# PREPARING FOR THE WORST: BEST PRACTICE CRISIS MANAGEMENT FOR LEISURE & ENTERTAINMENT BUSINESSES

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We can all agree that leadership teams in the MENA leisure and entertainment sector are no strangers to managing crises. You manage large-scale, complex operations with huge workforces, serving even greater numbers of customers. All your operations are conducted with safety as a priority, and many of you have (successfully) navigated your way through some very difficult situations, ranging from pandemics to extreme weather events.

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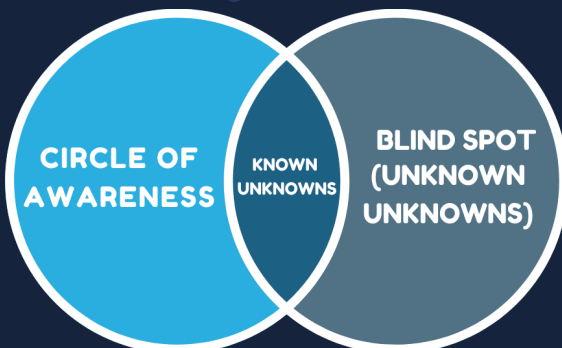
However, regardless of sector, size, or geographic location, many teams we have worked with share the same "blind spots" in their crisis preparations. Here are five areas that are of particular importance to companies operating in the leisure and entertainment sector.

ACCEPT THAT A CRISIS CAN HAPPEN AT ANY TIME

Before the coronavirus outbreak, only a handful of organisations were willing to place pandemics on their risk register because they were such "low likelihood" events, not considered worth preparing for. Fast forward three years and pandemics now have a prominent role on the agendas of leadership teams.

However, many senior executives remain in a state of denial when it comes to considering how their next crisis could manifest itself. Some may hold the belief that because a particular situation has never happened to them, it will never happen. Others may believe that something that has happened before will not happen again. Either way, too many leadership teams find themselves taken by surprise. Recent geopolitical tensions demonstrate how quickly a situation can deteriorate – accepting that stability cannot be taken for granted is the first step to preparing effectively.

Even the most robust, multi-layered risk management can suffer from a "Swiss cheese" effect: the "holes" in the plan can be what allows an accident to become a catastrophe. The first challenge for many organisations is to accept that accidents happen for a range of reasons outside of their control. The second challenge is to anticipate what might come next.

ANTICIPATE THE WORST

Many crisis teams activate themselves only once an incident has occurred. For many, this is too late. Creeping crises are normally foreshadowed by a pattern of events which are challenging to recognise until they manifest themselves into something catastrophic – and can be difficult to manage afterwards. Often what really defines a "perfect storm" is how it exposes all the preparations that were neglected, and there is a familiar pattern afterwards where we learn of all the warning signs that were ignored.

By having a mechanism for identifying, monitoring, and updating their risks daily, leadership teams can anticipate and potentially even avoid a crisis. Ideally, organisations will be monitoring for external risks (extreme weather, security issues during periods of heightened tension), as well as internal risks (potential design and construction flaws that manifest themselves many years after construction, and of course, human errors that come from lack of training or failing to follow procedures).

Anticipating the types of crises that may occur is challenging but not impossible. While you cannot predict everything, these activities can give crisis management teams the edge they need to either prevent those crises from occurring or minimising their impact when they occur.

FOCUS ON OUTCOMES, NOT PROCEDURES

Many of the crisis management plans we have seen contain plans with pages and pages of repetitive text and procedures, often just providing guidance on who to notify and very little guidance on the principles behind their overall approach. As a result, we often see time-pressured teams ignore crisis management plans in their haste to respond to a crisis and react to whatever is in front of them.

Crisis teams should seek to establish clear objectives and priority actions based on their outcomes, for example preserving the life and wellbeing of guests, and brief their incident management teams (IMT) and emergency response teams (ERT) on those. In the L&E sector, most IMTs and ERTs work at a level in the organisation that gives them detailed knowledge of the site's operations.

This allows an outcome-focused crisis management team to develop a range of response options to meet their objectives.

Although crisis plans should always contain a set of procedures, these do not need to be lengthy. Instead, they should be kept as simple as possible so that they can be followed in any circumstances – particularly when the situation worsens, and they need to make swift decisions when there is no time to seek approval. With a clear set of objectives and priorities established at the outset, IMTs and ERTs can better adapt to the unfolding situation.

The general problem of not following procedures can also result from not knowing what procedures to follow, rather than not applying the procedures that had been established.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

It is understandable that organisations, particularly those working with limited resources to operate their day-to-day business, must sometimes move crisis exercises and emergency drills down their agenda. However, we have found that many organisations who have suffered from major disasters had previously neglected or deferred this training.

Even with the best crisis management plans and resources that money can buy, those leadership teams who do not take the time to practise how they would respond to some of their worst-case scenarios miss opportunities to prepare themselves for the real thing. The most effective way to ensure that these preparations are well-understood is through regular training and exercising.

While not every risk you face will have an existential impact on your business, practising for catastrophic events will provide excellent opportunities to test both the thinking and preparation of senior leadership teams and promote continuous improvement. We have found that such exercises help leaders whose teams might otherwise work in "silos" appreciate their colleagues and the roles they must play when working together to combat a crisis.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Communication gaps and failures are easily the most common feature in nearly every major disaster, contributing either to their cause or their impact. While most leadership teams in the L&E sector are very conscious of the need to communicate externally to maintain their reputation, we frequently see gaps in their internal communications, particularly failure to share critical information with colleagues in the same organisation. Failures in this activity in the early stages of any major crisis can have a significant impact on its outcome.

The MENA leisure and entertainment sector is perhaps at higher risk of this than most. Many major operators employ large workforces who speak multiple languages, and often rely on third parties to manage operations or provide critical support for major disruptive events. At worst, these teams may not have any lines of communication at all and can easily find themselves working at odds with each other.

One method used by government agencies around the world that may be suitable for the types of organisations described above is the use of a "commonly reported information picture" (CRIP), a single and authoritative overview of a crisis that is developed according to a standard template and is intended for briefing and decision-support purposes. Simple procedures, such as briefing all those involved in a crisis response at regular intervals, can limit the confusion that characterises the early stages of any crisis response, and positively impact the effectiveness of your response.

Equally important is keeping those employees not involved in a crisis informed about what has happened before it becomes public knowledge. There are plenty of reasons to keep your staff in the loop, from building organisational solidarity to preventing an employee being caught off guard by the media.

CONCLUSION

Questions to ask in your risk assessment

What types of risk could my company face?

How can we respond if a crisis happens?

Who will take action in a crisis situation?

While the points discussed above are not exhaustive – nor will every point apply to every organization – we hope that this article provides some insight and elicits some discussion within your organizations. Crises are characterized by their ability to catch leadership teams by surprise, escalate in their intensity and quickly damage the good reputations of organizations and their leadership teams.

By anticipating and preparing for worst-case scenarios, leadership teams place themselves and their organizations in the best possible position to manage crises successfully.

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Disclaimer: *The advice shared above is based on a high-level view of the Best Practices of Crisis Management. It is however important that you speak with and follow the recommendations of the local authorities and regulations in the countries where you operate. Their guidelines will help you to create your own Best Practices of Crisis Management at your attractions to ensure your Rules and Responsibilities are outlined to meet the requirements of your individual country, and the regulations and recommendations of your local authorities.*