HR at work

Leading and managing people effectively in the face of global public health emergencies: lessons from Ebola and Zika virus outbreaks

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In crisis management, global public health emergencies require special attention from organisations. Some challenges are of key importance: a virus may be contagious, a localized epidemic can transform into an "explosive" pandemic rapidly and a vaccine may not always be available, as demonstrated by the Ebola and Zika outbreaks between 2014 and 2016. Thousands of people have been infected or even died from the Ebola virus, and several babies were born with severe birth defects caused by Zika. Governments, international institutions and medical research showed the extent to which they were powerless in the face of these challenges. Against the background of increased exposure to global health threats that are hardly predictable or controllable, organisations should take proactive steps to offset the impact of a global health emergency on their employees and families. Drawing upon experience with the United Nations working in the field of human resources (HR) capacities in countries affected by the Ebola and Zika virus, this paper provides the following suggestions to leaders and managers on how to manage people effectively in the face of global public health emergencies based on lessons learned and best practices:

1. Define the main lines of an external and internal strategy designed specifically to address the challenges posed by global health emergencies.

When the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported the Ebola and Zika outbreaks as global health emergencies, the biggest issue we faced was to communicate in a timely manner and respond effectively to the concerns of employees, particularly those located in remote areas in the field. At the time, the government, the main concerns were that governments and international institutions had no real answers about how to handle the virus and how fast it could spread. We did not have much information to provide to staff to reassure them. Rumours, in this context, started to spread very quickly, especially when a colleague would contract a virus leading to tragic loss at times. Inevitably, the organisation faced an increased level of absenteeism, low staff morale and some employees challenged the ability of the organisation to protect them.

To tackle such difficult situations, mass communication and emergency response preparedness are among the

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most important, even most critical factors, to manage risks and save lives:

- Ensure that your organisation has a strategic plan to deal with public health threats. To lead a general preparedness plan, set-up a task force to design a set of systems to facilitate fast, clear and consistent messaging in the event of a global humanitarian crisis, such as highly contagious influenza pandemics; use a dedicated, secure Web-based facility that allows exchange of information, talking points and press releases as they are issued, or in advance of their issuance. This Web-based facility will also collect information for the purposes of organizational learning and decision-making.

- Further elaborate and implement a strategic communication plan that provides a detailed approach on how to communicate and consult with internal and external stakeholders. Your communication plan will certainly help diffuse consistent information and promote open communication and transparency to the benefit of your organization's reputation, credibility and effectiveness. Update and implement your communication plan during and after the crisis.

- Empower your managers. During a crisis, leaders and managers should have full control on their employees. It

is, therefore, critical to support managers at all levels in meeting the challenges they face in leading, managing and offering the best possible support to employees. Prepare them to deal with sensitive, highly stressful situations caused by influenza pandemics. Encourage them to participate regularly in crisis management-related workshops, such as stress management and soft skills in crisis management. Consider bringing-in a consultant to train your leaders and managers.

2. Elaborate an emergency-preparedness plan for HR managers.

In today's world, organisations increasingly face unique risks and challenges and most organisations can now rely on their business continuity plans. However, these plans often overlook the strategic role of the HR function within organisations.

The role of the HR function in an organisation in the event of a pandemic or other emergencies in general is two-fold, which is to support the organisation and act as a resource for employees and their families. It speaks for the critical importance to invest in your HR managers's technical capacities and training in emergency-preparedness and response:

- For operational planning and support, appoint a focal point within HR and develop an

emergency response plan that defines the roles and responsibilities of your HR practitioners. It will help reduce anxiety and confusion and ultimately improve client service with employees and their families. Consider establishing a mixed team of HR and staff counsellors/ psychologists tasked to handle emergencies vis-à-vis employees and their families.

- Provide your HR staff with adequate training on your organisation's business continuity plan and crisis management soft skills; organize mock crisis situation scenario to help them practice on how to deal with their own stress and respond effectively to employees and families.

- Review and update the organisation's HR policies, guidelines and health and safety insurance policy schemes on a regular basis.

- Work in collaboration with other similar organization and particularly local organisations to share experience and build organizational learning.

3. Help your employees deal with situational and residual stress.

It sounds obvious, but when a crisis hits, every person's threshold for dealing with stress is different. You can help your employees and their families deal with situational and residual stress in rational, effective ways through building collective resilience and wisdom.

You can hit these targets by setting-up a dedicated intranet page, use social media as well as mobile communications:

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- Your intranet page should provide expert information to educate and reassure your employees about the disease. During the Ebola outbreak, some organisations such as WHO and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) used customised programmes providing expert information about the disease. These programmes could be shared and viewed by hundreds of thousands people around the world. Some organisations have actually used them as part of their support scheme for employees and families.

- As we live in the era of social media, foster communication by setting up a wiki platform on which employees can post their questions and concerns – designate someone to monitor the platform and answer questions and concerns on a daily basis.

- Last but not the least, set-up an alert system through email, SMS, Facebook and any other social fora as deemed appropriate, to notify employees at any time or on any day of the week, within minutes after an emergency has been identified or to provide the latest updates.

Conclusion

As the world becomes increasingly prone to global public health emergencies, with pandemics that prove to be hardly predicable or controllable, organisations must support managers and employees in their readiness to handle health crisis situations effectively. Organisations that are well prepared for this type of crisis scenario will mitigate risks, increase their reputation, credibility, effectiveness, as well as their employee engagement and motivation.

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