#Covid-19 #Coronavirus #Pandemic: Managing the #Crisis

Whenever an organisation finds itself facing a crisis, the cause can be varied – a cyber attack, civil unrest, industrial action, legislation changes, hurricanes, earthquakes, ICT failure, head office fire etc – the list goes on. It could even be a crisis that is multifaceted resulting from two or more threats materialising simultaneously. It is certainly worth remembering that because you may be dealing with one crisis, there is no moratorium on other crises.

Most recently during its 2019-20 summer season we have seen the emergency services in Australia fighting unprecedented bush fires while parts of the country were facing serious flooding with the Covid-19 Coronavirus waiting in the wings ready to do its worst. Any one of these crises could have presented organisations caught in the firing line with a severe set of challenges but imagine having to face two or more concurrently??

Today, and for the foreseeable future we are facing a global civil emergency in the form of a pandemic which, in addition to the human aspect, has very serious implications for just about every organisation on the planet. We are being strongly encouraged to practice social distancing both in our personal as well as our professional lives by maintaining a distance of at least two metres (six feet) from work colleagues or passers-by in the street. This can understandably make the traditional round-table crisis management meetings logistically very difficult to conduct. Fortunately, technology is at hand to help resolve that challenge and these meetings can now be conducted online. Consequently, members of the CMT can be at home or theoretically anywhere in the world but still engage in a meeting providing they have a suitable Internet connection.

Who should be on the Crisis Management Team (CMT) ?

For large organisations you would generally expect the CMT to be made of members of the 'C-Suite'. Executive level managers such as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Chief Information Officer (CIO) and so on. Other C-suite job titles could include CTO (Chief Technology Officer), COO (Chief Operating Officer), CCO (Chief Compliance Officer), CKO (Chief Knowledge Officer), CSO (Chief Security Officer), CDO (Chief Data Officer), and CMO (Chief Marketing Officer).

So, in the current pandemic generated crisis, while the titles of the various senior management roles will vary from organisation to organisation, a CMT might look something like this:

- CMT Leader – usually an organisation's CEO would take the lead role
- Human Resources Director – a pandemic is first and foremost a human issue
- Chief Financial Officer – will invariably be expected to control the funding of any initiatives that are required during a crisis
- Chief Information Officer – with responsibility for Information Technology
- Chief Operations Officer – representing what the organisation does or its "*raison d'être*"
- Company Doctor (assuming the organisation has appointed a medical representative)
- Media communications Manager – this role may sometimes be handled by the CEO although some organisations will appoint a specialist in public and media relations

   "Having a company-wide communication plan in place will empower you to act quickly and effectively when a crisis begins. Instead of wasting time debating how to handle things, you'll be empowered to take action and prevent the crisis from growing out of control" - (Dawley, 2016)

In a typical three-tier command model, while a CMT would generally operate at the 'Strategic' level (sometimes referred to as 'Gold' or 'Command' Level) the team may also decide to co-opt others that would normally be expected to function at the second level – the 'Tactical' level ('Silver'). For example, this could include those individuals with responsibility for managing Business Continuity and Emergency Preparedness.

For Small and Medium Size Enterprises (SME's), because they have probably not reached a critical mass, they may only need to adopt a two-tier or even a single-tier command structure. Furthermore, it is entirely possible that the Chief Executive is also the individual who wears several other 'hats' too. Consequently, SME's should make sure that, even if some individuals are responsible for multiple aspects of the 'business', they still have sufficient representation for all appropriate parts of the organisation.

Regardless of the size of an organisation, what is also important is that every member of the CMT has at least one named backup who can stand-in as and when necessary. If it is logistically possible, they should also be in attendance at CMT meetings whether the meeting is being run as a traditional or an online session. Their brief may only be to observe proceedings. However, should they be called upon to take a more active role on the CMT, they will already be up to speed on what has happened and been agreed in previous meetings.

So, what about a CMT meeting agenda?

First and foremost, we need to accept that the agenda for just about every crisis management meeting will be event driven. Moreover, whatever the nature of the crisis, any issues pertaining to the health and safety of employees and other stakeholders should be high up if not at the top of the agenda. A life-threatening pandemic certainly meets that criteria.

However, in order to be effective while avoiding precious time being wasted, like just about any other type of meeting, a crisis management meeting needs a predefined agenda. Along with the minutes from any previous meetings the agenda must be circulated to attendees before the meeting starts. But events associated with some crises will be very dynamic and in the case of a pandemic, the crisis can be exacerbated by members of the crisis management team succumbing to the contagion.

I remember many years ago watching a training film that ran for about 30 minutes and was entitled 'Meetings, bloody meetings'. It featured John Cleese of Monty Python fame and a trailer of the film can be seen by following the URL below:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWYnVt-umSA

The film is very amusing, but it carries a serious message and is one that has stayed with me in the years that have passed, so I would recommend looking at the trailer. It shows you enough to provide a flavour of how meetings should be organised with specific emphasise on agenda setting before the meeting starts. If you can see a full version of the film, I would recommend it. There is also has a sequel called "More bloody meetings".

OK, so what type of things are you likely to find in that pandemic flavoured CMT meeting agenda? It is not easy to create the definitive CMT meeting agenda as I would argue that it does not exist. However, I would suggest that you consider ©the mock agenda below which should help you construct your own agenda and also read the case study of a pandemic plan exercise which I facilitated several years before the Covid-19 coronavirus came charging out of China (click here to read the case study).

1. You are going to need the usual standards such as:
    a. Meeting date / start time
    b. Location Details / URL link for joining an online meeting
    c. Requested Attendees
    d. Review and approve minutes of last meeting
2. Human issues
    a. Current absenteeism statistics including:
        i. Reasons for the absenteeism
        ii. Update on support programme(s) for 'at risk' employees
        iii. Status on sick employees
        iv. Areas of organisation affected, and potential backfill options for absent staff
    b. Report on social distancing initiative across the organisations premises
    c. Home working update
    d. Availability of counselling for traumatised employees
3. Financial update from CFO
4. Supply Chain Management update

    NB. If your organisation uses a 'Just-in-Time' supply chain model, should any of the products or components depends commercial aviation, we saw during the 2002-3 SARS outbreak and now during the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic that commercial aviation all but stopped. Consequently your 'J-i-T' supply chain may well be broken.

    a. Upstream
    b. Downstream

5. Facilities Management:
   a. Report on state of hand gels, paper towels, personal tissues, disposable gloves and face masks etc.
   b. Daily premises cleaning update
6. Review / agree actions on escalated issues from Business Continuity and Emergency Preparedness Managers etc
7. Agree upon any appropriate stakeholder communication including employees
8. Any other business
9. Date / time / venue for next meeting

Those organisations that have a 24*7 market presence the frequency of CMT meetings could be daily and, in some cases, several times during a 24-hour period especially if the media and social media spotlights are focused on your operations. The nature and gravity of the crisis will be a key driver in this.

And Finally……

For a meeting to be effective, someone needs to write the minutes. As an old boss of mine used to say, "If it isn't in writing then it didn't happen, or it was never said". He used to be very pedantic about this point but he was absolutely right.

So please don't forget to ensure that someone is nominated as the minute taker. Or better still, consider making a recording of the meeting either audio or if practical use video. This shouldn't be used as substitute for the traditional minutes but it could prevent any later disputes arising should anyone choose to challenge what was said by whom and when and what the minute taker actually wrote..

Robert Clark is the author of "Business Continuity and the Pandemic Threat".