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Learning curve

~~PANDEMIC IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR BUSINESSES TO LEARN HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE NEXT CRISIS~~

By: Barbara Bowes

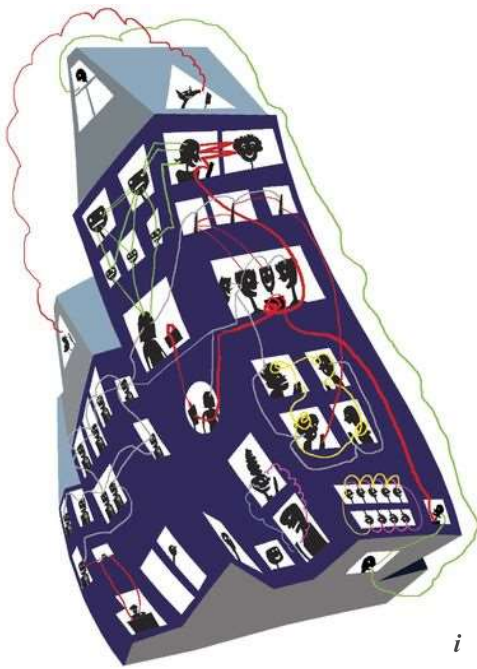
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COVID-19 pandemic... a scary term and a very scary time. For employers and employees, it's something that's been top of mind for the past six weeks. The crisis sent many employees to work in their home environment. Businesses and many services gradually ground to a halt. No more playgrounds, no more casinos, no more movies and no more pampering spas and/or personal service. Customers line up to enter the grocery store, 10 at a time and then "walk the line" to get what they need. Recently, store lineups have consisted of strings of people with a wide variety of face masks making one think it's an early Halloween. Strange times for sure.

Many workplaces are empty because employees are working at home or the business is closed. Information technology professionals are exhausted from having to quickly locate equipment to link multiple employees to central systems. Managers and supervisors are struggling to keep their teams together and trying to find innovative ways to keep their isolated employees from actually feeling isolated. At the same time, employees are reeling from the sudden change of workspace and struggle to juggle work and family. That so-called work/life balance idea just doesn't seem to work in this circumstance.

However, like or not, this COVID-19 crisis is also a learning experience. It's more than just scenario building, it's essentially an extreme, real-life exercise in business continuity planning. So what has management learned? First of all, I think I can safely say that pretty well every business leader has learned they weren't ready for such a widespread calamity. Yes, some larger organizations are accustomed to planning for annual shutdowns and many others do have carefully planned emergency business continuation plans. Most do not. Some of the things many organizations have learned are as follows:

The right leadership



Susan Joufflas / The Seattle Times

While some organizations do have a crisis plan in place, it is also important to look closely at the implementation leadership required. Leadership during a crisis requires someone who is "cool, calm and collected" when faced with the threat of attack on the organization especially when public safety must be part of the success formula. When things don't go smoothly, leadership is often the problem. Did your organization appoint the right crisis leader? What have you learned?

Essential worker assessments

It is also important to always have an overall view of the organization and know exactly who the essential workers are. They're found in every department. These are the employees that you need to continue

functioning. It includes human resources, finance, production or service employees even though the number can be quite scaled down. Organizations should keep a running spreadsheet that identify those roles and positions and the people in them. Were you ready with your master essential worker chart? What have you learned?

Replacement planning

While many organizations engage in succession planning for executive leaders, not too many also engage in replacement planning. So, if someone must engage in "self-isolating," do you have a list of three other employees who could do their job or is the work simply not done? What was the status of your replacement planning map? Was it updated or were you caught off guard? Lesson learned?

Cross training

Cross training was once considered just one of those HR fads. But it is not. Every department should have been engaged in cross-training opportunities for as many jobs as they could. Not only does this prepare an organization for a crisis such as COVID-19, it provides security of staffing for vacation, illness and other absences. Were you ready? What lesson did you learn?

Work at home planning

Having employees work at home is not as easy as sending them home and simply linking them up with technology. Employers should have work at home policies in place, work at home agreements, and lists of equipment that would be provided by the employer versus the employee. You also need guidelines with respect to security and safety of equipment and the confidentiality of data. And you need guidelines and expectations for employees while at the same time considering the need for flexibility for unique life/work situations. Did you have this in place? What lesson did you learn?

Work at home supervision

Working at home changes the entire dynamics of supervision. It's more challenging to retain that good old-fashioned teamwork developed so well when everyone was in one place. It takes more effort to stay in touch, reinforce corporate values and monitor productivity. And it takes compassion and consideration of employee stress and home work environment, something that not all managers/supervisors have. What has your success been to date in supervising at home workers? What challenges have you experienced? What are the lessons learned?

Technology cracks

The COVID-19 crisis has brought more awareness to the many cracks in an organization's digital environments such that not all work at home employees could be completely supported. In addition, issues of non-compliance with corporate hardware/software as well as security features can creep into many work at home situations. What was the status of readiness for your technology needs? What are the lessons learned?

Employee character

A crisis such as this pandemic quickly opens a window to the personality and the individual character of your employees. Who is stepping up to the challenge versus who is withering on the vine? Who is productive and who is not? In times of crisis, you don't have time to hold hands for very long. Everyone has to pull their weight. If they didn't do so prior to a crisis, managers will now be assessing the personality and character required for each job role and will be making some changes in their selection criteria. What lessons did you learn about employee character? What do you need in the future?

Emotions

While human resource managers have always emphasized the importance of the people side of the business, never has this been more important than during a crisis. Not only are managers scrambling to balance operational issues, they are now dealing with the emotional trauma experienced by employees. And, this isn't just stress management 101 for a couple of employee issues, it's everyone, management included. What was your success and/or challenges in this area? What were your lessons learned?

Operational processes

Many rules and regulations and operational processes have been relaxed during this current crisis and perhaps surprised many with the ability to provide a faster service. It's anticipated many of these changes will become permanent. Why bungle up service with bureaucracy? Did you find ways to streamline your business? What were your lessons learned in this area?

Human resource policies

While the COVID-19 crisis was quite unexpected, it has served to identify a number of human resource policies that should be added into every policy manual. This includes how a crisis team will be set up, policies for working at home, policies for refusal to work, policies for communicable diseases in the workplace, policies for temporary layoff planning, and policies for leaves/vacations during a crisis. As well, the crisis highlighted the importance of your human resource professionals. What were your lessons learned?

Communication

Communication during a crisis has always been important but the COVID-19 crisis required continual communication to both employees and consumers. An all-out media alert was needed for employee communication and efforts needed to include reaching out to those now working at home. This required frequent communication with managers but also email notifications and website updates. Although the variety of communication tactics took time and energy, the role of communication was key. What were your lessons learned?

No one enjoys engaging in an extreme, real-life exercise in business continuity planning this COVID-19 has provided us. However, I am confident management learned a lot from the experience and now knows what needs to be done should we encounter such an

event again. Take time to not only count your blessings but count the learnings you will take away from this.

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