

[Career Advice Home](#) > [On the Job](#) > [Build Skills](#) > [Leadership](#) > Create a Disaster Plan

Create a Disaster Plan Work Together to Prepare for the Worst

by [John Rossheim](#)
Monster Senior Contributing Writer



When it comes to preparing for disaster, executives are the ones who sweat the big stuff, whether the potential risk is a hurricane, earthquake, pandemic, terrorist attack or other calamity. Top managers approve the plan for offsite data mirroring, pick an alternate payroll processor and assure the firm's biggest customers that current services won't be interrupted.

But of course, it's the folks in the trenches -- line managers and staff -- who sweat the seemingly little but essential stuff, such as making sure techs have the security privileges and passwords needed to set up an emergency PC network and updating the list of employee dependents with babies born since January 1.

The bottom line: Staffers and their supervisors are often the only ones in the organization who know how the rubber will meet the road in trying times. Without careful application of their knowledge, imagination and even leadership, the company and its employees and customers may suffer dire consequences.

Savvy organizations acknowledge this basic tenet of disaster preparedness, down to the geographic deployment of employees in preparation for a crisis.

"Typically, the CEO shouldn't be at the location of the disaster," says Gregory Thomas, a director at the [National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University](#). "The only ones left are the line managers, and they know the employees' tendencies, their plusses and minuses."

Staffers Are Essential to Assessing Preparedness

Drawing up disaster plans should be a 360-degree process, according to experts. "Everyone in the company should review the plan," says Dr. Gabriela Cora-Locatelli, president of the Executive Health & Wealth Institute in Miami. "Executives often have no clue what goes on at the supervisor and employee levels."

Rank-and-file workers are also crucial to leveraging lessons learned from previous crises. "Staffers dissected where things broke down, and they made recommendations to the senior leadership as to how they could improve communications," says Frank Folino, a vice president at Touro Infirmary, the first New Orleans hospital to reopen after Hurricane Katrina.

"We've had several dozen dedicated employees not afraid to step forward and suggest to us ways to improve our program," Folino says. These workers had insights Folino didn't, because "I wasn't on a nursing unit for hours in sweltering heat and darkness," he says.

So Many Ways to Get Communications Wrong

But staffers can't do a reality check if they don't have access to emergency plans -- or don't even know they exist. "Plans are often created at the executive level, and it's never communicated down," says Cora-Locatelli.

And the government doesn't necessarily do any better than private enterprise when it comes to communicating disaster plans. Nine of 23 federal agencies [studied by the Government Accountability Office](#) planned to enable essential knowledge workers to telecommute in case of disaster, but only one of these agencies documented it had told workers they might be asked to telecommute during a crisis.

Staffers can also play a crucial role in questioning how well emergency contingency plans for communications would work. After all, even satellite phones are useless if their batteries can't be recharged.

"We try to have a no-communications plan," says Tim Ramsay, associate vice president of information technology at the University of Miami. "We might say, 'If we can't communicate, we'll all meet at a designated site tomorrow at 2 p.m.'"

Remember: It's All About Your People

Workers can also demonstrate leadership by reminding executives that adrenaline will only take them so far. Even top

performers who rise to the occasion of a disaster are not superhuman.

"During Katrina, my second-shift staff got abused, because we so underestimated the storm" due to inaccurate weather forecasts, says Ramsay. The second shift had to stay on site for about 48 hours straight, "and a lot of people were upset."

Perhaps staffers' ultimate role is to convince top management that if workers are to stay on board during a crisis, they have an irreducible need to know how the company will handle it. "The workforce needs confidence that the plan will work," says Folino.

If there is management resistance to grassroots involvement in disaster planning, workers can diplomatically push back, says Cora-Locatelli. "Staff and line managers can say, 'I just want to make sure that my operation will continue to be effective. May I see the plan?'"

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