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Internal communications critical in times of crisis

The knee jerk reaction that many companies take when they are embroiled in a crisis is to start communicating only once the issue has been broken on the public stage. The vast majority of their communication then focuses on external audiences and very little effort is made to communicate with staff prior to or at the same time as the external audiences are receiving their communication.

“Internal communication tunnel vision is arguably one of the most dangerous mindsets a company can develop,” says Evan Bloom, MD of Crisis Communications Consultancy. “Most companies forget about communicating effectively with internal audiences. The reality, however, is that a company’s employees, contractors, part-time staff and service providers will require communication about an incident even before it reaches the press.”

Internal communications is going to be an increasingly critical component of crisis management over the next few years in South Africa. “A company that has an internal crisis communications plan and can roll it out effectively is a responsible company,” adds Bloom. “These companies understand the value of proactive and rapid internal communication to take control of an issue before the rumour mill goes into overdrive. Most importantly, an internal crisis communications plan is indicative of a company that embraces the values of good corporate governance.”

Looking at the next few years, Bloom predicts at least seven potential internal crisis scenarios that companies must not only have on their radar screens, but also have concrete, tested crisis management plans in hand to deal with. The potential crises are: skills shortages, industrial action and wildcat strikes, declining business confidence, staff retrenchments and corporate downsizing, industrial accidents, general unforeseen incidents and dreaded illnesses such as AIDS, drug resistant TB, and bird flu.

These internal crises need to be seen in the context of crises that South Africa will be facing over the next few years. These crises will occur external to companies, but will affect internal operations. Some of these crises, in no particular order, include:

1. Corruption – public and private sector
2. Crime – organised and petty
3. Weather – irregular patterns
4. Infrastructure – utilities, roads, houses
5. Organised labour / unions

6. Political uncertainty, political infighting, defections and government issues
7. General business uncertainty and lack of confidence
8. Healthcare - public and private
9. Skills shortage and emigration of economically active individuals
10. Service delivery

With all these issues at hand, how does a company prepare to communicate internally and manage a crisis that originates internally?

Conduct an internal vulnerability audit

Companies can only plan for issues and events that they will be vulnerable to and the only way to uncover such vulnerabilities is to hold an internal vulnerability audit. This audit is an in-depth analysis of each and every department, its day-to-day functioning in the company, coupled with how it interacts with other departments and external bodies. Internal day-to-day operational risk is a large contributor to a company's overall vulnerability and the audit will uncover multiple internal areas of weakness..

Hold a scenario planning event

Companies then need to hold a scenario planning event that uncovers every internal scenario the organisation could face. What the company will be trying to ascertain is the worst things that could happen to it from an internal communication perspective and if the company has the capabilities, resources and strategies to tackle these scenarios and manage them effectively.

Put the crisis management plan together

The crisis management plan is then put together and it should consist of the following aspects:

1. **List of what factors may cause an internal crisis** – all of these are obtained from the vulnerability audit.
2. **List of potential scenarios** – these are obtained from the scenario planning event.
3. **List of the crisis management team** – a list of the crisis management team needs to be formulated. This team must include the company spokesperson, the CEO, managers from HR, corporate communications, sales and marketing and IT. Allowance must be made for external consultants and specialists such as: the police, labour specialists, psychologists, private investigators and insurance advisors, etc.
4. **Call-out list** – a list of who must be called out when a crisis breaks must exist with full details of all their contact information, including after-hour numbers.
5. **Call-out procedure** – the company will need a call-out procedure that will describe how the crisis team is called out, who the first and second person to be called out are and how the list cascades from there .

6. **Spokesperson** – this is a short list of the primary spokesperson for the company as well as one or two back-up spokespeople, should the primary spokesperson not be available. The external spokesperson will also address the internal audience to ensure a single spokesperson addresses all audiences for the duration of the crisis.
7. **Roles and responsibilities** – every member of the crisis team and those supporting them must have their own responsibilities noted down so that each team member knows what they are required to do for the duration of the crisis.
8. **Holding statements** – the company will need to write a series of press releases covering a series of potential scenarios. The writing is generic and space must be left for details to be inserted. The press releases will have to be proactively disseminated, internally and externally, so that all audiences receive the same message.
9. **Collateral material** – a series of company-specific documents such as background briefing information, photography of spokespeople, product information and question and answer (Q&A) documents must be kept on hand. The Q&A document will be in a template format so that it can be tweaked accordingly.

Having a crisis management plan for internal crises is worthless if practice exercises are not held in which the team goes through fictitious scenarios to test their crisis management capabilities. “Being well-prepared includes being well-drilled,” concludes Bloom.

This article formed the basis of a recent presentation at a seminar on internal communications hosted by Knowledge Resources.

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