Black Swan Solutions

Assisting People & Organizations in Crisis

Accounting for People 2.0

Four Lessons That Transform Accounting For People

With the advent of mobile technology and social media platforms, accounting for people has changed significantly in recent years. What was primarily a function of herding people to specific time zones in a parking lot or safe area has been transformed into a complex procedure providing detailed information in real time on employee/visitor locations, as well as their health and safety status. There are clear advantages to modern accounting for people practices; however, not all organizations are aware of the new methods and tools that can determine who is safe or not in a crisis situation. In this white paper, we will explore:

- How to account for people in a crisis;
- Methods for accounting for people;
- How to assess your organization's ability to respond in a crisis; and
- The broad impact a crisis can have on your business.

What's Wrong with Classic Accounting for People?

Let's start with a scenario.

It's 11 a.m. and you are with 19 of your colleagues in a conference room. Your office is in a high rise building in a busy part of the city. Suddenly, you hear a loud explosion outside and within seconds the building fire alarm goes off. Everyone in the room stops talking and looks at one another in stunned silence. You look through the conference room window in the hallway and see other colleagues running down the hall. You then look outside and see chaos. You know that you have 1,000 employees in the building on any given day plus approximately 500 visitors and stakeholders there as well. Now, what do you do?

In traditional accounting for people, along with other safety wardens you might grab your bullhorns, employee checklists, paper and pencil, and run out the door to corral everyone in their respective areas of the parking lot or other identified areas. Consider the following:

- Will you or anyone else have time to safely collect your accounting for people lists and bullhorns?
- Even if you have your employee list, will you still be left wondering:
    - Is this information correct?
    - Who is left in the building?
    - Did everyone get out safely or was anyone hurt?
    - Does everyone remember that their meeting place is in the NW corner of the parking lot in the event of an evacuation?
    - What if the safety warden for one or more zones is out of the office on the day of the evacuation? Does the back-up person know their role and where the safety warden information is located in the Crisis Plan?
    - How often is the employee list updated?
    - People behave differently in disasters than drills. Protocols may or may not be followed as outlined – some employees may flee the area in fear or to find loved ones. How will you know they are safe or out of the building?

- What if there is a telecommunications outage due to high volume, which is often the case in a crisis situation that affects many people? How will you communicate with your employees or affected persons?

These are just a few of the challenges that are common in accounting for people. Thankfully, modern technology has made many of these challenges obsolete.

What is Accounting for People 2.0?

Modern accounting for people incorporates new technology into familiar processes, including:

Lesson 1: Mobile technology with 2-way texting functionality

Many organizations utilize an Emergency Notification System. Ensure yours takes advantage of current technology by allowing a minimum of 1-way text alerts. Ideally, look for a system that allows 2-way text functionality that will allow your organization to collect information from individuals in distress and help you manage a prolonged disaster or crisis situation. Alerts can be structured to collect information, such as an individual's status, or provide information, such as alerting individuals to shelter in-place or evacuate the building. It can even help you determine if displaced persons are in need of food, water or shelter in the event of a prolonged disaster, such as an earthquake or flood, and help you make arrangements to provide basic needs to these individuals.

Further, assess the following and integrate as needed:

- ☐ Ensure you have both process and functionality to check in telephonically with employees if needed;
- ☐ Establish email and website functionality for employees to check-in and collect information;
- ☐ Use social media to communicate with employees. If social media is utilized, be sure to determine ahead of time with all responsible parties what information is appropriate to communicate via social media and what should be done directly one-to-one instead, such as emotionally charged information or that which could be upsetting to an individual.

Lesson 2: Employee self-report & check in via text and/or web site

Organizations are moving away from relying solely on congregating individuals in a safe zone where a roll call is taken by a safety warden. Now, organizations employ mobile technology that allows them to push a text or message to individuals who can then respond with their status and location. This provides real-time information that is invaluable to first responders in rescuing individuals trapped or injured within a building and allows an accurate status list based on response received. Individuals who don't respond to the message or check-in on the web site will be listed as unaccounted for and appropriate strategies can be instituted to determine their whereabouts. Responses can even be coordinated so that an outsourced crisis call center (see below for more info) can provide real time information on a person's status, if known, to individuals inquiring via telephone.

Lesson 3: Crisis call center

Organizations experiencing a crisis are flooded with phone calls immediately after the event, sometimes reaching thousands of caslls per hour depending on the number of people impacted. Induividuals calling for additional information are often those who suspect someone they care about may be injured or affected. They will be scared, in distress and anxious for information.

Many organizations fail to plan for handling calls following a crisis. As a result:

- People seeking information are unable to get through, panic and may show up in person at your office or the scene of the crisis;
- People seek information from other sources, including social media, which might be incorrect or not up to date and fuel the exchange of false information; and
- Calls that get through are answered by reception staff or other in-house workers who are:
    - Experiencing trauma themselves from the event;
    - Not trained in handling people in crisis;
    - May be uninformed and unable to answer questions knowledgeably or compassionately from concerned individuals, escalating frustration and anger toward the company.

Lesson 4: Social media

If utilized wisely, social media can help you share information and updates quickly with a large group of affected individuals, including employees. However, care should be taken to determine what is and is not appropriate to share via social media. Generally it is best to share general updates, not specifics on the status of individuals. Nobody wants to find out their loved one is injured or deceased via social media – that is still best communicated one-to-one and in a careful and sensitive manner.

What's At Stake and Why Is It Important

Accounting for people is important for several reasons. Poor processes can contribute to the following:

- *Fatalities and injuries.* A study conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) found that between 1992 and 2002, 64,333 workers died from workplace injuries, which cost society a total of $53 billion, or an average of $831,000 per death.
- *Lost sales revenue or the inability to meet client needs.* According to OSHA, lost productivity from workplace injuries and illnesses cost companies $60 billion each year.
- *Brand and reputation damage.* An organization that experiences brand and reputation damage during a crisis, faces an uphill battle to restore their image during a time when they might also be faced with challenges relating to facilities, supply or staffing, among other things.
- *Incurring secondary trauma costs that were otherwise unavoidable.* Secondary trauma occurs when a person experiences trauma from the response to an event. For instance, an employee who is tasked with taking calls and sharing information about colleagues and their health status or safety might be traumatized by that process. Alternatively, utilizing staff to clean or repair a damaged facility where colleagues were injured or deceased might also further traumatize those individuals. It is important to think through your response ahead of time to avoid unknowingly traumatizing affected individuals and staff.

Accounting for People 2.0 Checklist

Below is a checklist to determine if your accounting for people process incorporates current best practices and modern technology:

- ✓ Assess your current accounting for people system and address gaps in each of your buildings.
- ✓ Ensure your current Emergency Notification System allows for two-way communication allowing employees to report their status. Ideally, ensure that the system can also help you filter the list so that secondary messages can be sent to those who did not initially respond.
- ✓ Ensure that all employees know:
  - The evacuation procedures and escape routes, as well as secondary routes out of the building;
  - Procedures to self-report status via text, voice or email; and
  - Actions to take and where to meet in the event of a facility evacuation.
- ✓ Secure a pre-established 800# dedicated specifically for individuals to call during a crisis and collect information on the crisis itself or family and loved ones to inquire on an individual's status. The 800# can also be utilized after the initial crisis for employees to receive updates and information on when they can return to work, benefits, pay, etc. A crisis call center can be created/managed in-house via dedicated staff; however, most organizations find it more cost effective to outsource this function.
- ✓ Ensure redundancy in key roles is at least 3 deep.
- ✓ Establish protocols ahead of time that determine the following if your facility is inaccessible or not functional for a period of time after an incident:
  - Is there an alternate facility wher employees could report to work? If so, where? Which roles?
  - Will employees continue to receive pay? Which roles?

- Will employees continue to receive benefits?

✓ Designate a communications person ahead of time who can communicate in a timely manner to stave off rumors and ensure accurate information is provided. Be prepared to issue periodic, regular announcements with updated information throughout your response. Ensure whomever you designate is comfortable in this role and is trained in responding to media requests.