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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- UNDERSTAND PEOPLE'S CONCERNS
- CONSIDER ONGOING COMMUNICATION
- BUILD RISK INTO LIFE
- PROVIDE PRACTICAL ADVICE
- MONITOR VIEWS
- SUPPORT BUSINESSES

WHAT HAPPENED?

It may not be the cheeriest of discussions, but this edition is going to consider preparedness for war. During the last month a number of European countries have been sharing information about being prepared for disasters and emergencies, and this includes war. Sweden, Denmark and Norway have sent documents to residents which included advice on the items to have at home as an emergency response kit.

Finland has reminded citizens of their 'national defence obligation' and launched a new information website. Recent documents have included checklists for food and medicine supplies citizens should have ready.

The increasing concern about the possibilities of a conflict have been discussed following the agreement for Ukraine to use US and UK weapons in Russia. In a recent addition, Germany has published a document that detailed how it would host hundreds of thousands of troops from NATO countries to serve as a logistics hub. Businesses were also advised to create crisis plans to look at employee responsibilities during a crisis and considering ways to ensure energy independence.

In a further escalation, Vladimir Putin officially reduced the threshold for Moscow to consider a nuclear strike. Professor Lucy Easthope raised concerns about the UK's readiness for a nuclear incident in a recent article (read it here).

Latvia has invited citizens to join the National Armed Services by choosing some military training and service as a reservist. And in Estonia, a recent survey commissioned by the Estonian Defence Ministry found 40% of the population consider a large-scale military attack on the country likely, an increase on the previous year. The same survey found 60% were prepared to defend their country.

What can communication and business learn from the situation?

There has been a lot of media coverage of the developments across the Baltic countries, the increase in the rhetoric from Putin and Russia's actions. At the same time, UK Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has attempted to dampen concerns by responding to questions, saying the UK is not at war with Russia but is standing by Ukraine. He was also asked questions at the G20, where he avoided commenting on the possibility of nuclear war or the need for citizens to prepare and instead hit out at the Russian 'irresponsible rhetoric'.

Amanda Coleman
COMMUNICATION

This coverage and discussion has led to confusion among many people in the UK about what sensible measures should be taken, with many choosing to avoid considering the potential impact on supply chains, vital services and other essentials.

Speaking at a European policy think tank event, the Chair of NATO's military committee, Dutch Admiral Rob Bauer, said businesses needed to be prepared for a 'wartime scenario' and to consider production and distribution lines to avoid being vulnerable to 'blackmail' from countries such as Russia and China.

Given the way information can be shared and spread around the world, the actions of governments in the Baltic countries has highlighted the gaps in information in other parts of Europe, including the UK. The UK does have the Prepare website (view it here) that provides emergency information for residents, but is this the time when more is needed?

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Public information campaigns are an important way to continue to remind people how they can become more prepared to face the challenges that may come from a range of disasters and emergencies.
- Ongoing discussion of threats and risks would help people to understand the fluctuations that can impact on lives and to become more accustomed to being prepared. This would help to avoid any discussion appearing to be linked to a specific threat or incident.
- Gathering data on views about preparedness and the risks. In the same way Estonia has gathered the views of residents, this is vital to really understanding public concerns and being able to respond with effective and tailored communication.
- Monitoring for developments and changes in opinions is also essential, as the threat may lessen or increase. This will allow communications to be developed and adapted.
- Risk could be built into modern life by ensuring it is discussed at senior levels and is not brushed off or ignored. This requires politicians to take a different approach to avoiding questions, particularly against a backdrop of increasing tension.
- Practical advice is needed to help people address practical problems and also to be prepared for any emergency, not just a possible conflict.
- Providing businesses with some specific advice about the importance of managing supply and distribution chains and building resilience for the future.

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