

# When Disaster Hits, What Is HR's Role in Avoiding 'Confusion and Chaos'?

HR Executive | Tom Starner | September 29, 2022

In the wake of Hurricane Ian's assault on the state of Florida, HR leaders nationwide are reminded that the function must play a leading role in helping employers be as ready as possible when disaster strikes. And with climate change expected to usher in increasingly severe weather events in the coming years, now is the time to get ready.

"No matter the size of your business or what industry you're in, you need effective disaster preparedness plans," says Amy Bakay, CEO at HRNola, an HR consulting firm based in New Orleans.

Bakay explains that HR can play a vital role in planning for disasters and emergencies by working with senior management and the executive team to create a custom disaster preparedness plan tailored for the business—and for each type of disaster, including fire, tornado and hurricane, among others. Plans should be reviewed and updated annually, at a minimum.

"HR's role is to ensure that a response plan is in place well before the crisis even occurs," she says.

## Building the plan

Maggie Inbamuthiah, general manager, Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Accessibility, at peer networking firm Executive Networks, says employee safety should play a central role in disaster planning.

*How leaders will communicate with employees is often central to that priority.*

"HR often takes the lead in keeping a communication chain in place through which a network of calls can be initiated to ensure all employees are safe," she says. For instance, every employee may be assigned to call three other employees to check on their condition and report back to a core team.

"This way, the overall status can be quickly obtained," Inbamuthiah says.

David Lewis, a 37-year HR professional and CEO of HR consulting firm OperationsInc, says HR must think ahead now to make such plans possible.

"In the midst of a disaster, we unfortunately learn of all of the things we wish we had done beforehand to allow us to be better prepared to manage the situation," Lewis warns.

Lewis agrees that communication must be foremost in a plan. After a disaster, employees often won't have the typical access they are used to experiencing, and HR also has to consider that company servers and other communications systems could be offline. With that, he explains,

personal phone numbers and email addresses should be in both electronic and print format, and in the physical and virtual hands of multiple key employees.

"This will allow for contact with all should the company systems fail," he says.

When building a post-disaster communication plan, adds Jon Black, network director, Global HR Services Network, at Executive Networks, solutions such as mass text automation to all employees in a disaster zone, a call-in option for employee service centers and direct calls from local management are the best ways to plan to reach employees.

"This takes pre-disaster preparation so you have the systems and employee numbers in place in advance," he says.

## Training management

HR should remember that there are particular considerations for each organization when it comes to preparing employees for a disaster—particularly in today's climate—and managers will need to be well-prepared for how a disaster plan will impact their respective teams.

For instance, you may have a geographically dispersed workforce and will want to plan for the fact that some, or even many, of your workers could be located in areas unaffected by a natural disaster.

"To that end, you want to implement a plan for allowing those folks to take on work that cannot otherwise be handled by those in harm's way," Lewis says. "This will allow you to ensure that clients and customers are supported regardless of your staff's limited ability to do so."

Proactively informing managers about what to expect and how to handle the absence of team members is critical, he says. For example, make sure managers understand that someone who loses their home or is otherwise displaced, for example, could be unable to work for an undetermined period of time.

"Employers want to provide support and empathy, have regular communication where possible with affected staff members, and work with leadership to shift responsibilities and rebalance workloads," Lewis says.

On the empathy front, leaders and managers need to be urged to put support for employees above the bottom line, despite the business implications of a looming crisis. Not doing so can not only damage employee morale but could even create a PR nightmare.

For instance, the CEO of a Florida-based marketing company, Postcardmania, is receiving sharp criticism in the media after she reportedly downplayed Hurricane Ian to employees, calling it a "nothingburger," singling out workers who feared its approach and even urging employees to bring their families to work with them, according to The Washington Post.

Such missteps from leadership are rare, according to Executive Networks' Black, who notes that, while HR may not be able to teach empathy, it usually shows up in difficult times.

"My history has shown that leaders rise to the occasion—from pre-buying and storing essential items like water, generators, etc., to even sending out tree removal services to employee homes so employees can mobilize," he says.

## After the storm

HR shouldn't just be there for the pre-disaster planning but should also help their businesses prepare for the post-disaster aftermath.

"HR must help the senior management team determine remote work capabilities and limitations of all employees and game plan for alternate work sites in the interim," Bakay of HRNola says. Of course, recovering after a natural disaster, such as Hurricane Ian, can seem daunting, as HR issues are not at the forefront of most people's minds immediately following a crisis.

"However, employers need to be careful not to overlook important HR and employment considerations when trying to get their businesses back on track after a significant event," Bakay says.

"HR often is responsible for ensuring there are safe workplaces," Inbamuthiah adds, but "HR is also crucial in highlighting all the human aspects of getting employees back to work, and considering all aspects—from healthcare to support for the families."

The better prepared that organizations are for all potential outcomes, Black adds, the more likely they are to get the workforce, and the business, back on their feet quickly.

"There is no excuse for organizations to not be prepared for disasters today," he says. "Disaster playbooks must be tested and rewritten many times and HR should ensure that an effective response plan is in place before a crisis occurs."

Without one, Bakay adds—or if the communication around that plan is not sufficient—"the result will be confusion and chaos."