

Towards a Model of Sustainable Crisis Communications



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There is a whole new landscape of communication which is rapidly evolving, it is so very different from what has happened in the past that it is leaving many organizations exposed. Driven largely by changes in technology in which access and sharing of information is now global, it creates both opportunity and threat.

It allows risk and business continuity professionals access to almost instantaneous and relatively cheap tools for regular and sustainable communications. More importantly it creates an environment in which key stakeholders can share and engage in conversations.

This paper examines why risk managers and business continuity professionals need to establish sustainable strategies for communication and to build them into an organisation's DNA.


It would be a major oversimplification to refer to this communications revolution as a social networking phenomena or to characterize it as a "twitter" fad.

We are witnessing the breakdown of boundaries between internal and external communications. Your staff and their families, your contractors and customers are communicating at a speed that only a few years ago would not have been believed.

Their access to current and historic information is almost unlimited as is the demand for information when problems occur. Sharing and comment is fast and accessible, 15 January 2009 and the US Airways jet lands on the Hudson River. Pictures are being posted on the internet within minutes. An extreme example but one which illustrates not only speed but content and accessibility to information.

Information flow through virtual groups is being driven by individuals who include your staff, customers, competitors and others who may not look favourably on your performance.

Organisations must recognize that the dynamic of communication is changing and they have to become aware that the rate of change is rapid. We are already well down this road to change but it appears many companies are



either not aware of the threat or cannot adapt to the changes. In this paper we have considered the need for a sustainable crisis communications model to be established, one that address the internal communication demands as well as the external. By rooting itself in the building blocks of the risk management processes and sitting within the culture of an organisation, it is not seen as a bolt-on procedure.

For the purposes of this paper we at LINK have defined Sustainable Crisis Communications (SCC) as proactive and reactive communications, resilient in terms of people, processes and technology, which effectively manage issues, business impacts and stakeholder expectations, and ensure the long term stewardship of an organisation.

Failure to handle internal and external communications leads to suspicion and the perception either that the company has something to hide or that it is not a professional operator. It raises questions over the accountability, transparency and ethical behaviour of the company.

The recently issued draft International Standard on Social Responsibility (ISO 26000) states:

“Effective governance should be based on incorporating the principles and practices of accountability, transparency, ethical behaviour, respect for stakeholder interests and respect for the rule of law into decision making and implementation”

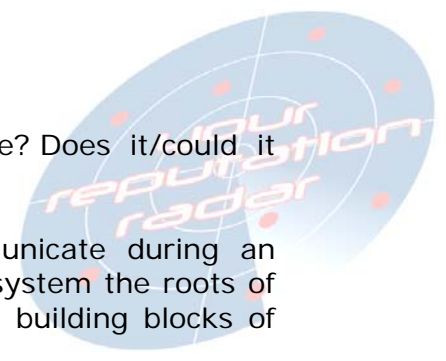
With mounting internal and external pressure to demonstrate capability and competence ,many organisations continue to apply significant resources to establishing effective risk management and continuity processes. But often these fail to engage the business because of fundamental challenges in the areas of information management, culture and communications. It seems that the more sophisticated we become the less able we are to express our ability to handle risk

Placing communications expertise at the heart of a business continuity process is an essential ingredient for success. Not only during periods of invocation but in the preparation, maintenance and testing phases. Good stakeholder communications acts as the lubricant for internal processes and as the shield for corporate protection. But only where proper processes, procedures and training have been implemented.

These should address both the internal and the external dynamic of risk management, allowing an integrated approach in which the Business Continuity communities knowledge of impacts and risks feeds into other programmes. Typical examples include Horizon Scanning and Reputation Radar which have been developed by LINK to be the eyes and ears of an

organisation. Who is saying what about you and where? Does it/could it impact on you and what will you do about it?

Recognition of risk and an ability to reactively communicate during an incident is no longer sufficient. To achieve a sustainable system the roots of the communication process need to be derived from the building blocks of risk and business continuity management.



Such systems have to establish a straight line linkage between the data collection for business impacts and business risk and the ability to avoid crises. This linkage lies not only in the preparation of supporting documentation but also in the conversations and accessibility of key information.

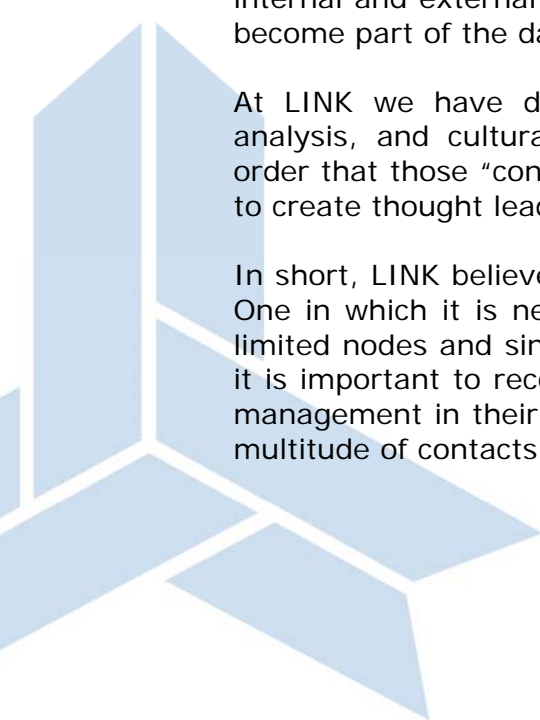
The solutions requires business continuity professionals to engage in the core business functions and to recognize that the best business impact analysis will not deliver results if it is not communicated effectively and owned by the business.

To assist in delivering practical solutions LINK has successfully established and tested the procedures and policies in addition to web based solutions for information management. We can enable you to access, store and share current situation reports alongside the results of impact assessments and horizon scanning.

These techniques provide a basis for building robust arrangements to aid internal and external communications. Allowing the policies and processes to become part of the daily management routine.

At LINK we have developed a conceptual model based on transactional analysis, and cultural theory to hypothesize how to engage audiences in order that those "conversations" can be heard by an organisation. Our aim is to create thought leadership in the area of SCC.

In short, LINK believes we are preparing for a future that is almost upon us. One in which it is necessary to realise that information flow is not through limited nodes and single points of contact that can be easily controlled. That it is important to recognize that staff are moving ahead of the organizations management in their ability to engage in international communication with a multitude of contacts and stakeholders.





The implications are both positive and negative. On the downside the organization can feel it loses control. It faces increased expectations to communicate and to share information. To monitor what is being said by whom to whom.

However an opportunity exists to learn from what is happening in the world outside our organisations. To start now to build sustainable communications which encompass the embedding of business continuity and risk management and seamlessly connect to the management of business recovery and crisis mitigation.

Earlier this year BP suffered a helicopter tragedy on 1st April in which 16 people lost their lives. The level and intensity of media interest placed great strain on the organisations involved in the response. In capturing the lessons to be learned a cross industry group reported:

This world has changed and is changing rapidly. News media organisations are instantaneous, intensive and incessant – they are also global and this has a huge impact on crisis management. Anyone and everyone can see breaking news as it happens and this in turn can intensify media interest as well as generate enquiries from families and friends of people involved – and from the thousands of people who may not be involved.

