

Pandemic Flu Communications Best Practices

Coping with Widespread Illness

An influenza pandemic affects organizations large and small, and employees look to their leaders for guidance. Communicating effectively not only helps employees cope with uncertainty, but can help them take precautions that could save lives.

Key Challenges

- Unpredictability. Pandemics can hit anytime and vary in length and scope.
- Severity. Unlike the seasonal flu, which affects mostly children and the elderly, all age groups may be at risk, including otherwise healthy adults under 40 – in other words, the majority of your workforce.
- Timing. Unlike typical crisis communication plans, there is no clear triggering incident such as an earthquake, a hurricane, a fire or a bomb. There's a risk of sounding the alarm too late, or worse yet, too soon.

Goals/Objectives

- Limit the speed and spread of the pandemic
- Minimize risk to employee health and well-being
- Continue critical business operations
- Minimize panic while motivating employees to take action
- Accelerate the return to normal business operations

Strategies

- Maintain extraordinary visibility of leadership
- Create opportunities for employees to take action to protect themselves and their loved ones
- Encourage employees to plan (for work continuation, sustained periods at home, and for care of their families)
- Confirm the accuracy of all broadcast information
- Establish an equitable standard of care for all regardless of grade level
- Couch initial pandemic flu information within broader messages about seasonal flu



Creating a Plan

- Begin with Wordwright's pandemic communications plan and customize it to suit your organization's particular needs.
- Become informed and follow in step with health authorities. Access worldwide public health resources for information and help. The World Health Organization (WHO) has classified pandemic flu into six phases, from Phase 1 (low risk of human cases) to Phase 6 (efficient and sustained human-to-human transmission).
- Raise and maintain awareness. Schedule and distribute regular communications. During a pandemic, communications should be daily. Err on the side of communicating too much. Repeating your key messages reassures your audiences that your information is accurate and that you have a clear understanding of the situation.
- If you haven't done so already, think through the implications of a pandemic and begin to put an operational plan in place. One potential consequence is that communication chains will break—either because critical personnel are sick, caring for loved ones, or deceased themselves. Ask yourself ahead of time how you plan to continue working with these people missing. If your IT infrastructure goes down, do you know how to reach employees at home?

Tips for an Effective Plan

- Give people something concrete to do. Taking action, no matter how basic, gives people a sense of control.
 - Provide tips on proper hand-washing, and introduce relevant products such as GloGerm™, which employees can apply to their hands after washing and then view under a black-light where bacteria and viruses still remain on the skin.
 - Give people an emergency hotline number to call instead of pushing an email or voicemail update during an outbreak. Update your hotline with new information daily. Many employees will be out sick, caring for someone who is sick, or may be afraid to come to work. Letting people take the initiative by calling the hotline will increase their sense of power.
- Make sure that employees are set up to work at home and know how to log in to email and perform their regular tasks remotely.



- Give suggestions for spending extended time at home. During an outbreak, employees will want to minimize face-to-face contact with others. Suggest ways that employees can prepare for extended periods at home, such as having emergency kits ready with stored water, canned food, cash, propane for the grill, etc.
- Make it clear who's in charge. Keep senior leaders informed and visible. Decisions and announcements should be communicated by one person, someone highly respected and trusted. While debates among various persons may take place in private, the organization must speak with one voice.
- Be available; be authentic. Create channels that employees can access every day. Keep channels open, credible and updated. When sharing information, trust that people can handle bad news as long as they believe that what they are hearing is the truth. Leaders should tell it as it is (a lesson well-learned from 9/11), and avoid painting falsely reassuring pictures (as in the case of the Katrina disaster).

Concluding Thoughts

- It's not too late to plan. Any planning is better than no planning.
- Don't be intimidated by the overwhelming amount of information and the many unknown factors. You don't need to know and understand every detail to create an effective plan. Keep developing your plans even in the face of fear and uncertainty.
- Help is available if you need it. Call us for resources if you don't know where to begin.
- Many intelligent people have dedicated years to thinking about the implications of a pandemic. While the character and scope of this pandemic is unknown, we have the benefit of forethought and planning to minimize the consequences.

