Guidance on Business Continuity Planning and Emergency Response

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GUIDANCE TO BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLANNING & EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Across the globe, many organizations are implementing "work from home" programs for their staff and are actively working to mitigate the impact on operations that an emergency situation can cause. BSI Intelligence teamed with BSI Senior Consultant David Bernstein to provide guidance and best practices on crisis management and business continuity planning.

From a planning and emergency response standpoint, context is key. It is useful to think of organizations as falling into two categories. The first category is organizations that are directly connected to the emergency, such as organizations in the healthcare sector or manufacturers of critical goods (N95 masks, medications, or other medical supplies) that are needed in the event of a natural disaster, outbreak, or other emergency. The other category would be organizations that are indirectly impacted by the emergency. Most companies fall underneath this category and when an emergency occurs, will need to engage in measures to maintain the organization and minimize losses over the short-, medium-, and long-terms.

For organizations in the first category, with direct connections to an emergency event, the ability of that organization to provide their good or service is going to largely dictate the nature of their response. For these organizations, there will be an array of concerns added on top of the risks experienced by organizations that are not directly connected to the emergency. For example, one major concern in a crisis is a run on resources. During a global outbreak or major natural disaster event, a company manufacturing N95 masks may experience much larger demand and therefore needs to conduct internal planning and decision-making sessions to discuss how to increase supplies, raise awareness of counterfeit products, secure against theft of products, and strategically distribute the supplies to healthcare providers and institutions in need.

For organizations that produce goods not directly tied to emergencies, two key planning factors will likely determine resilience: the ability to get workers to resume operations, even remotely, and the ability to confidently answer "if an impact takes place, do we have alternate ways to meet the needs of suppliers, staff, and customers?" **Communication is key.** Unless an organization can communicate and demonstrate a plan for maintaining a safe working environment or implementing effective work from home program, staffing levels will immediately become unstable in the event of an emergency. Additionally, companies must continue to meet the needs of stakeholders, and answer questions regarding the availability of raw materials, capacity of key suppliers, and delivery of produced goods to customers. As business continuity experts highlight, there are elements of supply chains that, if impaired, can impact businesses in unexpected ways. Organizations must understand how it is possible to maintain resiliency through managing staff and managing inputs and outputs of the organization during the event of an emergency.

Answering "What is Resilience?" in a Crisis

As with many aspects of business continuity, there is no silver bullet or one-size-fits-all answer to these questions. However, there is a solid process for understanding gaps or weaknesses in an organization's abilities. **The initial step should be determining what it means for the organization to be resilient.** The answer to this question is going to vary because there is a multitude of impacts that a crisis can have on an organization beyond the financial as supply chain partners and customers observe the organizations' response to the crisis.

Similar to the concept of implementing a results-based approach, an organization will need to decide if the answer to this question of "what does it mean to be resilient" is simply weathering the crisis or is the answer more specific, such as maintaining certain production

levels or meeting and exceeding other targets despite the crisis. After answering that primary question, the next step is to determine how best to set up organizations to improve resilience and meet those established targets. There are resilience standards, such as ISO 22301 that companies can turn to, but considering "what does it mean to be resilient" at an institutional level makes it clear that the same target cannot be applied to every organization.

Adapting and Managing Expectations: Building Flexibility

Even if an organization is implementing a business continuity plan during such a crisis, there will be moments where the organization will need to bend their response to meet the shifting parameters of the incident. There will also very likely be moments where the organization will need to manage expectations on the successes of the plan and its capabilities amidst the crisis. Much of the work to be done both prior and amid a crisis is figuring out what will take the company from an on-the-heels reactionary response to a proactive response that is well-organized to tackle further incoming challenges presented by the emergency.

One common issue that BSI noted is that companies often see a new circumstance and immediately rewrite the crisis management structure or make extensive changes to the plan of action. If a company has a response management structure that is simply not functioning, that may indicate a larger issue with plan development to be revisited after the incident. However, if their response structure is flexible, the plan of action can likely be retooled instead of discarded.

One effective way to ensure that disaster response plans are flexible is to **develop broad, enterprise-level policies** that are then altered slightly for regional differences in risk. Organizations should implement a general framework for managing or governing an emergency response with some basics of what to do in different scenarios and then, depending on the scope of the organization, implement regional or office/facility-level differences that address the context in those places. If there are unexpected differences or impacts at the regional or office/facility-level, there is still possibility to adjust while maintaining that enterprise-level framework.

Building a robust and flexible response or continuity plan should also include the addition of an escalation structure that makes sense for the organization. This structure calls for added procedures to be initiated as issues become more extensive. Implementing this methodology in your planning helps keep the entire organization on the same page, whether it is national or international, and provides a mechanism to be proactive instead of constantly reacting to changes in the situation in a variety of places or different ways.

Communication is Key

One of the most critical best practices is communication. Organizations must be mindful of the concept of public perception of the risk versus the actual risk. These days, a great deal of information is sent out through the media without much context. Organizations should not only communicate internally with staff, suppliers, and other relevant parties but should establish a clear internal communication cadence and an internal place, such as an intranet site, where employees can always find the latest communications related to an emergency. This should be a central place to learn about other key topics and policy changes, including what is under discussion internally, what the concerns are for the organization, and what resources or support is the organization providing internally, among other information. **Cadence is key to maintain** as well. For example, everyone understands that at set intervals, the company will provide an update to the situation and what about the situation is relevant internally, even if that update is "no news to report." By establishing this cadence, organizations can mitigate any sort of speculation or guessing as to what the company is or should be doing. To follow-up on those communications, management should be actively checking with staff, listening to their thoughts and feelings on coming to work amidst the crisis, and providing that information to decision-makers. Staff are going to manage risk not only for themselves but also for their families and are going to be constantly evaluating many factors. There should be a mechanism for decision-makers to hear those concerns and provide reassurance. Staff inputs can lead to critical insights into how to best build a response that maintains the organization and effectively recovers functionality lost during the crisis.

Re-Evaluating in the Medium- and Long-Term

When designing a flexible escalation system and its protocols, it is important to think critically in the medium- and long- term. If, as an organization, you believe that the emergency will get worse before it gets better, now is the time to be looking at those escalation protocols and begin to think about scenarios that could last weeks or even months from now. Are the protocols listed for later stages adequate for what you envision as "worse"? Are the actions you identified still attainable? In any emergency, a short-term response may be all that is possible to implement, but outlining, when possible, likely scenarios that will play out over weeks and months is an important part of any business continuity plan.

It is important to prioritize and mandate planning for future possible outbreaks or disasters and adopt lessons learned by this experience. Because of limitations in time and resources, many organizations take a mostly reactive posture and plan for incidents that are top of mind. After the Ebola outbreak, organizations developed and implemented planning related to that outbreak. After an aggressive hurricane season or coastal storm, organizations respond to and plan for the impacts of hurricanes. More recently, when there are major instances of lone-wolf terrorism or active shooters, organizations will plan for and implement plans to respond to

those situations. A typical organization will take the work done for those incidents and then place the plan metaphorically back on the shelf for when it may be needed again instead of actively revising and updating their base and incident-specific plan. It is not due to a lack of importance or concern by organizations, but more fundamentally that business continuity planning is one goal in a constantly changing list of competing priorities. It can sometimes be difficult to justify the time, cost, and energy needed for a continually updated plan, however, it is still critical to develop and have access to at least some general plans available that can be adapted to help suit the situation.

After the Crisis: Preparing for the Future

After an emergency or a major incident, most organizations are understandably focused on recovering from the emergency or pushing resources toward restarting or managing the fallout of the particular incident. It can be difficult to justify, based on the size of the organization and personnel available, the resources to go back and put together a more formalized plan and that is not always the best solution. Another recommendation is instead of developing a plan immediately after an emergency, take a breath and examine what went well and what are areas that you want to improve upon in a future response. Take the time to put together a comprehensive after-action or internal assessment. Without assigning blame, examine what responses went well and what did not. This can include evaluating communications, the consistency of decisions, and the overall resiliency of operations, among others. After developing the after-action report, decide and document what elements you are satisfied with and which you want to change. The report does not need to necessarily be an extensive process, but it is an important reflection that will guide how to prioritize next steps and either update or build-out continuity plans.

In summary, the above processes should encompass the emergency planning cycle or business continuity cycle. Take an after-action, conduct an assessment based on that after-action, design a plan, train people on the expectations of that plan, and then conduct an exercise to validate the plan. The exercise is a way to engage people, garner buy-in, and ensure that your plan is understood in the way that you expect it to be understood. It also provides the opportunity to identify any gaps that you may have missed in the initial design. Organizationally, an ideal is creating exercises that become increasingly complex over time or as the plans become more complex and detailed. Doing a functional exercise where resources are actually moved or expended is not always feasible, but a table-top or discussion-based exercise or game-play can be just as useful.

If your organization is at least actively discussing preparedness efforts or working toward having general planning in place, it can be extraordinarily consequential in times of crisis and have tangible outcomes that would not be present otherwise. After any crisis, organizations should be following the process of engaging in an after-action, examining what can be improved, and then set about reinforcing those actions throughout the company.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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Mr. Bernstein has over 10 years of experience in emergency response, emergency management, and business continuity and resilience planning. He has overseen planning and response initiatives spanning individual hospitals to multi-facility health networks. Mr. Bernstein has also acted as a strategic advisor on multi-agency initiatives at the local and regional level, including coalitions and consortiums ranging in size and scope. His expertise includes the development and implementation of emergency drills and exercises, training, incident command, and regulatory compliance for emergency management in the healthcare sector.