



COVID-19

Reviewing your command structure

Introduction

COVID-19: Reviewing your command structure

COVID-19 is the most significant challenge the global economy has faced. No business is unaffected. Some are battling with a collapse in revenues, others are responding to an unprecedented spike in demand.

All are adapting to the challenges of working remotely for an extended period and a profoundly uncertain future.

Most businesses have frameworks designed to help them respond to such crises. Many have scenario-specific plans within those frameworks. 'Pandemic preparedness' is often one of them.

Those frameworks have, on the whole, been activated. However, these plans are typically informed by the earlier outbreaks of H1N1 Swine Flu or MERs or SARs. Few, if any, make provision for the humanitarian impact COVID-19 has brought nor the global disruption that has followed it.

Some organisations have chosen to rely on ad hoc initiatives designed to supplement business-as-usual command structures.

With the prospect of social distancing continuing for some time to come – and perhaps being intermittently re-introduced once the peak of the pandemic is over – now is the time to ask whether the command structures in place are working as effectively as they could and how sustainable they are.

We suggest examining your organisation's response in four areas:

1. Situational awareness

Organisations prefer to make decisions slowly having considered tested data against known variables. Crises don't lend themselves to such approaches. They take fluid and unpredictable turns. Facts are hard to verify and information changes constantly. Yet decisions are expected more quickly than ever.

Now is the time for organisations to consider *where* they get their information and how it is filtered into decision making structures and *when* it is considered and acted on.

Those who are doing this effectively will be sourcing information from:

- **Government and public health bodies** in all of the jurisdictions they operate or have supply chains.
- **Industry groups and regulators:** COVID-19 is a crisis which will have similar challenges for organisations in the same sector.
- **Supply chains** which are only ever as strong as the most impacted link.
- **Customers** without whom no business can survive.
- **Staff** who are the most important stakeholders of all.

A disciplined approach to listening, synthesising and responding to changing information will be essential to navigating the decisions that lie ahead in the short term and steering the organisation to recover and thrive in the long term.

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2. Objectives and priorities

Clear objectives and priorities must accompany situational discipline. In most crisis response structures – as in most organisational structures – the strategic direction is set by the most senior executives. It is here that the North Star for the rest of the organisation is set.

Leaders in these roles must be able to clearly and crisply articulate organisational priorities. The health and well-being of staff and customers will almost certainly be one priority, but there will be others which range from ensuring that the organisation has the financial means to survive to doing whatever they can to contribute to wider efforts to beat COVID-19.

This latter point is critical. Deloitte research has shown that in crises such as pandemics people who feel that they were making a broader societal contribution are more likely to continue to work productively.

3. Clarity of mission within the command structure

COVID-19 has for most organisations demanded a range of cross-functional work streams to be engaged whether they are within a formal crisis response structure or ad hoc in nature. Typically, these have been established to respond to impacts being felt in four areas: people, supply, demand and financing.

But teams established in haste may fail to align their mission within the overall command structure. Leaders of these work streams ought to be able to state clearly the purpose of their team. Teams need to be flexible and agile, but they must also have structure (see the 'command, control and coordination' section below for more on structured approaches). Without structure teams collide into one another, work is duplicated, and the danger of energy-sapping conflict grows.

Beautifully written terms of reference aren't necessary but clarity of mission for teams at every level is vital.

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4. Efficiency in execution

No organisation is perfect. Even in business-as-usual the sheer complexity of most organisations makes getting things done – and proving that they have been done – a Herculean task. Crises are like water: they find cracks in an organisation and they make them wider. This manifests itself in many areas, but never more so than in the efficient tracking of actions that result from the workstreams.

Any 'inflight' review of the efficiency of the response structure must include an assessment on the project management tools, the technology as well as leaders' ability to hold their teams to account on the actions they are delegating. Sooner or later, the questions will come. Did we respond quickly enough? Did we make the right decisions? Were actions executed? Did we do the 'right thing'? And they will come right to the door of the most senior in the organisation. These questions will need an answer delivered with a clear conscience, supported by robust evidence.

The future will be different: prepare now

Most of the world is only just at the start of the COVID-19 curve and we are likely to oscillate between additional peaks for many more weeks and months.

However, the enormity of the impacts will be felt for many years, possibly decades. They will influence future generations. Organisations must begin to ask profound questions.

How will customer behaviour have changed? Have our supply chains survived? What will the taxation and regulatory landscape look like? Will the values of future employees have changed? In short, what will our business be?

The answers to these questions will determine the 'next normal'. Planning for this future reality should already have begun.

Command, control and coordination

When sense-checking your crisis response capability, consider applying the Command-Control-Coordination ('The 3Cs') concept – widely-used by multi-agency emergency responders – as a crisis management checklist:

- Have you established vertical **command**? Who reports to whom, who performs what functions, and who holds accountability?
- Have you established horizontal **control**? Have you mobilised pre-determined crisis management structures and resources? Are the structures still applicable and relevant in the context in which you are operating? Who are the key response partners you must work with and how are you doing that?
- Have you established **coordination**? Have you reached clarity on how teams must interact, how information flows throughout your response network, and how to ensure collaboration and avoid duplication? Does your response have a reporting and information sharing 'rhythm' which everyone is working to?

'The 3Cs' checklist does not prescribe how an organisation must implement its crisis response capability, but it does interrogate your approach for completeness.

A note on bias

We are all prone to bias. In business-as-usual, when we are operating at peak performance we manage it. But, in the same way, crises find weaknesses in organisations, so too they find it in individuals. This leaves us – and the teams in which we work – more prone to bias than we may typically be.

We must be constantly on guard for *optimism bias*, *confirmation bias*, *information bias* and *salience bias* which are commonly found in crises.

Tell tale signs that they are emerging include linguistic signals ('it will be alright', 'things will return to normal'), the view most loudly voiced being the direction most typically followed; solutions being discussed ahead of a review of the facts at hand and a reluctance by leaders to seek the views of others or to accept challenge.

There are solutions to this ranging from the straight forward (such as meeting facilitators, and adherence to strict meeting agendas) through to the more sophisticated (such as challenging direction through red teaming).

But the first step towards treatment is diagnosis. We recommend that teams are constantly vigilant to the danger of bias.

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Scenario planning

COVID-19 may bring profound change for many in the long term. However, there is short term scenario planning to be done in three areas:

1. Sustainability of command structures

Have those in key positions been working too hard for too long? Are there deputies who can fulfil key roles in the event of higher rates of absenteeism? What changes do we need to make to adapt to changing needs? How will those changes be made? *Someone needs to be a guardian of the overall efficacy of the response framework.*

2. Flexing the operational response for different scenarios

How will we adapt to a constantly changing operating environment should we see repeated waves of social distancing? How will we keep up with the changes in supply and demand that this will bring? What planning tools will we use to help us with this? *We call this Modified Resilient Operations.*

3. Reputational implications of mitigation strategies

With no immediate end in sight for much of the world, businesses will soon need to make difficult decisions as financing becomes tighter. To date, most organisations have been spared external criticism as they respond to a common challenge. This will change as differences emerge in the mitigation decisions organisations take and the way they communicate these decisions.

Communication

Effective communication often lies at the heart of an effective crisis response. This has never been more true as a disparate workforce grapples with remote working and a lack of human interaction during a period of great distress.

Communication needs to be frequent and empathetic. It must reinforce an organisation's values. But, it also needs to be disciplined. We recommend redoubling discipline in the following areas:

- **Objectives:** communication helps audiences to know, or do something or feel a certain way. No communication should be issued without knowing what it is designed to achieve.
- **Instruction:** unparalleled levels of precision are required when communication relates to how people are to interpret changes in organisational policies or operating procedures.
- **Audience:** crises can confuse perspectives and audiences. Ensure that enough consideration has been given on the audience being addressed and what they need to hear.
- **Voice:** followers cleave to leaders during a crisis. Ensure that those who are delivering messages to different audiences at different times are chosen carefully, that their delivery is absent of personal position and is always consistent.

Inflight checklist

Situational awareness

- Do you have regular and easy access to authoritative local and international sources of information about the current situation? Do the sources provide a picture for your organisation's entire geographical footprint?
- Is there a routine (daily) reporting rhythm in place to provide you with a picture of the 'state of play' of the organisation's response activities?
- Do you have a real-time view of any priorities, issues and actions the organisation is managing, who is managing them and when a resolution will be in place?
- Do you have access to a regular situation report that enables you to brief your internal and external stakeholders and provide a consistent company 'point of view' on response and recovery efforts?

Objectives and priorities

- Have clearly defined objectives been established for the response?
- Are these objectives realistic and pragmatic?
- Are the objectives referred to regularly and used to guide decision-making?
- Are these objectives evolving and being refined over time as needs change?

Mission and the 3Cs

- Is the organisation's business-as-usual mission at the heart of response efforts?
- Have internal and external stakeholders 'bought into' the mission? Is it well known and resonating?
- Do you know who reports to whom in the response structure?
- Do you know who is performing which functions?
- Do you know who holds accountability for key response activities?
- Do you understand the response structure your organisation has put in place?
- Do you have visibility of the tiers of response and their roles in comparison to each other and your own?
- Do you understand how information flows up, down and sideways within the response structure?
- Do you know the touch points for your engagement with the response structure? How you will get information, from who, and when?

Communication

- Do the organisation's internal and external communications consistently reflect the organisation's mission and response objectives?
- Are communications (still) people-centric?
- Are communications proactive, timely and accurate?
- Are the communications meeting your stakeholder's needs? Are they transparent and informative?

What ifs?

- Is your crisis response capability sustainable over the long-term?
- Can you see any bottlenecks, single points of failure or fatigue emerging? Are these being actively addressed and planned for?
- Is the organisation ready for subsequent peaks of the pandemic? Has it thought through what this might look like and how it will mitigate the risks?
- Has the organisation reflected on some of the big decisions it might have to make about its people, operations and finances as it moves into recovery?
- Has it taken the time to consider the future, the 'next normal' and the organisation's potentially different role in a post-pandemic world?



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