

CRISIS RESPONSE FOR COMPANIES IN THE WAKE OF COVID-19

On January 30th, 2020 the International Health Regulations Emergency Committee of the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 “a public health emergency of national concern”.

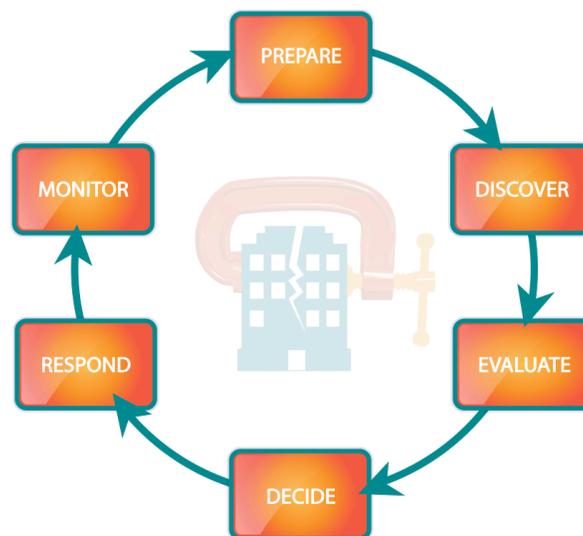
Every day, we are greeted by statistics of new cases, and questions whether major events like the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympic Games will be cancelled or postponed in the wake of the spread of this virus. A few days ago, the Paris half-marathon was cancelled one day before the race and there is speculation that the London and other marathons like Boston will share the same fate.

Although you can't control the spread of the virus or the latest news, rumors or speculation, you can control your company's response. The question is how to do this in a measured way that does not cause additional panic or spark questions that you can't answer. Several of our clients have canceled their corporate travel plans as attendance at trade shows and industry conferences has decreased over the past few months. Other CEOs have gone as far as to plan for a quarantine and how employees' vacation and sick time could be used should this become a reality for their companies.

The most important thing CEOs can do is to be armed with the latest information from a trusted source and have a plan to share with employees and stakeholders, as needed. Your best source of news will not come from social media posts, newscasts blogs, podcasts or politicians. The [Centers for Disease Control website](#) and the [World Health Organization](#) are the best sources for information on the number of new cases, areas of concern, and deaths.

Armed with the latest information, it is up to you as a senior leader, along with your management team, to lead by example and plan for customized scenarios that may likely impact your company.

The first rule of thumb in any crisis is to get out in front of the issue and respond accordingly. But what should you do, and when and how should you do it? Refer to the Crisis Interception cycle of crisis response below:



Prepare – Forward thinking and planning is key. Prepare yourself and your team with the most up-to-date information from the CDC. Do NOT rely on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or shared posts on social mediums. Take time to discuss worst case scenarios with your leadership team. How will you engage in “business as usual” if your office is closed and people are quarantined? What will HR do for employees if the quarantine exceeds a certain number of days or weeks? If you are a public-facing company what are you doing to protect your employees and customers from the spread of COVID-19?

Discover – Research companies similar to yours to see how they are responding to the emerging threat. Are they closing down? Suspending travel or conferences for one month or indefinitely? Are they offering masks, gloves, hand sanitizers, to their workers and clients? Are they directly appealing to employees or customers to self-regulate and quarantine? I live in an apartment complex and received a note earlier this week from building management telling tenants not to return to the property for 14 days if anyone has recently traveled internationally to China, Italy, Iran or Japan.

Evaluate – Ask your team – “What is the best and most measured response I can provide to my stakeholders at this time?” Remember, don’t kill an ant with a cannonball. Be sure your response is commensurate with the current situation. Many companies are suspending travel for 30 days and sending reminders about hand washing, tissue disposal, cell phone wipe downs, etc. The CDC has a [webpage](#) dedicated to guidance for businesses and employers to help you best plan and respond to the coronavirus.

Decide – Now that you have done your research, decide what you are going to do, who you are going to communicate with and when. Be sure you have current databases of all employees, clients, customers, vendors, stakeholders and decide how to respond to each of those influencer groups. Most of the content will be similar; however, internal messages to employees will likely differ from the ones sent to clients or outside stakeholders.

Respond – Once the decision has been made, send responses out in a timely manner to your audiences. Arm them with enough information to feel empowered but not too much to overwhelm. Many CEOs are telling employees that while there is concern and the number of cases is growing, it’s still not time to be overly concerned based on the latest reports from the CDC.

Monitor – Stay informed and monitor the situation to determine if you need to start the cycle again based on new information or an increase in cases in your area(s). With any crisis situation, what is currently known may change in an instant, requiring rapid decision-making and changes to the current plan. Keep a pulse of the situation within your company and externally. Remain at the ready should the need arise for a rapid change of plans to best support the health and well being of all of your stakeholders and company.

A good offense is the best defense and the rule of crisis is to always be out front even though you can’t predict what will happen, measured thoughtful responses to the current crisis will put your company in the best light possible as this unnerving situation continues to unfold.

-Tara Goodwin is Founder & CEO of Goodwin Group PR and a founding partner of Crisis Interception, LLC; she also is a Vistage speaker and first became a Vistage member in 2010. She delivers keynotes and crisis training workshops nationwide. For more information visit <http://www.crisisinterception.com>.