Crisis Management Essentials

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Crisis Management, Crisis Communications

Every nonprofit would be well-served to spend time planning how it will cope with a crisis. The crisis management plan for your nonprofit will detail how you will deliver your organization's programs despite adverse conditions. The strategies should encompass events such as fires, explosions, power outages, natural disasters, theft, embezzlement or the death of the CEO/executive director, with obvious negative impact. But also plan for seemingly positive events that, with poor planning, could turn against you.

For example:

- twice as many walk-in volunteers as expected show up to help and you have no plan to put them to work or capture their enthusiasm for a future project, or
- you're overwhelmed with perishable donations in response to a community plea, but you have no procedures in place for handling the overflow in a timely and equitable manner.

While developing a comprehensive crisis management plan could take some time, if you're interested in getting started right away with some key activities, consider beginning with the essentials outlined below.

1. Formulate a crisis communications team to craft messages and communicate within the company/entity/organization and with public officials, deal with the media and take care of employees from post event until the situation is resolved. Key constituent groups for small businesses might include the vendors, suppliers, the landlord, distribution centers, major clients or customers, and government offices. For a nonprofit organization, the list could include key funders, the organization's parent or umbrella organization, program participants, volunteers and staff. For a public entity, these might include elected officials, appointed officials, community organizations, and leaders of neighboring state and local governments. The official spokesperson need only answer questions from the media that pertain his or her employer's areas of responsibility. Questions outside those parameters should be referred to the spokesperson for the fire or police department, the hospital or other appropriate "expert."
2. Reach out to key public safety agencies in your community when designing your facility evacuation plan. Determine where the fire or police department is likely to place its staging area and designate that location as the site where staff will congregate after evacuating your building. Many communities also have an office of emergency preparedness that may be able to provide advice about evacuation strategies.
3. Establish a network of community institutions that you can call on during a crisis. Consider a wide range of organizations that might be key partners during specific types of crises. Don't forget the range of needs you might have, depending on the crisis. For example: supplies, office space, equipment, and expertise.
4. Keep a comprehensive directory of personnel up-to-date, with copies maintained off site. Be diligent in maintaining emergency contact information for all staff; every time an employee leaves or joins the organization, or undergoes an annual review by a supervisor, update current home addresses and phone, fax, wireless and beeper numbers. With security and privacy issues in mind, consider an online directory that enables each staff member to update personal information without requiring a visit to your personnel department.
5. Carefully inventory the physical assets needed to continue mission-critical operations, even at vastly reduced levels. Update these databases or spreadsheets during the annual audit or property insurance renewal process, but record major acquisitions as they occur.

6. Maintain a backup of your server and key databases and critical financial files. Update the backup at least every week and consider storing backup data in the cloud or at an off-site location. Schedule drills every 30 to 60 days to test backup procedures and to determine if you can restore your systems solely using backup records.
7. Store a copy of all insurance policies, vehicle and property titles, vehicle registrations and bank account numbers in a safe deposit box or fireproof safe.
8. Review emergency and crisis management procedures at least once a year with key personnel. Make it a top priority to create procedures indicating who does what in the event of an emergency with alternates to replace them.

Whether or not you're forced to operate at a reduced level or from another location or transfer your obligations to another provider, thinking about a crisis before it materializes could mitigate the damage to your operations and your reputation. Visualize what the organization would look like if it were strong and fortified to survive a serious — as well as catastrophic — crisis. Then invest time, analysis and some budget to create a crisis management program that meets the unique needs of your agency.

More Information

Read our book on crisis management: Vital Signs: Anticipating, Preventing and Surviving Crisis in a Nonprofit.