In crisis management, global public health emergencies require special attention from organisations. Some challenges are of key importance: a virus may be contagious, a localized epidemic can transform into an “explosive” pandemic rapidly and a vaccine may not always be available, as demonstrated by the Ebola and Zika outbreaks between 2014 and 2016. Thousands of people have been infected or even died from the Ebola virus, and several babies were born with severe birth defects caused by Zika. Governments, international institutions and medical research showed the extent to which they were powerless in the face of these challenges. Against the background of increased exposure to global health threats that are hardly predictable or controllable, organisations should take proactive steps to offset the impact of a global health emergency on their employees and families. Drawing upon experience with the United Nations working in the field of human resources (HR) capacities in countries affected by the Ebola and Zika virus, this paper provides the following suggestions to leaders and managers on how to manage people effectively in the face of global public health emergencies based on lessons learned and best practices:

1. Define the main lines of an external and internal strategy designed specifically to address the challenges posed by global health emergencies.

When the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported the Ebola and Zika outbreaks as global health emergencies, the biggest issue we faced was to communicate in a timely manner and respond effectively to the concerns of employees, particularly those located in remote areas in the field. At the time, the government, the main concerns were that governments and international institutions had no real answers about how to handle the virus and how fast it could spread. We did not have much information to provide to staff to reassure them. Rumours, in this context, started to spread very quickly, especially when a colleague would contract a virus leading to tragic loss at times. Inevitably, the organisation faced an increased level of absenteeism, low staff morale and some employees challenged the ability of the organisation to protect them.

To tackle such difficult situations, mass communication and emergency response preparedness are among the
most important, even most
critical factors, to manage risks
and save lives:

- Ensure that your organisation
  has a strategic plan to deal with
  public health threats. To lead a
  general preparedness plan,
  set-up a task force to design a
  set of systems to facilitate fast,
clear and consistent messaging
  in the event of a global
  humanitarian crisis, such as
  highly contagious influenza
  pandemics; use a dedicated,
  secure Web-based facility that
  allows exchange of
  information, talking points
  and press releases as they
  are issued, or in advance of
  their issuance. This
  Web-based facility will also
  collect information for the
  purposes of organizational
  learning and
decision-making.

- Further elaborate and
  implement a strategic
  communication plan that
  provides a detailed approach
  on how to communicate and
  consult with internal and
  external stakeholders. Your
  communication plan will
certainly help diffuse
consistent information and
promote open communication
and transparency to the
benefit of your organization’s
reputation, credibility and
effectiveness. Update and
implement your
communication plan during
and after the crisis.

- Empower your managers.
  During a crisis, leaders and
  managers should have full
  control on their employees. It

is, therefore, critical to support
managers at all levels in
meeting the challenges they
face in leading, managing and
offering the best possible
support to employees.
Prepare them to deal with
sensitive, highly stressful
 situations caused by influenza
 pandemics. Encourage them
to participate regularly in crisis
management-related
workshops, such as stress
management and soft skills in
 crisis management. Consider
bringing-in a consultant to
train your leaders and
managers.

2. Elaborate an emergency-
preparedness plan for HR
managers.

In today’s world, organisations
increasingly face unique risks
and challenges and most
organisations can now rely on
their business continuity plans.
However, these plans often
overlook the strategic role of
the HR function within
organisations.

The role of the HR function in
an organisation in the event of
a pandemic or other
emergencies in general is
two-fold, which is to support
the organisation and act as a
resource for employees and
their families. It speaks for the
critical importance to invest in
your HR managers’s technical
capacities and training in
emergency-preparedness and
response:

- For operational planning and
  support, appoint a focal point
  within HR and develop an
emergency response plan that
defines the roles and
responsibilities of your HR
practitioners. It will help
reduce anxiety and confusion
and ultimately improve client
service with employees and
their families. Consider
establishing a mixed team of
HR and staff counsellors/
psychologists tasked to
handle emergencies vis-à-vis
employees and their families.

- Provide your HR staff with
  adequate training on your
organisation’s business
continuity plan and crisis
management soft skills;
organize mock crisis
situation scenario to help
them practice on how to
deal with their own stress
and respond effectively to
employees and families.

- Review and update the
organisation’s HR policies,
guidelines and health and
safety insurance policy
schemes on a regular
basis.

- Work in collaboration with other
similar organization and
particularly local organisations
to share experience and build
organizational learning.

3. Help your employees deal with
situational and residual stress.

It sounds obvious, but when a
 crisis hits, every person’s
threshold for dealing with stress is
different. You can help your
employees and their families deal
with situational and residual
stress in rational, effective ways
through building collective
resilience and wisdom.

You can hit these targets by
setting-up a dedicated intranet
page, use social media as well as
mobile communications:

“The role of the human resources function in an organisation
in the event of a pandemic or other emergency situations in
general is two-fold, which is to support the organisation and
act as a resource for employees and their families.”

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“As the world becomes increasingly prone to global public health emergencies, with pandemics that prove to be hardly predictable or controllable, organisations must support managers and employees in their readiness to handle health crisis situations effectively.”

- Your intranet page should provide expert information to educate and reassure your employees about the disease. During the Ebola outbreak, some organisations such as WHO and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) used customised programmes providing expert information about the disease. These programmes could be shared and viewed by hundreds of thousands of people around the world. Some organisations have actually used them as part of their support scheme for employees and families.

- As we live in the era of social media, foster communication by setting up a wiki platform on which employees can post their questions and concerns – designate someone to monitor the platform and answer questions and concerns on a daily basis.

- Last but not the least, set-up an alert system through email, SMS, Facebook and any other social fora as deemed appropriate, to notify employees at any time or on any day of the week, within minutes after an emergency has been identified or to provide the latest updates.

Conclusion

As the world becomes increasingly prone to global public health emergencies, with pandemics that prove to be hardly predictable or controllable, organisations must support managers and employees in their readiness to handle health crisis situations effectively.

References


About the author

Christel Adamou previously worked with the United Nations (UN) as Chief Human Resources Officer in Haiti and with several other international organizations based in Geneva, Nairobi, New York and
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