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TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- TRUST IS VITAL
- WARNING THROUGH MANY CHANNELS
- AVOID BECOMING COMPLACENT
- BE PREPARED
- TEST THE PLAN

WHAT HAPPENED?

Extreme and severe weather events are among the top risks around the world. Flash flooding is not a new phenomenon, but the severity of recent events has been branded as unexpected. In Texas on 4 July around 135 people were killed in a flash flood caused as the Guadalupe River burst its banks. A month's rain fell in just a few hours in what was described as a 100 year catastrophe. Twenty seven of the people died at Camp Mystic, a holiday camp for young people.

The region around the Guadalupe River is known for flash flooding and has been labelled 'flash flood alley'. Heavy rain had been expected and there was a flood watch alert, but it only became a warning after midnight and at 4.23am Accuweather and the National Weather Service issued a rare flash flood warning. The emergency managers said that although rain was predicted they were not aware of the amount of rain. Alerts were provided to mobile phones.

Video in the days that followed the terrible events showed the speed of the flooding and the damage caused by the force of the water. There is an investigation into the incident and the response underway.

Just a couple of weeks after the Texas floods, there was flash flooding in New York and New Jersey that led to a state of emergency being called. Flash floods also happen around the world with 54 people killed in a monsoon in Pakistan on 18 July. At the end of July, authorities in China relocated 4,400 people after rain affected the Miyun suburb of Beijing leading to flash floods. At the same time, three people are known to have died in eastern Romania after flash flooding. Five people have also been killed in north Vietnam through flash flooding.

What can communication and business learn from the situation?

There has been a significant amount of attention placed on the emergency warning alerts and the messages that were provided in the hours before the flooding hit. The region that was most severely affected did not have an audible warning system similar to those used to warn of tornadoes.

Instead, the alerts were sent to mobile phones. Kerr County Judge Rob Kelly who is the most senior elected official said the public were concerned about the cost of an audible warning system and so the decision was made not to introduce it.

Officials in the aftermath of the Texas flash floods said although they had expected rain, they did not expect the amount of rain and the impact that it had.

In addition, people saw light rain and made an assessment that the situation was not that serious and they were not at risk. It highlights the importance of trust in the messaging from authorities but also the need to have channels of communication that work around the clock.

As technology has developed, we have become more reliant upon it but it regularly doesn't provide the immediate response that we expect it will. The details of the investigation into the response should provide important information for others involved in the use of early warning systems.

In the aftermath of the Texas flood, details of the people who lost their lives filled the media and images of the disaster including timelapse footage of the waters rising gave an insight into the terrible event and its devastating impact.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Trust needs to be built before a disaster occurs and this includes in the systems that are in place for early warnings
- People must understand and have confidence in the messages that are given as warnings
- Warnings need to be provided in multiple ways as in many situations the old approach of ringing church bells or issuing an audible alarm have a greater impact
- People need to understand the risk but avoid becoming complacent or to have a view that things have not been bad before
- Having a plan and being prepared at home for severe weather events is essential
- The public need to be involved in the development of emergency plans and to understand the details and take part in testing
- It is essential to learn and make changes after disasters and crises even when they are in a different country
- Extreme weather events are not confined to one location and are increasingly being experienced around the world

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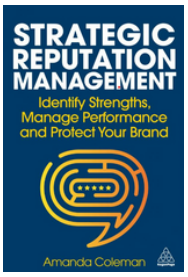

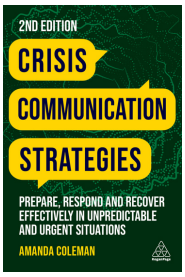

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