PLANNING AND CRITICAL COMMUNICATIONS

'The Most Important Minute' - that first minute during a crisis situation when every second counts. Since emergencies can be frantic and emotional by nature, what you do during the first minute of a crisis can severely impact the outcome. That is why it is essential to plan well in advance and be ready to execute your Emergency Response Plan, and critical communications should definitely be a part of that plan.

Timely notification to your employees, students, and/or community with the information necessary to keep them out of harm's way is the core of any emergency response. The TTI (Time To Initiate) this messaging can very likely impact the overall outcome of the incident. Unfortunately, there is no simple solution for crisis communications, but just as the old adage says preparation can, indeed, prevent poor performance. By considering your options and the types of communications that you may send, and then creating predetermined sets of actions for those specific situations, you are on your way to making that first minute's outcomes successful.

Consider Your Message Before an Emergency Happens

Planning for urgent messaging is key, and defining and prioritizing when, how, and why you'll utilize your critical communications system is an important part of that process.

One good place to start is by documenting your communications use-cases. A use-case defines the communication dilemma that needs to be solved and what actions will take place to address it. Once the problem is thoroughly understood, then it is easy to see how your communications tools can be implemented as a solution. Some common use-case examples can be weather alerts, office closures, class or event cancellations, or power outages. They can include life threatening emergencies like an active shooter situation or a crime in the vicinity. Some other more specialized examples are IT outages, on-call shift notifications, and response team activation and coordination.

The main objective is to clearly define your organization's communication goals and what personnel should be involved in planning and executing your response. Document when you would utilize your communications solution and exactly what you will say. It's also helpful to indicate who's likely to initiate each type of communication, as well as who your audience will be. Each use-case can be broken down into:

• When will the communications system be used?

• What's the 'trigger' event?

• Who 'owns' the situation? Who's the authority on when a message should be sent, who will send the message, and who will receive the message?

• What will the message actions be? These can be defined by existing protocols derived from your Emergency Response Plans or through collaboration with key personnel.

Once you've identified your use-cases, they can easily be added to your Emergency Response Plan and be used to improve your communications solution, by leveraging its built-in capabilities.

Use the Tools You Have

Planning out your communications use-cases is a necessary and valuable process, but it's just the first step. Once you have documented the specifics you can very easily translate this information into usable parts of your crisis communications solution. Pre-defined messages can be easily turned into pre-written scripts and implemented in your emergency notification system to mirror your internal processes and response plans, so it can function as a natural extension of your existing tool set.

Your crisis communication solution's settings should be pre-set well ahead of an actual emergency. By addressing messaging during the planning stages, you should have concise instructions on which administrators should have access to sending

messaging. Which groups they have access to, and what they are able to initiate should be documented, as well. Implement these permissions accordingly.

By documenting how a message is going to be sent, you can identify which endpoints will be utilized and set those up in advance, as well. It also helps when looking for gaps in your messaging and can assist in identifying what new endpoints need to be added to your existing processes.

It's always helpful to bring your dedicated vendor Account Manager into the mix throughout the process to assist with best practices, recommendations about system-specific capabilities that may help save you time, and suggest possible additional endpoints and features that you may have overlooked.

Testing for Performance

System tests are an opportunity to review your emergency communications guidelines with your administrators before an emergency happens. Your administrators may know how to launch a message, but do they know when? Do they know when to initiate a message or use certain tools? Do they know about your specific endpoints and your pre-written message guidelines?

Regular refresher sessions make sure that your team knows exactly what to do when a real emergency occurs. It's also a great time to do some actual tabletop drills or full-scale exercises. Drills are a practical way to test the outcomes of the Emergency Response Plan and training. Remember, testing isn't just about your data, it's also about your staff and their performance.

Your emergency notification system should provide extensive control over administrator roles, allowing you to designate who can send what, to whom, and when. Tools that allow you to restrict access to higher level functions, and 'clean' the interface by removing extraneous functions from view are common, but rarely used. By clearly defining your administrative roles in advance and tailoring your administrator's rights to match, you can make your system easier to use and eliminate the possibility of confusion when an actual emergency occurs.

Consider Automation

Executing a plan quickly and flawlessly during an emergency is extremely difficult. Consider using an automation capability in your system to reduce this challenge. A powerful system should allow you to codify many elements of your plan into actions which can be executed upon demand, reducing risk and dramatically improving performance.

What This Means for You

Front-loading your communications efforts by using the tools that you already have will make your communications efforts more successful. By making sure that your practices are documented and integrated into your day-to-day use of the system, your staff and community will be better prepared when you need to implement and activate your crisis plan. Regular internal testing, administrator training, and reviews of the capabilities of your critical communications solution with your provider will all keep your processes streamlined and ready to deploy at a moment's notice.

By taking the time to review your communications practices and plan for a crisis before it happens will save time, and potentially save lives. A little bit of preparation goes a long way.