

# the Bradford Group



## COVID-19 Crisis Plan Template

*March 16, 2020*

### **Create a task force**

- Bring together leaders from across your company to identify and prioritize issues, with all major functions and regions represented
  - In larger companies the senior communications leader should usually head up this effort
  - In smaller companies the CEO should lead
- Task force team should establish strategic imperatives, communication protocols and a meeting rhythm
- Participants will likely include a leader from:
  - Human resources
  - Legal
  - Operations/facilities
  - Finance/accounting
  - Sales and customer service
  - Marketing/communications
- Determine command and decision-making structure
  - Who must be involved in all decisions? Who is optional, but helpful?
  - Who is the ultimate authority for key decisions? What is a key decision?
  - Who is the authority for all other decisions?

### **Prioritize issues of greatest urgency**

- The top priority is ensuring the safety of employees, customers, vendors and other stakeholders
  - Look to guidance from public health experts – such as the CDC and WHO – on what to do and what not to do
    - Follow [CDC recommendations for businesses](#)
- Immediate decisions could include:
  - What do we do to keep our employees safe?
  - Which customers are most likely to be significantly affected by the pandemic? What can we do to help them?

- Which customers are likely to leave because of this crisis? Why and what can we proactively do to prevent this?
- Should we cancel, postpone or reschedule events?
- Should we use videoconferencing or conference calls instead of in-person customer, employee or vendor meetings?
- How do we determine whether employees should travel for business?
- How do we handle internal meetings?
- When do we require employees to work remotely? Does it apply to all employees? If not, which ones?
- How will we ensure that employees who work remotely have the tools required to do their job? How will we help remote teams work productively together?
- How will we support employees if their children are kept home from school?
- Key areas for the team to deal with:
  - Business continuity: what must be done to ensure the business survives
    - Forecast possible scenarios and possible responses:
      - Lose major customer
      - Lose significant number of customers
      - Employee tests positive
      - Several employees test positive at a certain location
      - Several employees test positive across the company
      - An employee is hospitalized from the virus
      - An employee dies from the virus
        - Anytime an employee tests positive, tell the employees with whom the infected employees has been in contact that they have been exposed to the virus.
        - But don't reveal the infected employee's name. Always be proactive about protecting employee privacy and confidentiality
        - The [CDC has four risk categories](#) for individuals. It might be helpful to share this information with employees, and they may be reassured to learn that they are not at risk.
  - Safe customers
    - Let customers know what steps you have taken to protect them from exposure to the virus
    - Let customers know what the company has done to assure that their business needs will continue to be met during the crisis
    - Determine how to discover and respond to customer pain points during the crisis
    - Consider providing an FAQ document with business questions your customers may ask and/or setting up a hotline
    - Stay in regular touch with customers – share all updates; connect with them at least weekly, even to say that “all is clear”
    - Focus on empathy rather than trying to create selling opportunities

- Safe workplace
  - Decide what to do if an employee displays coronavirus symptoms
    - Consult [CDC recommendations for businesses](#)
  - Educate employees about how the virus is spread and what they can do to protect themselves and others around them
    - Share a copy of the condensed, curated version of the [WSJ Coronavirus Special Edition](#) created by the Bradford Group
    - Share the [CDC's four risk categories](#) for the virus
  - Determine remote working protocols
    - Who should work remotely and when?
    - How will they work remotely? What tools/technology needed? What are reporting protocols? What is manager's role?
    - Beware of bias or discrimination in deciding who works remotely
    - Determine how to help employees be productive when working remotely
      - See [WSJ coronavirus special section](#): "How to work from home," page 22
  - Determine meeting and travel protocols
    - When meet in person versus by videoconference or conference call?
    - When will employees travel on business? When not travel?
    - Follow [CDC recommendations for business travel](#)
    - Consult [WHO travel guidelines for COVID-19](#)
      - Also see [WSJ coronavirus special section](#): "How to travel during the coronavirus pandemic," page 15, and "What employers can and can't do," page 19
  - Office cleaning protocols
    - Follow [CDC recommendations for businesses](#)
  - Determine sick leave policies
    - Do you need to revise your paid sick leave policy?
      - See [WSJ coronavirus special section](#): "Re-evaluating sick time policies," page 21
- Safe communities
  - See this crisis as an opportunity to enhance relationships with your local communities. Some ideas include:
    - Providing resources such as cleaning supplies or food for those in quarantine
    - Providing transparency about what is happening within the company rather than remaining silent
    - Providing information to local media to help calm communities down

## Look for opportunities to do something extraordinary

- Once top priority safety issues are decided, think about how your response to this crisis can enhance your company's reputation with employees, customers, vendors, government officials, shareholders, centers of influence, the general public, etc.
- Think about how this crisis will affect your industry specifically and how your response can make a difference. For example:
  - A company that provides group collaboration software could provide the service at no cost or at a discount
  - A financial services company could provide extra staff at drive-up windows so that customers don't have to come inside the branch and aren't delayed by long lines at the drive up

## Develop a process to deal with changing situations

- First, decide what actions to take based on what is known today
- Then, create a system for identifying and responding to changing situations. This system should include:
  - How will we monitor changes?
    - Be sure to monitor communications updates from your industry's leading associations, as well as public health organizations
  - What are the criteria for deciding the importance of changes?
  - Who will be notified about significant changes?
  - Who will craft the response plan and communications?
  - Who will approve the response?
  - How do we ensure all of this happens quickly?
- The output of this exercise is not necessarily a list of actions, but a detailed process for how new developments will be identified and incorporated into the existing plan
- Keep in mind that disinformation travels as fast or faster than accurate information
  - Your organization should seek advice from scientific and medical officials with experience in epidemiology, such as those in the WHO and the CDC.
  - The WHO is publishing [daily bulletins](#) on the status of the virus.
  - It has developed [instructions for dealing with the virus](#), and has produced a [document on COVID-19 myths](#). The organization's [Q&A on COVID-19](#) is also very helpful.

## Prepare the communications engine

- Create templates for common types of content that can be created as needed.
  - Press releases
  - Statements
  - Blogs
  - Social media posts
  - Emails

- Newsletter stories
  - Talking points
- Set up expedited legal vetting process
- Work with digital teams to decide how to convey content through company's owned channels, such as website, blogs, social media channels, newsletters, etc.
- Prepare for media inquiries
  - Prepare spokespeople – from CEO to the receptionist – with media training and concise answers that can be given without additional approvals or escalation paths.
    - Only specific, appointed people from your company's coronavirus task force should be communicating about the company's situation with employees and external audiences (media, investors, customers, suppliers, local government, etc.).
    - Keep in mind that this is likely not the best time to release company news about new products, etc. Media outlets are devoting their limited resources to covering the coronavirus story.
  - Most companies will not want to comment on how the virus is or is not affecting their business
    - We recommend that organizations only discuss their policies relating to the outbreak, their advice to employees on staying healthy, and their plans to keep meeting customer needs
- Brainstorm possible media questions and responses, such as:
  - Is production capacity guaranteed?
  - Are responsibilities within your company for addressing aspects of the virus outbreak clear?
  - Is there a plan in place for dealing with the virus?
  - What have you done to protect your employees?

### **Map communication strategies to audiences**

- What is the most important information for the specific audience in question? What is their emotional context?
- What is the objective of the communication?
- How should we best deliver it?
- For regional audiences, what cultural norms do we need to be aware of?
- Segment the audience in as granular a form as needed to address the specific scenario

### **Maintain open communications with employees.**

- One of the first priorities should be to plan for how communications will flow internally:
  - The channels and cadence that employees can expect to receive information
  - Determine alternative communications channels if the normal channels (which may occur in a face-to-face environment) are not available
  - Remember that employees are a channel, and if you enable them with content, they can extend the reach of your information and credibility with audiences

- Do everything you can to protect your people – and the little things matter
  - Showing you care during a crisis will never be forgotten
- Be open and frequent with communications
  - Even if you have “no news,” simply say so
  - Communicating nearly every day – at least 3 times a week – is essential

# Greatest needs

## Protect people

- Social distance
  - Remote working
  - Reduce travel
  - Videoconference or conference call instead of personal meetings
- Provide tools
  - Remote working software, laptops, etc.
  - Step up janitorial disinfecting schedule
  - Source disinfecting products to provide to employees (and perhaps customers) - hand sanitizers, hand soap
  - Check on health insurance coverage of coronavirus testing and treatment, and share information with employees
  - Be generous – pay for things you would not normally pay for that makes your employees' and customers' lives easier during the crisis
- Prepare for possible situations:
  - Most likely being:
    - An employee tests positive
    - An employee's child or spouse test positive
    - Children cannot go to school
    - The CEO gets the coronavirus

## Reduce fear

- Regular communication
  - Of public health information (CDC, WHO, etc.)
  - Of information from your leading industry associations
  - Of health developments within the company
  - Of actions the company is taking to deal with the crisis
  - Silence is NOT golden – sharing facts in real time with employees, customers, investors, etc., will go a long way towards encouraging trust
- Transparency
  - Announce any known infection that could affect employees, customers, vendors, shareholders and the general public
  - Quickly communicate actions the company is taking to deal with the crisis
- Take control
  - Make the CEO or other top official highly visible in dealing with crisis
  - Communicate confidence, preparedness, resoluteness
- Be clear on what is known and unknown
  - Map it out into known and unknown categories
  - Know what to do about what is known
  - Brainstorm what you don't know – and possible responses
- Share the bad with the good

- This includes layoffs and other cutbacks
- Keeping employees informed at all times will help them understand the difficult decision you may have to make
- Be clear, concise and sympathetic
- Most people are looking for a measured, authoritative “voice” to tell them a) what has happened, b) what is now being done to fix the problem, c) that this situation will not go on forever and d) what we can do in the meantime.

## **Help customers**

- Reassure them
  - Share what you have done to protect them – from infection and business disruption
  - Overshare – provide a FAQ that addresses all possible questions your customers may have
- Ask what they need – and deliver
  - You already know what they need – share your observations and confirm you’re correct
  - Then do all you can to meet their needs – and if you can’t, let them know, so they aren’t left hanging (and they at least know you tried)
- Keep them in the loop
  - Communicate at least once a week – more often is better
  - Share both good news and bad – don’t let them hear bad news from your competitor or the news media
  - Ask for their feedback, solicit questions
  - Assign a specific contact in your company to each customer – someone who knows their situation and to whom customers can reach out to anytime
- Share their pain
  - Empathize with what your customer is going through – genuinely express sorrow
  - Share some of your pain with them – not to elicit their sympathy, but to show you understand what they are experiencing

###