



CORONAVIRUS

A LESSON IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLANS

WRITTEN BY: ERIN COLEMAN, RD, CPT
CHILD NUTRITION DIRECTOR, PERRY TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS

Many nutrition program leaders have pre-existing emergency feeding plans for natural disasters stored safe and sound on their bookshelves. However, the coronavirus pandemic has presented unique and unfamiliar situations that, despite their best efforts, have left these leaders unsure of how to appropriately respond. Child nutrition directors have had to act quickly to develop new feeding plans in addition to fielding questions where, in many cases, the answer is most certainly speculative if not unknown. Enter crisis communication mode!

This pandemic has brought a whole new set of challenges including difficulties in effectively communicating response plans. Nonetheless, child nutrition leaders have persevered and reminded us of the importance of developing communication plans in conjunction with feeding plans to overcome inevitable roadblocks during emergencies.

A good crisis communication plan consists of the following principles:

1. Communicate early and often with your team.
2. Be open and honest to maintain credibility and reliability.
3. Approach the situation with empathy by putting yourself in your constituent's shoes.

Let's take a more in-depth look into the specific communication challenges that nutrition program leaders are facing at this time and how we can apply the aforementioned principles to develop a solid crisis communication plan.

CHALLENGE #1: SOCIAL DISTANCING & DECENTRALIZED COMMUNICATION

Emergency feeding plans are not a new concept, unlike the guidelines mandated by social distancing. Prior to Covid-19, a quick in person group meeting could be called in order to brainstorm ideas and communicate responsibilities among the various parties involved. Now,

many planning meetings can no longer take place in person due to the number of individuals in a room being limited, as well as the guideline for maintaining a distance of at least six feet between individuals. With many people working from home during this crisis, these challenges can lead to a disruption in planning and misunderstandings among departments.

Solution: To overcome this obstacle, start by creating a team for centralized communication. For many school nutrition programs, this crisis-response team might consist of the Superintendent, Child Nutrition Director, school Principals, and some other key administrators such as the Human Resources Director. Ideally, this team should be kept small, comprised of ten people or less, to centralize the source of information.

You may also consider utilizing technology programs and software, such as "Zoom" to hold virtual meetings. In addition, software that allows multiple individuals to edit and view plans simultaneously, such as Google Sheets, can serve as a central work-hub. With these technological advances, departments can continue to work together to develop plans remotely while adhering to the social distancing guidelines.



CHALLENGE #2: UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Undoubtedly, this pandemic has been the most intense viral health scare we have experienced in our lifetime. With so many unknown factors, it's only natural that child nutrition departments receive an influx of questions regarding feeding plans from employees, administrators, and the public. How will we continue to feed our students? What will meals consist of? How will the staff and public be protected from exposure? These are questions that we have all likely received and it can be a bit overwhelming to navigate the unknowns, so how do you communicate your response when you don't have the answer?

Solution:

Be open and honest. People value transparency so it's helpful to communicate what you do and do not know, but think critically about how much is necessary to share. The goal is to provide insight, not cause panic. It's also equally important to cite your sources to maintain credibility.

For example, when communicating about new required safety measures, you can reference the State Department of Health and provide any relevant materials that pertain to your guidelines so that individuals know where you are getting your information.

In addition, schools may consider creating a FAQ document to place on their district's website and other social media platforms to address common questions to the public. Other helpful channels of public communication include automated phone call systems or email chain software (such as Parent Square) to inform every household of specific program information and changes.

CHALLENGE #3: COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR EMPLOYEES

One of the biggest questions on the forefront of our employees' minds is how this pandemic will affect their employment. Many may feel anxious about their paychecks as well as what their day-to-day responsibilities will look like. Feeding plans change by the hour and with schools not in session, it is much more difficult to ensure that all staff members are receiving correct information in a timely manner. Employees' anxiety and frustration levels may build if they are left with too many unanswered questions, but leaders also face the challenge of thoroughly explaining procedures and program updates given the unstable atmosphere that leads to last minute changes.

Solution: Studies have shown that leaders play a vital role in reducing employee anxiety in times of crisis. Communicating to your employees regularly either live or through phone or email will emphasize that you care about them and have made them a priority. Inform them of who their point of contact will be and their role in communicating with fellow employees. Send these communications regularly and consider creating a daily or weekly newsletter to inform staff of updates. Lastly, explain how decisions on issues that affect them were made to help them gain a better understanding and put their mind at ease.

SUMMARY:

We can use this period of time as a learning opportunity to improve communication efficiency. Creating a centralized communication team and staying in constant contact with your team to provide updates will ensure everyone remains informed. Answer questions upfront and do not delay time sensitive information. Lastly, leaders should remain calm, positive, and display empathy towards their employees.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT QUIZ SUMMER ISSUE 2020

Eligible for 1 CEU
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NAME: _____
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- 1) A crisis communication plan should be developed in conjunction with an emergency feeding plan. **TRUE OR FALSE**
- 2) A good crisis communication plan includes communication with employees early and often. **TRUE OR FALSE**
- 3) Social distancing guidelines recommend individuals maintain a minimum of 2 ft. distance between one another. **TRUE OR FALSE**
- 4) Technology software systems can be used to hold group meetings in lieu of in-person discussions. **TRUE OR FALSE**
- 5) "Yahoo Sheets" is an example of software that allows individuals to edit and view documents at the same time. **TRUE OR FALSE**
- 6) Crisis response teams should include every district employee. **TRUE OR FALSE**
- 7) You should not cite your source of information when sharing safety and health guidelines. **TRUE OR FALSE**
- 8) When asked a question that you do not know the answer to, it is best to make up an answer on the spot. **TRUE OR FALSE**
- 9) FAQ documents and automated phone messages can serve as a communication tool when providing plan information to the public. **TRUE OR FALSE**
- 10) You should only communicate with employees once a month to provide updates during a crisis. **TRUE OR FALSE**

Submit to Sheri Shipp, Executive Director by email or postal mail.

Email: sheri@indianasna.org Postal Address: P.O. Box 915, Brownsburg, IN 46112