



Crisis Management: Planning for and Surviving Unpredictable Events

by Jack Riley

Your company may encounter many types of unplanned disruptions where your resources could be significantly strained or rendered unusable. Things like fires, storm damage, utility failures, chemical spills, floods, or destructive or criminal attacks. And often overlooked are the medical pandemic crisis like what we face today with COVID-19.

No matter the crisis, there are critical impacts to business. More often than not we consider things like loss of life, lost or damaged assets, destruction of files or documentation or even complete facilities. But things we often realize, sometimes too late, include degraded employee morale, impaired customer and supplier trust, and market interruptions to the community.

Although the above risks and their impacts can occur at any moment, by following a structured plan, their short- and long-term effects can be mitigated. And that's where having a robust, well planned, tested and executable Business Continuity Plan can prove to be one of the most valuable tools you possess.

A few years ago, I found myself at the epicenter of a disaster where we experienced a major fire that destroyed everything but the workshop of one of our dealership facilities. Fortunately, we had been recently tasked to develop a Business Continuity Plan for our company. As a result, our teams were fully trained and confident with a well-structured plan at the ready. In record time of less than 12 hours, we recovered to having the full capability of serving our customers as if we hadn't skipped a beat. I believe to this day that without this plan we would not have been so successful.

A Business Continuity Plan (BCP) outlines risks and impacts of varying disruptions and provides the essential steps to ensure your business units are able to immediately continue functioning, and then be restored to full operational capacity following the event. A few key elements went into our plan that I will share:

TEAMS & STRUCTURE:

Your plan should be designed as a manageable and structured process to organize activities during and following a disruption with the intention to bring about order from chaos. It should include a designated Recovery Team Leader and key team leads assigned to specific areas of the operation.

In the event your BCP needs to be initiated, your Recovery Team Leader should quickly review the required information set out in your plan and activate the necessary teams.

At a minimum, you should consider having teams dedicated to General clean-up and grounds access and directions, Internal and External Communications, Facilities and Replacement Resources, Technical and IT, Transportation and Logistics, and Sustained Department Operations. This ensures you have focused coverage of all major areas of your business.

PRIORITIES:

For the purpose of organizing, prioritizing and focusing resources, an example of priority categorization might look like this:

Immediate: Reserved for steps that must be taken within 12 hours of interruption.

Same Day: Applies to steps that must be taken within 24 hours

Secondary: These are steps that must be taken within 1 week

Non-critical: Those steps that could be delayed for 2 weeks or longer

COMMUNICATION:

It is also important to clearly define and communicate how your teams are set up, who the leaders are, and what their areas of responsibility are so that there is no confusion during an event. The last thing we want is more chaos!

There should be as many relevant tasks outlined with steps to take, who to work with and how to ensure their progress is updated regularly.

The appearance of organized activity is settling and breeds confidence with your employees, customers, and anyone else impacted by the event. A few things that should fit into your communications plan are:

- Communicating to employee's families with a clear message outlining proposed schedules, support and showing empathy of the situation
- Communication to customers and suppliers that clearly state the impacts on the business and how it will affect them. Ask what their priorities are and offer to work directly on individual plans where required.
- Gather regular updates from reliable sources about the ongoing crisis – if more significant, how does it change the current state
- Posts to social media, internal boards, customer facing areas etc.
- Be clear, concise, open and honest and deliver with a true sense of care

Also, the media may be interested in your story so you should have a well-prepared message.

LEADERSHIP:

One of the most important aspects of your Business Continuity Plan is having competent leadership who understand how critical it is to respond to the personal reactions and stresses of those involved. People will experience events very differently from one another and will act and react accordingly.

Your leaders need to be well equipped to guide and mentor their people and be able to lead the business through successfully. Here are some tips:

- Take a “Do right, Do your best” approach
- Create a sense of community, strength and purpose
- Stand with your people and acknowledge all their contributions to solutions. Let them know they are valued
- Prepare to make outside the box decisions; interrupt or alter existing processes
- Consider the need to “make do” with limited resources
- Act with honesty, empathy and be clear in any communication or decision support
- Remain positive, create activities mid-cycle to enliven your work force
- Hold ideas round table discussions around topics of customer service, supply availability, employee scheduling and workloads
- Celebrate outcomes at every win and discuss every setback to see where it could be overcome
- Prepare for the aftermath by having your people document their experiences through the crisis for sharing/planning/future preparations. They will remain part of the solution when the crisis ends
- Provide employees with resources to manage stress, confidence, and health

- Manage employee schedules and workloads and regularly check to see if those plans are working well for the employee
- What are the company values? Have employees tell stories of living out those values

We are all facing a large crisis at the moment. If you don't already have a Business Continuity Plan, it is never too late to start building one.

I sincerely hope this article provides you with some good thoughts and ideas.

Please note that DFS is making consulting services available on a pro bono basis to help companies impacted by the Coronavirus. If you'd like to discuss how we can assist you and your business, get in touch with Jack Riley, the author of this article, at jriley@dfs-solutions.com.