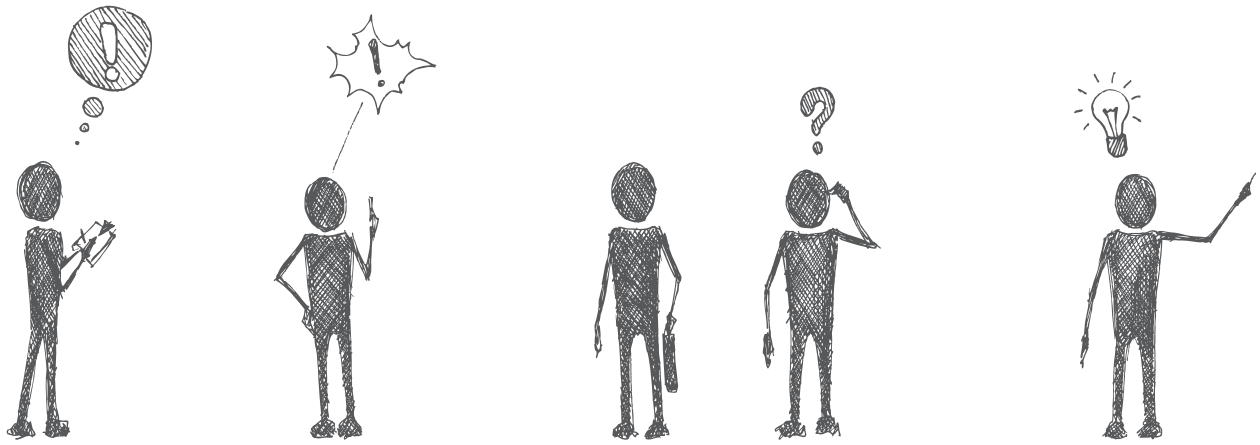
HOW PEOPLE REACT DURING A CRISIS SITUATION

So - we all define and react differently to crises, but that doesn't mean that there aren't a great number of similarities in our responses. From a psychological and medical point of view there are two main areas of interest - ASD (Acute Stress Disorder) and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). These are extreme - neurological and physiological responses that can occur when systems are not put in place to cope with unexpected events.

But before we get there, let's take a closer look at what we mean by a crisis. A widely accepted definition (from a medical perspective) is ***'an event which occurs when a person is confronted with a critical incident or stressful event that is perceived as overwhelming despite the use of traditional problem-solving and coping strategies.'***

In other words, humans are programmed to be able to deal with events for which their individual experiences have prepared them - a firefighter will not regard a fire as a crisis, whereas an office-worker might, resulting in differing responses. This might seem obvious, but to put into effect a good incident management solution, we need to understand that 'crisis' will mean radically different things to different people - the information that people receive and the way in which it is communicated is the difference between panic and effective action.

A crisis can range from a short-term localized incident (such as a company's network going down at a crucial time) to major geo-political catastrophes such as 9/11. How we react is to do with perspective - not being able to send an email on time may not seem like a crisis, but if one's job and therefore family livelihood depends on it, then it radically changes in significance. If we can't see a way to cope with a problem, then the level of our response can quickly escalate, from concern, to stress, to acute physiological reaction.



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One of the most common negative reactions to a crisis (minor or major) is prevarication - the 'rabbit in the headlights' response to a situation which is beyond our experience. To take an extreme example:

"One of the most graphic examples of crowd passivity in recent times occurred in New York's Twin Towers after the hijacked planes hit them on 9/11. You'd have thought those who survived the initial impact would have headed for the nearest exit pretty quickly. Most did the opposite: they prevaricated. Those who eventually got out waited six minutes on average before moving to the stairs, and some hung around for half an hour"
US National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST)

Put simply, people simply didn't know how to react - it was outside their response range. Clear instructions as to what to do in a given situation - any situation - allows those involved in a crisis a clear path of action. By putting in place incident management tools that guide people through the communication process - who, how, and when - a significant part of the decision making process is removed, giving individuals fewer choices to make and therefore significantly lower stress levels.

" people simply didn't know how to react "

The importance of a coherent incident communication strategy cannot be overstated - one of the absolute priorities during a crisis is for all team members to clearly understand their roles and be kept informed of ongoing developments. It's therefore vital that there is a clear, predetermined protocol of who to contact and how to do so in the event of usual channels being unavailable. Equally important is that this protocol is immediately to hand - it's no good putting together a strategy that then gathers dust as a file (real or virtual) - it needs to be in the form of an instinctive, go-to tool that everyone can quickly access when needed.

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HOW PEOPLE BEHAVE AFTER A CRISIS SITUATION

Negative reactions to a crisis - indecision, panic, poor communication - can all have an effect on both people and the company where they work. There is the obvious financial element - loss of business, damage to brand reputation, etc. - but there is also the stress inflicted upon employees, leading to both a loss of morale, confidence, and productivity. Misleading or delayed information can result in rumors - rumors that can make an already difficult situation that much more stressful. While this stress can have an immediate impact, it's also important to consider other, longer lasting effects, such as ASD.

What's the real cost of not being prepared?

In May 2017, British Airways suffered a power supply issue that triggered a computer systems failure, stranding 75,000 passengers at Heathrow and Gatwick airports over a holiday weekend. British Airways was criticized at the time for poor communication to passengers and the length of time it took to restore normal service. The estimated costs were as follows:

- **$68 million dollars passenger compensation for canceled flights...**
- **...not including the undisclosed cost of hotel accommodation...**
- **Share price of Spanish-listed parent company IAG fell by 2.8%**
- **Total cost estimate from BA internal review £80m (approx $100m)**

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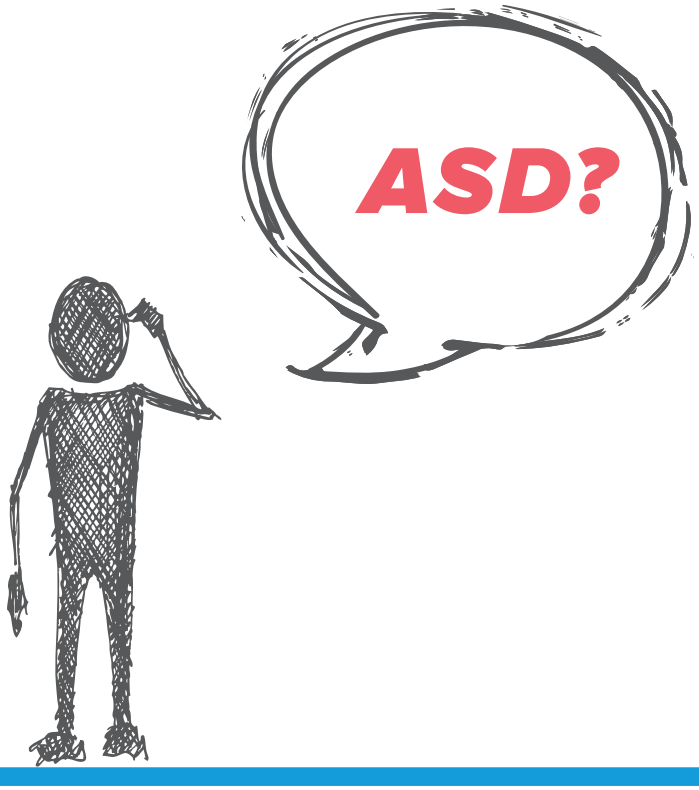
ASD is what happens when coping mechanisms are not put in place - when we perceive the world as unmanageable. ASD generally occurs in the month following a trauma. The impact of ASD upon an employee's performance can be profound, with loss of concentration, sleep deprivation and the inability to engage with coworkers all having a major effect upon productivity, not to mention the general disruption to a happy, creative workspace. If the symptoms persist, it is then termed PTSD. In a perfect scenario both of these disorders can be minimized by a clear, coherent incident management strategy.

Furthermore, employees with diagnosed PTSD are, in many countries, subject to legal protection under disability legislation. Employers are often required to make allowances and accommodations for those suffering from PTSD, accommodations which place a serious financial burden on firms. At the risk of sounding cold-hearted, inadequate preparation for a crisis can lead to not just short-term economic interruption, but exposure to long-term costs for supporting employees who have suffered trauma. The US Equal Opportunity Employment Commission spells out the kind of 'reasonable accommodations' that could be expected of employers - and it's a long list. Similar provisions exist in most regions, including the EU.



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BE PREPARED

So how do we minimize the psychological impact of crises? In a word, communication. Most of the negative responses discussed are as a direct result of an individual not knowing what to do, of feeling isolated and out of their depth. Take the following, fairly routine example. There are two outcomes - one when the individual has to respond unguided, the other when there is a support mechanism in place:

Network crash

a. *Unguided - an office worker is unable to access business critical files, send emails and therefore misses key deadlines. Having no technical knowledge, they call IT and just hope the problem is fixed in time. There is no 'plan b' in place, and they are uncertain as to who else to speak to. Concerned that any action they take might cause further damage, they instead do nothing. Other stakeholders - unclear as to what is going on - call the helpdesk, which is overwhelmed with call volume, leading to long queues and further delays in time to action. Communication is fragmented and unclear and there is major negative impact upon business productivity and corporate reputation.*

b. *Guided - the same situation, but this time incident management systems are in place. There is a clear protocol - external backup servers are activated, key stakeholders are informed, alternative paths of communication can be used and workers company-wide can continue with the minimum of disruption. Information is communicated to the right people at the right time and feedback and progress closely monitored. Damage to workflow (and external company reputation) is minimized and colleagues not only continue to be productive, but do not suffer stress symptoms.*

Communication is everything. When confronted with an unexpected situation, most of us will not be thinking as clearly as normal - by establishing a company-wide protocol of the steps to be taken and in which order, we can compartmentalize. Not everything can be prepared for, but by anticipating the most predictable requirements, crucial hours can be saved. Let's take a specific example to illustrate how this might work.
A large meat-packing company discovers that a batch of their product is unsafe to eat, product which has already reached consumers. The implications are huge - to public safety, corporate reputation and subsequent profitability. Employees at the company are understandably stressed - this is the first time that they've encountered this situation.

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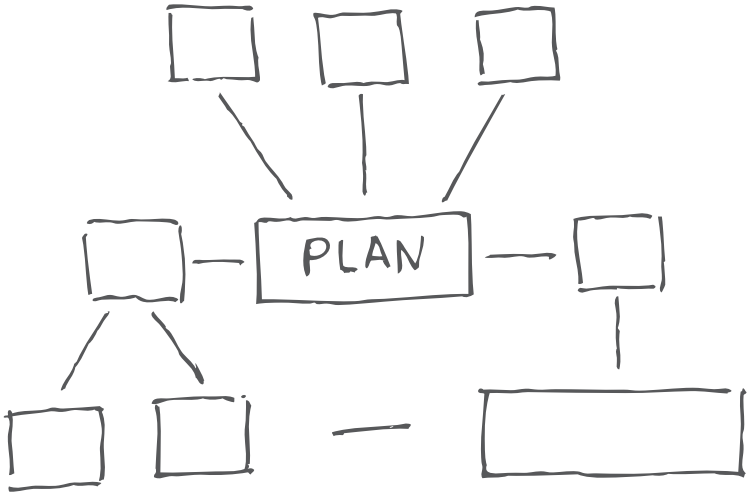
Fortunately, they've put an incident management solution in place. The moment that sales are made aware of the problem, they put the protocol into action. Here's what happens:

- **All relevant stakeholders are informed of the situation via incident management tool and where relevant, summoned to attend an emergency meeting, either physically or virtually via conference call. Responses are monitored to ensure that everyone is up to speed.**
- **With contaminated batch numbers already identified, recipients are notified to remove product from sale. Feedback is monitored to ensure if/when they've complied.**
- **The press department is kept in the loop, with real-time updates as to progress. As such they're able to release timely updates detailing the steps being taken and specific numbers relating to product recall and consumer safety, i.e. "62% of vendors have recalled product, 20% in process of recall, 18% being urgently contacted through other channels."**
- **Fast, full transparency through media outlets, supported by factual data, contributes to greater credibility and increases the chance of a positive PR outcome.**



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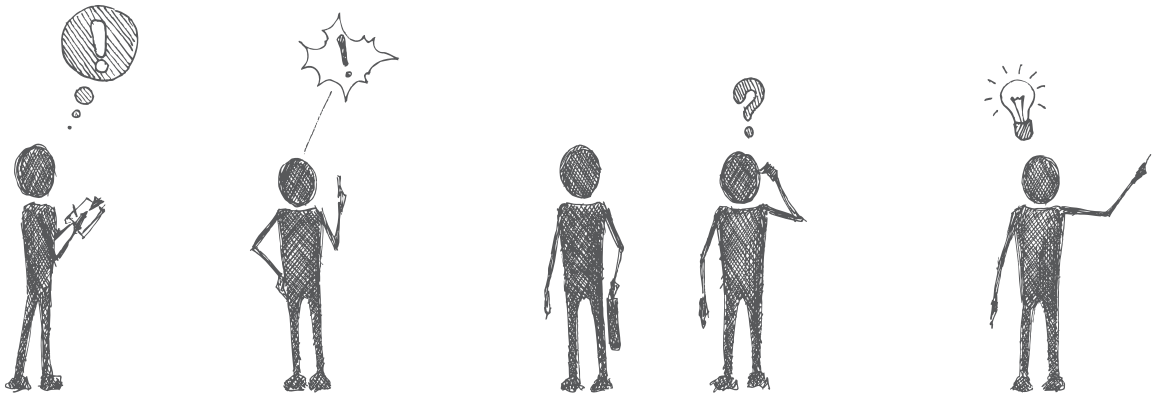
BE PREPARED

Critically, by putting a communication protocol in place prior to the event, it has already been decided who to contact and what information they need to do their jobs. No time is wasted speculating 'who needs to know' and then trying to find an email address or phone number. Clear, informative press releases already exist in template form to cover every eventuality and relevant media outlets and industry bodies are already established in a pre-populated incident communication tool.

Intelligent use of technological solutions is also a major factor when it comes to the effectiveness of communication. One answer is to ensure that all systems - records, communication, etc. - are duplicated outside of the company's infrastructure, ensuring that critical channels can be kept open and running in the event of an internal incident. Incident management solutions offer an effective way of achieving this result, mirroring the existing infrastructure while ensuring it's available under any circumstances.



Simple, proactive measures such as the above allow team members to communicate with each other calmly and productively, freeing up time to deal with other, less easily anticipated issues. By taking advantage of a coherent, technology-driven solution, human error is radically reduced and damage limited. For team members, just knowing that they're not isolated from their colleagues - but that they're working alongside them to quickly and effectively resolve issues - can have a real impact, both reducing stress levels and increasing the chance of a positive outcome.

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THE BENEFITS TO A COMPANY - FINANCIAL, ETHICAL, AND PR

A comprehensive incident management solution is a rare example of a 'win-win'. It's not just the right thing to do from a human perspective - we all want our fellow colleagues to be happy in the workplace - but it also makes complete sense from a financially objective one. The return on investment in the event of an incident is clear, with business minimizing disruptions and maintaining brand reputation.

" crisis communication solutions can benefit your business "

What is less obvious are the benefits even when there isn't an incident. The knowledge that a company is thinking ahead - has given thought to the welfare of employees and customers alike - can be a huge PR positive, driving staff loyalty, building brand credibility and establishing a company as a mature, proactive operator, projecting a positive, reassuring image both internally and externally. And when all is said and done, that image can directly contribute to a company's bottom line.

Conclusion

Not every event can be anticipated, but the vast majority can. Even in the extreme case of 'act of god' type situations such as natural disasters or terrorist events, thoughtful, comprehensive planning and good communication can radically reduce the negative fallout, speeding recovery times and reducing stress to employees.

If you want to learn more about how incident and crisis communication solutions can benefit your business, your colleagues, and your customers, why not read on at www.bosbec.com/incident

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