8 Tips to Improve Your Emergency Communications

JUVARE

Keep your Emergency Management Communications from being a Disaster

You might remember the popular communication game – we called it "telephone" – where one person is given a detailed message, which is then quietly passed on verbally to the next participant, and to the next, and so on. The last participant writes down the message they received after it has gone through a dozen or more people, and compares it to the original. Usually, the end message winds up with little or no resemblance to the way it started out.

It's a fun game but more to the point, it exemplifies just how unreliable communication can be. In emergency situations, however, communication isn't a game – it's a matter of vital importance, of life and death; so clear, reliable communication is critical.

This is something that is appropriately top of mind of emergency managers. Recently, we asked 344 emergency management professionals as well as attendees at the 2019 International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM) Annual Conference about their viewpoints and concerns regarding emergency preparedness, planning, and response.

The first question of the survey asked which aspects of their emergency management technology solutions they thought could be improved. *Communication* was the top response, and it wasn't even close. It begs the question, why in this age of innovative, cutting-edge technology, should communication still be the top need for improvement in emergency management? We decided to dig deeper into the aspects of communication and best practices that contribute to success in terms of emergency management.

What are the most important components of communications for emergency management?

How do you create a system that promotes clear, direct, and effective communications, and avoid communication fails as in the "telephone" game described above?

Communication is vital before, during, and after a critical incident or disaster of any kind. Organizations need to be able to quickly make contact with everyone who will be potentially impacted or will be part of the response and keep them informed throughout the life of the incident.

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Here are 8 ways you can Improve your Organization's Communication

Focusing on these components can ensure better interaction among all stakeholders, improve day-to-day activities, and enhance the effectiveness of your response when disaster strikes.

1. Evaluate Processes and Plan Ahead

Good preparation leads to better execution, and this is especially the case with communication. The process of evaluating and learning from previous actions and then improving procedures based on those evaluations is an ongoing cycle that helps organizations to be better prepared for future incidents.

A recent Harvard Business Review article shows how California wildfires in 2017 and in 2019 helped Kaiser Permanente evaluate its disaster response and then make significant changes to improve its response in future disaster situations. According to the article, "…the lesson is that coordinated responses happen most seamlessly with advance planning." ["How Kaiser Permanente Prepares for Disasters", Harvard Business Review, Dec. 26, 2019]. This is also the case with communication.

During the planning process, identify everyone who will be part of the crisis communications team, and the platform they will use to disseminate information. The communications platform should enable easy, seamless communication before, during, and after the incident, among all internal and external stakeholders.

Quite a few communication tasks and preparations can be performed before an emergency occurs, such as:

+ Review and update all contact lists. Identify everyone that you will need to communicate with in a crisis. Lists should include:
  - All emergency agencies, including local, state, and federal, if applicable
  - Emergency first responders
  - Employees, customers, suppliers
  - Company or organization leadership or executives
+ Keep contact information in a secure, centralized system or location
+ Organize lists by groups, such as departments, location, etc.
+ After an incident, be prepared with a detailed communication plan to communicate with customers, partners, stockholders or anyone with your organization who may have been affected

2. Use an Emergency Management Platform to Centralize Communications

Communication and collaboration go hand in hand, but in emergencies and disasters organizations need a strong emergency management platform that allows full and easy collaboration with everyone involved in the incident response.

The ideal emergency management platform centralizes operations, including communications, and allows real-time connectivity to share information and data within your organization as well as other key stakeholders – across geographical and jurisdictional borders and across public, and private sectors.

Rather than just pushing out information, using an emergency management platform allows collaboration within a centralized system. Individuals and departments are able to complete forms and reports, and information entered into the system can in turn be visualized in maps and dashboards summarizing key information and metrics.

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Users are able to quickly update information on tasks and objectives, log events, coordinate teams and activities, assign tasks and more – all while working one-on-one in chats, or in groups, collaborating on topics or discussions in real time.

An emergency management platform enhances communication by giving you the ability for everyone on your team to collaborate or work together "on the same page" – with the same, real-time information, all within an organized system. If you don't have this type of system, your ability to communicate and collaborate is significantly diminished, which will weaken the effectiveness of an emergency response.

3. Establish a System and Processes for Alerts and Notifications

Have a system or platform in place which allows users to develop and execute communication mechanisms. The system should support:

+ Centralizing information

+ Launching notifications from forms and workflows for a more efficient, streamlined process (users should not need to re-enter this information to send the alert)

+ Sending notifications to the appropriate stakeholders and key personnel

+ Maintaining communications with and disseminating information to employees

+ Creating alerts or notifications using the preferred modes (e.g., email, text, voice, push notification, etc.)

4. Plan Communications Processes to Protect Brand Reputation

Your organization's reputation and brand also depends on good communications, especially during a crisis. What does an incident say about your brand? What are you saying about it?

Organizations have to consider and plan for communications about incidents to news media as well as on social media during or after the event. Proactive communications providing information about an incident can help lessen any negative effects to your reputation and brand.

The old adage is, if you leave a void in communications, someone will fill it for you, and it probably won't be the message you want put out there. It is often helpful to craft draft messages in advance of the incident so you can get information out quickly while dealing with other pressing issues or activities.

How you manage a crisis or disaster can cast a positive or negative light on your business or organization. Quick and open communication is especially effective in shaping the public perception about an incident and your response.

An emergency management platform centralizes information and allows the team members who are managing a crisis to collaborate with public information officer or other person responsible for disseminating information. Having all the data and pertinent information in one location helps ensure communication and key messages that go out to the public, media, customers, stock holders, etc., are more accurate.

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5. Stay Connected with Mobile Technology

With today's technology, it's possible to stay connected almost everywhere and almost anytime. Be sure that your emergency management platform is integrated with a mobile app to help keep emergency staff connected seamlessly when they're in the field or on the scene of an emergency. Mobile connectivity also makes preparation and readiness tasks easier and more efficient.

An effective mobile app gives staff access to notifications, forms, and boards, and the ability to capture data, conduct assessments, and complete reports in the field that automatically update the main system. Users can also receive notifications about incidents, statuses, resources, locations, and announcements in the field, or outside the Emergency Operations Center.

6. Practice Makes Perfect

The best processes and platforms for communications, and emergency management in general, are those that you use on a day-to-day basis. Daily use ensures that users are familiar with the systems and procedures before a major incident occurs. Generally, organizations that use emergency management platforms on a daily basis – for tracking regular day-to-day operations, incidents, projects, reports, and communications – receive greater value from the solution.

Regular training and exercises throughout the year are also essential to ensure everyone on the team, as well as any others who could be involved in the event of an emergency, are aware and ready to take action.

Here are some actions to improve communications and response during an emergency:

- **+** Run simulations or conduct training sessions two to four times per year
- **+** Conduct drills and exercises to practice and assess critical event response
- **+** Offer emergency training and encourage completion of certifications for response team members
- **+** Define roles and confirm that response team members know how to perform them

7. Be Part of a Response Community

The ultimate way to collaborate with and engage with other organizations is to use an emergency management platform that promotes sharing information and communication within a larger response community. Often, emergency response can be hampered by a lack of coordination between agencies, departments, and organizations. Ideally, a community-based approach for your emergency management platform would allow data sharing with other network participants across traditional barriers such as geographical or jurisdictional borders and public, private, and healthcare sectors.

8. Make Sure an Experienced Team Has Your Back

Often, despite best efforts, keeping an emergency management solution working to its maximum capacity can be challenging. Sometimes even organizations who are not new to emergency management technology can fail to make the necessary updates or improvements that maximize their system's effectiveness.

The proper support for your emergency systems and procedures is crucial, in particular from the company you partner with for emergency management software. Having an experienced partner with expert knowledge and familiarity with industry best practices to back up and support your operations can be reassuring in crisis situations, knowing that your systems are working at maximum effectiveness.

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Taking the Next Step with your Emergency Management Communications

You might notice that in the previous 8 points, collaboration emerges as a theme and a critical piece of emergency communications. Technology can't replace collaboration, but it does enable and enhance it.

If you're like the many folks that we surveyed, you're also looking for ways to improve your communications processes and interaction among stakeholders, as well as ensure better communications during an emergency response.

To find out how we can help, you can communicate with us today! Just follow this link to learn more.

Learn More

Juvare Helps Organizations Prepare, Connect, and Respond

At Juvare, our mission is to empower preparedness and response professionals to protect people, property, and brands. Juvare is the leading provider of emergency management software solutions.

Juvare solutions provide situational awareness for emergency management during unexpected incidents and disaster situations, large-scale planned events, and day-to-day operations by connecting your organization's data sources into a common operating picture that's configurable and easy to use.

Corporations, education institutions, healthcare facilities, and government agencies rely on Juvare solutions to improve communications and information management before, during, and after all types of critical incidents, emergencies, and disasters.

For more information on how Juvare can help with emergency management, go to our website, send us an email, or call 866-200-0165.

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