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On Leadership



LEGAL SCHOLAR

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THE QUESTION

How to Prevent Panic?

As the U.S. confronts a "potential" swine flu pandemic, which has shut down Mexico City, how should public officials and other leaders act to prevent panic among citizens in this country? Are there lessons from when corporations or other organizations have confronted similarly unexpected and threatening news in the past?

POSTED BY BEN BRADLEE AND STEVE PEARLSTEIN
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SARS Corporate Playbook

Multinational corporations have seen this movie before. It was a horror flick called "SARS" (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome).

The spread of that deadly disease earlier in this decade made corporations rethink and strengthen their strategies for dealing with dangerous communicable diseases, which may spread irregularly around the globe.

The private sector response -- especially for large global organizations -- is critical because many individuals look first to their employer, and its medical staff, for help in times of global health threats.

The policies and practices from the SARS playbook (and from more general experience with other communicable diseases like TB or meningitis) can be applied to swine flu. Some of the most important:

- A corporate-wide swine flu management team must be immediately assembled with top people from business, medical, legal, crisis management and communications functions. Its

job includes: plans for escalation and de-escalation of response; serve as "communications central" for the company; share medical, communications and business best practices.

- Lines of communication must be immediately established with the top government health agencies who are monitoring all dimensions of the disease in their geographies (e.g. incidence, locations, symptoms, course of disease, treatments morbidity and mortality). This can be the Centers for Disease Control in the U.S. or the ministries of health (or relevant sub-agency) in Mexico--or any other affected nation. Internet information may suffice, but contacts for special issues should be identified.
- Based on government information and its own medical expertise, corporations must communicate to all employees (now possible with one push of the "send" button -- a power usually only possessed by CEO and top staff officers) about outbreak of disease, symptoms, when to seek medical care in the workplace or when to seek care at home.
- Crisis management teams must be constituted in each major business division and locality to deal with such issues as: ill individuals at the work-site; public hygiene measures to make the workplace safe, especially if a person contracts the illness; communication on appropriate medical leave and standards for safe return to work; explanation that the event does not, as a general matter, justify unexcused leave; and, in extreme cases, temporary shut-down of a facility.
- Travel directives from the corporate wide team must be developed and updated for people in affected areas or traveling to such regions. For example, with respect to swine flu, travel may be limited to "business critical" to Mexico City (significant health issues) but not at all to Monterey, Mexico (limited health issues).
- Depending on severity of problem, business continuity plans may need to be developed.

This re-run, like the movies before it, is all about communication: getting in real-time the most up-to-date information from the various governments and then communicating clearly, concisely and forcefully at company-wide, business-unit and work-place levels about core issues such as the status of the disease, diagnosis and treatment updates, information for travelers and resources for further information.

The fiber of organizations is shown during crises. Especially when the health of employees is at stake, top business leaders have to execute crisis management flawlessly. SARS made companies perform to that exacting standard.

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