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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- BE READY FOR CRISES CAUSED BY OTHERS
- BACK UP DIGITAL SYSTEMS
- FOCUS ON WHAT PEOPLE NEED
- PREPAREDNESS IS KEY
- PEOPLE CAN BE NEEDED AT SHORT NOTICE

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WHAT HAPPENED?

On Friday 19 July, it quickly became obvious that there was a serious problem affecting computers across the world. Systems were put out of action which created problems for medical establishments, governments, travel, banking and a whole host of other businesses. As people around the world were attempting to log onto systems, it was clear it was across the globe.

The problem was identified as an update to a system provided by the company CrowdStrike that had impacted 8.5 million Windows computers. CEO George Kurtz issued an apology and the company's Chief Security Officer called it a 'gut punch'.

The fault meant that manual repairs were needed which caused a lengthy recovery period. Shares in CrowdStrike dropped by 13% and had been up by 40% before the incident. One of the worst-affected companies was Delta Airlines, who were forced to cancel 4,000 flights on the days immediately following the outage.

A lot has been written about the situation in the immediate aftermath, but the wider implications are significant. The problem highlighted the global interconnectivity that can be a weakness and how one system run by one company can have a huge impact. It is the latest situation to highlight the potential risks that exist within supply chains and how businesses can be caught up in other people's crises.

What can communication and business learn from the situation?

The impact of the outage didn't just affect businesses; it affected people, who had their lives disrupted. This is the most important impact from the situation and can be forgotten in a discussion about businesses that were working to get back up and running, and the financial damage to CrowdStrike. Among the human impacts were:

- people unable to access doctors' services and receive prescriptions;
- people unable to register the death of loved ones;
- people not able to travel and the Civil Aviation Authority saying they would not be entitled to compensation;
- patients having surgery cancelled, including heart surgery, and having cancer treatments rescheduled.

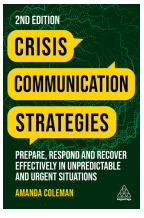
The communication by each organisation and business affected needed to recognise the real lives that were impacted. It required more from them then putting the responsibility back on the tech providers and the IT suppliers. Effective communication, including regular updates and details of what was happening, had to be provided. Crisis communication plans needed to be invoked, despite it being another business's issue.

Planning, testing and practising for crisis situations requires careful consideration of the risks from third parties, suppliers and external events. Following the CrowdStrike situation, every business needs to take another look at its crisis response and communication plans.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Prepare for a wide range of crises – don't just expect the situation will be caused by you or will be within your control.
- Ensure digital and technical systems can be replaced with something else, such as paper-based systems.
- Be ready to invoke the crisis plan and start to communicate quickly and with limited information.
- Focus your communication and response on those who are affected by your inability to operate and share the information they need.
- Blaming another business is not an effective response as your lack of preparedness is what will be put under the spotlight.
- Crises don't happen during working hours – as this happened on Friday, it required people to work through the weekend to get on top of the problems. Staff need to be available at short notice to implement the response.
- Keep learning, revising and developing the crisis response – this incident has raised many questions for businesses about how they operate and how prepared they really are.

For advice on issues management get a copy of Everyday Communication Strategies



For more case studies and crisis communication tips get a copy of Crisis Communication Strategies by Amanda Coleman available at book stores and on Amazon.

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