

Disaster Survival Kit: The Human Resource Side of Hurricane Recovery

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The University of West Florida (UWF) Pensacola campus was devastated by Hurricane Ivan in September 2004 and forced to close for three weeks. Due to the academic calendar, being closed for more than three weeks would have cancelled the entire fall semester (as we witnessed by New Orleans colleges and universities following Hurricane Katrina). Our University learned how to quickly reopen its doors even though 95 percent of all buildings and 110 of 114 classrooms had to be partially or completely rebuilt. While infrastructure such as water, electricity, sewage, and communications were completely lost for extended periods, the most humbling and daunting experiences concerned our employees. The following is our success story and presents a survival kit for Human Resource professionals and administrators of lessons learned from Hurricane Ivan that was further tested and refined as we suffered through the Hurricanes Dennis and Katrina in 2005.

Safety First

Think safety first. As Hurricane Ivan turned into the Gulf of Mexico and the predictive models began to target Pensacola, President Cavanaugh activated emergency procedures and the campus was evacuated immediately. While making sure the campus was secure, providing adequate time for employees and students to evacuate or find emergency shelter and getting people to safety was paramount. After Ivan struck, the campus was closed and remained closed for three weeks. As the recovery effort progressed, there was some frustration expressed by non-essential personnel wanting to see their offices and classrooms. However, there were more than 3,000 trees down around the campus and the facilities had to be assessed for wind and water damage. The campus was devastated and dangerous; insurance agencies and FEMA required careful documentation so restricting access protected the evidence as well as made response, repairs, and recovery efforts safer to perform. As people assisted in cleaning up the debris, the conditions were extremely challenging with high temperatures, limited water and electricity, and no air conditioning. Recovery accidents and risk incidences were mitigated with the focus on Safety First, by ensuring that non-essential personnel were kept away from the campus and that all buildings were closed for business until inspections were completed.

Essential Personnel

Does your organization know who its essential personnel are? Is that communicated clearly? What happens when essential personnel have experienced their own personal catastrophe? Identifying essential personnel that includes, at a minimum, representatives from facilities, security, human resources, and key administrators is an essential planning piece. In addition, clearly communicating the list of essential personnel in advance so that essential

employees may plan, the organization may plan, and that, if needed, a back-up essential personnel list may be implemented. At UWF, more than 75% of the faculty and staff suffered their own tragedy as the storm damaged or demolished homes and devastated the entire Pensacola community. Fortunately, those essential personnel who escaped with minimal personal damage were able to report to work. Insurance agencies, contractors, and FEMA representatives were added to the essential personnel list. Flexibility was critical as HR assisted in the assessment of who was needed, when they were needed, and even whether or not they could get to the campus with lack of fuel and impassible roads and bridges. There were county imposed mandated curfews to contend with and campus police were activated to deter curiosity seekers and non-essential personnel from coming onto campus during the recovery phase. With all the physical damage, emergency hiring of construction workers and contractors was implemented. However, these same critical skills were in short supply as other parts of the community had the same demands. Having contractors with pre-defined employment contracts ensures qualified skilled labor availability during a crisis. Identifying essential personnel and a back-up list including human resources, facilities, and security ensures continuity in emergency response and preparedness.

Employee Communications

HR was critical to communications with employees. Numerous letters and emails (for those with electricity or who had evacuated) were sent to employees containing information on emergency and insurance contacts, emergency health insurance notices, leave and time reporting procedures, payroll processing, employee assistance programs, and procurement/purchasing. The voice for the University became the campus radio station, WUWF, as they were able to transmit public service announcements and critical information. President Cavanaugh broadcast numerous announcements updating and reassuring employees about the progress of the University recovery. Telephone communication was problematic as most cell towers were damaged and only a small number of personnel had radio communications equipment. As a result, more satellite phones have been procured and are available to essential personnel as a lessoned learned.

Paying Employees

Hurricane recovery disrupted our normal work processes. When our business was closed for an indefinite period, this created payroll challenges. While contingency and backup systems were predetermined, cash availability and distribution methods were affected by local bank closures and limited electronic distribution. Full-time employees were paid during the three week campus closure. However, temporary part-time employees were out-of-work and unemployment compensation conditions applied. To help these employees, we requested that a representative from the Agency for Workforce Innovation (Unemployment Compensation Program) come to campus to process applications for our hourly and temporary employees who needed to file for

unemployment disaster benefits. We provided this service for the first two weeks after re-opening the campus. After a hurricane, some employees faced unpredicted expenses; those employees with catastrophic loss had needs as basic as food, water, clothing, and shelter. The University Foundation set up short term loans for students and employees that suffered personal damage and awarded \$49,949 in hurricane relief grants to 348 students and awarded \$21,700 in hurricane relief loans to 21 faculty and staff members. We found that employees appreciated the additional assistance with unemployment and that grants and loans helped employees get their lives back to normal; both efforts were needed and appreciated.

Records Management

What appears so obvious but became a major deficiency for many businesses after each storm was not having a well-thought out plan for access to critical data. Common sense practices would not suggest putting your backup data in the next room or even in the next building because major hurricane damage is pervasive. Prior to Hurricane Ivan, the University had an extensive consultant's review of the emergency preparedness plans. Therefore, when the plan was executed, the University had complete access to data that was in backup locations and we could access it from remote sites. Going through this exercise prior to an emergency saved a lot of time and anxiety when disaster struck.

People Helping People

The psychological effects resulting from the hurricane ranged from fear and anger to depression and post traumatic stress syndrome effects. HR becomes an important resource to guide employees to available benefits such as Employee Assistance Programs and counseling services to help employees overcome the affects from their loss and destruction of property. Upon our request, our employee assistance program provided critical incident sessions on campus for all employees during the first two weeks of the re-opening of the University. These sessions were part of our contract and were without additional charge. Employees also reached out to their colleagues offering assistance and support. Campus employees collected food, clothing, and household items to be distributed to all employees and students; they had so many donations that there was more than enough to take care of the University family with extras given to the community clothing drive. And when the University re-opened, a Town Hall meeting and welcome reception allowed employees to tell their stories and to help each other through the grieving process. Employees want to be a part of providing assistance to others. Benefits from programs already maintained by the organization may prove to be valuable resources in bringing help and assistance to employees.

Future Trends

So what do you look for the next time Hurricane Season arrives or a named hurricane appears on the radar heading your way? Here are three thoughts to consider. First, being in Florida and especially in "Hurricane Alley" has caused

concern with recruitment and retention of qualified employees to the Gulf Coast Region. This also has created a turnover concern when qualified employees choose to relocate their families to different parts of the country. Second, because some organizations (and in our case universities) implemented financial exigency measures, a future consequence may be that staff and faculty will fear layoffs and job security concerns suggesting that when another hurricane hits, they should be looking for another job. Finally, in the aftermath of a hurricane, the workforce demand creates a spike in the need for specialized construction and repair skills that will increase wages and, in some cases, worker shortages of critically needed skilled laborers. These issues will affect workforce planning.

We have shared with you some critical lessons that Human Resource Professionals and Administrators should reflect on and discuss with your respective organizations. We, at UWF, have spent extensive time and energy refining our planning process and sharing with many different organizations the lessons we have learned.

One final thought, we suggest and recommend preparing your own **C.A.R.E.** package for all employees that includes these critical strategies: communicate, anticipate, respond, and empathize. Bottom line, despite all the damage to a company's property and facilities, employees are the most important asset in your organization.

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