

# Keys to Creating a Culture of Preparedness

Use existing culture to build readiness throughout the organization



Whether you call it business continuity, disaster recovery or risk management, it all leads towards the same thing—a culture of preparedness. A culture of preparedness is when every person at every level of the organization is aware of the potential for a business disruption and knows what their role should be in both preventing and reacting to such an event. The concept is a good one, but to achieve such a culture you may need to approach your business continuity program in ways that are not well defined in the traditional best practices and methodologies.

## The traditional path gives you a traditional program

In time-honored fashion, when you first begin defining and creating a business continuity program, it's usual to start by assembling your tools. These may be as simple as the basic Microsoft Office tools (Word, Excel, etc.); or you may opt for a software application for building and storing your plans, conducting a business impact analysis or managing an incident. After performing risk and business impact analyses and building plans, you commence tabletop exercises and other practices, initiating fire drills and doing recovery tests along the way. And as we all know, it's important to communicate, communicate and communicate even more, so that everyone understands the program.

## The pitfalls of tradition

A traditional process like this is good in that it makes it easy for your plan to align with established standards and other business continuity plans. If you follow the process, you will indeed come up with a comprehensive and impressive plan. But that can be part of the problem.

Many times your plan is so big and so comprehensive that it overwhelms. Your audience expresses frustration that the plan is unwieldy, executives and staff don't totally support it, and you end up with a program that doesn't fit the culture of your company or its management. This is not good, as the sustainability of a program is directly related to the passion that everyone across the organization shares for preparedness.

## Start by considering your ultimate goal

How can you prevent these pitfalls and ultimately grow a passion for preparedness across all the organization? Start by confirming the goal or endpoint you want to achieve, which, ultimately, is agreement from everyone about the importance of being prepared. Your goal is to come up

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with a program that works and that people can make sense of and follow when the pressure is on. If your program is really good and your people are prepared no matter what happens, your company is less likely to even suffer an interruption. But if and when it does, the impact is likely to not be so grave.

To attain that goal and to create a truly useful and resilient program, you must start by understanding the culture that is already established within the organization. Once you do this, you no longer have to try and adapt your people to your program but instead you can build a program that will embed a sense of preparedness that gets buy-in at every level.

This way your ultimate goal changes from developing a business continuity program to **building a culture of preparedness**.

Start by understanding the corporate culture, and then align your goals for preparedness with elements that are already inherent in the culture of your organization.

## How do you define culture?

Corporate culture is made up of the beliefs, attitudes, values, principles and other elements that give your organization its unique personality. It's what makes working at companies like Apple different from Snapple, or working at Zappos different than Costco.

To determine corporate culture, take a look at what is written, starting with the employee manual or on posters in the hallways or break room. Look for evidence of the company purpose, values, principles, mission statements, vision, etc. Read what social media is saying about the company, and what the company says about itself in press releases. Then take into account the things that are not written, but are known by all (work hard/play hard; check your email on the weekends; Fridays are not only casual in dress, but in spirit too; etc.).

Cultures tend to stay stable so your task will be easier if you try to work with the one you have than try and change it. Be aware, though, that stable cultures can change when a change of management takes place. You and your plan must be flexible.

## How does existing culture effect a culture of preparedness?

Existing culture helps to define what matters most. Make a list of assets that include customers, employees, company goals, ROI and shareholder value and try and prioritize them; they'll be different for each organization.

When you ignore culture, crises can go undetected and a shoot-the-messenger mentality can take root. Both staff and executives want to know what to expect and don't want surprises; don't put yourself in the position of trying to explain, of reacting rather than acting properly in the first place, and then facing the inevitable and underestimated consequences.

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People tend to assume that someone else is focused on preparedness. This is dangerous. Your job is to remind them at all times that everyone in the organization is responsible for preparedness. No matter what the culture, if you're in charge of managing risk you must be respected like a Jedi knight: a person of honor, always training and preparing the mind, patient, enduring, persevering, honest and diplomatic. You must remind people which risks they need to be aware of. To do that you must build respect and patience and understand out what is most important to your senior leaders.

To maintain executive engagement, it's important your program has visibility. You can do this by putting scenarios before your leaders every month or quarter to encourage them to think of risks and their consequences Remember: executives, customers and employees don't like surprises and they value continuity. If you're explaining, you're losing.

No matter who you're talking to, it's important you use their language. Employees may react best when ideas are framed with the idea of safety, security, efficiency and happiness. Executives may appreciate terms like business success, continuity and return on investment.

Follow these steps and you won't go wrong:

- Seek to understand what exists today
- Start at the top if a culture change is needed
- Keep strategies and tactics simple and easy to understand
- Measure the culture changes as you go along (surveys, interviews, etc.)

## What can impede a culture of preparedness?

Messages templates that have been prepared in a cooler time are a great idea, but take the time to review and refine before releasing them. A message not communicated properly is not helpful, and may even be harmful. When preparing messages, keep in mind your message map and think what must be said before, during and after a crisis.

## Can there be certainty in crisis communications?

Disaster denial is a huge problem in today's crisis-prone world. The fear of what could happen is so big, that people tend to reject thinking about risky scenarios, not because it seems impossible they could strike, but because the lack of knowledge about how to respond is too great to embrace. They fear they will be frozen by fear.

Even our literature addresses this basic fear:

*"The human mind has a primitive ego defense mechanism that negates all realities that produce too much stress for the brain to handle."*

Dan Brown  
Inferno

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*"Denial is a critical part of the human coping mechanism. Without it, we would all wake up terrified every morning about all the ways we could die. Instead, our minds block out our existential fears by focusing on stresses we can handle—like getting to work on time... If we have wider, existential fears, we jettison them quickly, refocusing on simple tasks and daily trivialities."*

Dan Brown  
*Inferno*

Fortunately, by simply having a realistic plan in place, disaster denial is reduced dramatically. And if you provide clear instructions for what actions should be taken in the case of a disaster, and those instructions tie in with the corporate culture, you'll empower your people to face the fear and take the right actions when pressed by a crisis.

## Business standards and culture

Even the newest ISO 9001-2015 business standards link an organization's culture to addressing and preparing for risk. In fact, the standards talk about avoiding activities associated with a given risk and encourage discussion about when risk may be acceptable and when it is not when considering taking advantage of a key opportunity.

## Do you have a culture of preparedness?

A culture of preparedness asks the questions: Are you ready? How do you know? Are you sure? When is it okay to accept a risk and when is it not? Do you know what you're willing to risk? This kind of preparedness is not effective if it happens at just one level of the company; it must be embedded from the executive suite down through every department at every level.

A business impact analysis is a good place to start in determining which risks can be tolerated and which are unacceptable. Along with addressing the obvious risks, consider what your most senior employees know about risk, and imagine if they were to leave the organization without passing that on. It's important you have a knowledge continuity plan in place to capture this vital information.

To really address risk, more companies are focusing on risk management and pursuing standards like ISO 9001-2015 to guide them in:

- Establishing metric-driven decision process
- Prioritizing risks and allocating resources to mitigate
- Identifying and preventing risks that have potential for the greatest harm
- Documenting, maintaining and transferring organizational knowledge regarding risk mitigation as turnover occurs
- Expanding knowledge to increase awareness, communication and trust, both internally and externally

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Larger companies often employ internal auditors to see that company processes do indeed align to chosen standards. In the past this has been seen as a policing role, but is rapidly changing into one of collaboration. This helps to further embed a culture of preparedness and makes it easier to address risks as soon as they appear, rather than working in hindsight. This new flow and the prioritization of risk management is becoming the norm so that companies overall are becoming more and more prepared.

## In summary

We've learned that culture cannot be ignored. If you fail to start with an understanding of culture your efforts are likely to fail as well. Relationships with senior leaders must be cultivated and maintained, as their engagement is critical to the success of the program. Keep in mind that culture is generally stable, but can change as leadership changes. No matter who your audience is, keep your program simple, direct and aligned with your existing culture in order to make an impact. Keep in mind that day-to-day business operations will show you more about culture rather than a top-down statement or list that may consist of wishes rather than reality. Don't try and force-fit a program that doesn't align.

Your goal is to instill in everyone across the organization the same passion you have about being prepared. It's not a task that happens overnight, but one that requires a strategic vision and confidence that every initiative and interaction with employees or management will move all one step closer to understanding and passionately embracing a culture of preparedness.

### Words to remember

*"Sell the value of preparedness based on why your organization must be invested in preparedness, as opposed to what your organization must do to be prepared."*

Simon Sinek  
*How Great Leaders Inspire Action*



This paper is based on the webinar, [Keys to Creating a Culture of Preparedness](#), presented by Ann Pickren, MBTI, crisis communication expert and COO at MIR3; Jim Satterfield, President, COO, Firestorm; and Joe Miner, Global Internal Audit IT Supervisor, P&G.

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