

Your Guide to Crisis-Ready HR



A dedicated HR pro comes with a tightly packed toolkit. There are **onboarding checklists, benefits enrollment timelines, performance review workflows**—for every HR task, you have a plan.

But what happens when things don't go according to plan?

Life doesn't always fit neatly into a company's day-to-day routine. Whether it's an unexpected disruption, an industry-shaking scandal, or a **traumatic event**, there may come a time when your HR team will have to face a real workplace crisis.

You can't predict every emergency that comes your way, but you can be prepared with a crisis response plan. This guide takes you through essential **strategies** and action plans for the most common types of workplace crises.

Learn how you can empower yourself and your organization for whatever comes next.

HR's role in a crisis

When an organization faces an emergency, HR plays an essential role in protecting the stability of the business. Understanding what HR does in a crisis—and what HR can't do—is crucial to an effective response plan.

During a crisis, an HR team is all-hands on deck, making you vulnerable to **burnout**—especially when you get expectations and requests that go beyond HR's scope. HR is responsible for emergency-response business functions that affect employees, such as:

- Coordinating **internal comms**
- Ensuring **compliance** with labor and safety laws
- Sharing relevant **resources** with employees
- Tracking updates from authoritative sources (NOAA, local government, etc.)
- Advising leadership on next steps
- **Gathering employee feedback**

An HR pro is not responsible for administering physical or mental healthcare, serving as a personal counselor to employees, or enabling company leaders to avoid accountability.

HR does what's best for the entire organization, addressing collective employee needs and looking at the big picture to help a company get through a crisis.

“Workplace crises challenge not only our protocols but also our core values, and it is HR's mission to ensure those values shine brightly when they matter most.”

WENDE SMITH
SR. DIRECTOR, PEOPLE OPERATIONS | BAMBOOHR

Best practices for crisis communication

Successfully handling a crisis is all about good communication. Every organization's communication strategy will look different, but as you develop your team's plan, remember the following best practices.

PRIORITIZE SAFETY

Your first message to employees should address any safety issues, such as instructions to secure in place, evacuate, or stay home from work. Until your employees have received all essential safety information, updates about business operations or PR guidelines can wait. Not only does this ensure the wellbeing of all your people, but it also prevents your company from appearing insensitive or profit-focused during an emergency.

MOVE QUICKLY

Don't wait for misinformation to spread. Anticipate common employee questions, and provide them with answers as promptly as possible. In your crisis response plan, have boilerplate language prepared, so you can quickly draft internal messages when emergencies arise.

“In a workplace emergency or scandal, HR leaders and companies must act quickly, communicate transparently, and lead with empathy—speed protects trust, clarity reduces confusion, and compassion keeps your people grounded.”

AMANDA WATHEN
DIRECTOR, CORPORATE MARKETING | BAMBOOHR

COORDINATE WITH LEADERS

Make sure everyone in leadership is on the same page. As a crisis unfolds, continue to brief executives on company policies and clarify roles and responsibilities. Confusion around the response plan can cause safety issues and legal problems—the last thing you need is for the CEO and CFO to be sending out conflicting messages.

PUT IT IN WRITING

Send important instructions and updates in writing. This can be through email, a messaging app like **Slack** or your **internal communications** hub. Written communication prevents games of telephone and protects your company from liability issues down the road.

COMMUNICATE REGULARLY

Radio silence makes people nervous and can feed the rumor mill, so be consistent with updates. For multi-day emergencies, like extreme weather, try to send daily updates on safety conditions and other relevant information.

If it's a short-term crisis, like a building security issue, communicate with employees throughout the event, giving them context and instructions as soon as you can. After the event is resolved, arrange for a company-wide debrief within the following days to review what happened and answer employee questions.

BE HONEST

Never lie to employees. Dishonesty will irreparably damage employee relationships and expose your organization to greater liability. If there are unknowns, be **transparent**—tell employees that leadership is exploring options and provide a timeline for updates.

When you need to protect **confidentiality**, don't be avoidant with employees. Giving wishy-washy statements or ignoring questions will make the company look untrustworthy. Instead, give a direct response like, "Out of respect for the privacy of those involved, I'm not able to answer your question in full detail. However, I can address your general concerns about yesterday's incident."

CONSULT WITH LEGAL

Review all policy decisions and company communications with your legal team. Issues such as worker safety, **employee furloughs**, **delayed payroll**, and security breaches can all have legal implications, so be sure to cover your bases.

Are you experiencing HR burnout?

The demands of HR can take a toll on your mental health. Check in on yourself with this free guide to the signs of burnout in the HR field.

[READ THE GUIDE](#) →

5 types of workplace crises to prepare for today

MEDICAL CRISIS

A medical emergency in the workplace can be scary and upsetting for everyone involved. Some medical incidents are fairly minor, like sending someone home when they have a fever, but you may have to face a more severe emergency, like an employee having heart attack symptoms. With that in mind, your HR team should take steps to be prepared for medical crises, **promote a healthy workplace**, and support your people.

At minimum, your organization should practice basic emergency preparedness measures, such as keeping a well-stocked first aid kit and getting emergency contact numbers for every employee. But the best way you can support employee wellness is with proactive initiatives that address health issues in the workplace.

Work can affect our health in so many ways. For example, one recent study in the Journal of the American Heart Association found that **job stress** is connected to an increased risk of abnormal heart rhythm, a condition that can cause heart failure. **Investing in mental health** and other **wellness resources** doesn't just boost **work satisfaction** and encourage a positive **company culture**—it can literally save an employee's life.



HR TIPS & ACTION ITEMS

- **Provide physical and mental health first aid training:** Arrange voluntary workshops for employees who are interested in learning basic first aid and CPR. Additionally, offer **mental health first aid training** on how to recognize and respond to the symptoms of a mental health emergency. You may want to make certain trainings mandatory for managers to ensure there's always a trained individual available during an emergency.
- **Stock emergency medical supplies:** Make sure there are readily accessible first aid kits and AEDs (Automated External Defibrillators) in appropriate locations throughout your workplace.
- **Invest in comprehensive benefits:** Advocate for leadership to invest in robust health insurance, hospital insurance, and disability insurance plans. Promote EAPs (**Employee Assistance Programs**) that provide counseling, mental health support, and resources for a wide range of personal and work-related challenges.
- **Offer counseling:** Following a traumatic medical emergency, coordinate counseling services to affected employees and their colleagues.

DURING A MEDICAL EMERGENCY

Every medical emergency is different, and you should always follow directions from professional medical workers. Here are a few basic steps to take during an emergency medical event. To keep employees prepared, you can share a copy of these steps in a workplace common area, like a breakroom.

- **Call 911:** Call 911 or your local emergency number right away. Tell the dispatcher the nature of the emergency, your location, and, in case the call drops, the phone number from which you're calling.
- **Don't move the person:** Unless it's truly necessary, do not move someone who is unconscious or injured—doing so could cause further harm.
- **Get help from a trained employee:** If you are not trained in first aid or CPR, call out for an employee who is. If there's no trained employee available, follow instructions from emergency personnel over the phone.

In a medical emergency, remember to address specific people when asking for help. The **bystander effect** can cause people to freeze, so instead of saying, "Someone call 911," and waiting for somebody to spring into action, assign the task to a particular person, such as, "Riley, call 911."

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- [Red Cross Workplace First Aid Training](#)
- [NAMI: Navigating a Mental Health Crisis at Work](#)

Affordable Care Act compliance checklist

Is your company compliant with the Affordable Care Act (ACA)? Get the free checklist and make sure all your legal bases are covered.

[GET THE ACA CHECKLIST](#) →

NATURAL DISASTERS

In September 2024, **Hurricane Helene** made landfall in the southeastern US, causing deadly damage with severe flooding, dangerous winds, and multiple tornadoes. There were over 200 storm-related fatalities.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, communities struggled to recover. In **Asheville, North Carolina**, small businesses were devastated by the financial strain of infrastructure repairs and the lost revenue from long-term closures and reduced tourism. For the businesses that managed to survive at all, it took months to be fully operational again.

A severe natural disaster like Hurricane Helene is no longer a once-in-a-lifetime event. Climate change is continuing to cause an increase in the **frequency and intensity of extreme** weather, and it's reasonable to assume that your workplace will one day be impacted by a serious natural disaster. To protect your people and your business, your team needs to be prepared.

HR TIPS & ACTION ITEMS

BEFORE THE DISASTER

- **Create a natural disaster plan:** Outline general procedures for a natural disaster, such as the criteria for closing the office, the location of your workplace's storm shelter, and your emergency time off policy.
- **Protect essential documents:** Confirm you have **digital copies of important files** uploaded to a cloud storage system. Hardcopies and local devices can be destroyed in a natural disaster.

- **Follow official sources:** Track updates from sources like NOAA, the National Weather Service, and your local government. When deciding whether to close your workplace, use your public school district and state agencies as a benchmark.
- **Act early:** A delayed evacuation can be deadly. (In Hurricane Helene, **six people died leaving work** after their employer kept their factory open on the day of the storm.) If there's any chance your region will be impacted, close the office in advance—you're better off losing a day of work than waiting to see just how bad the storm will be.

DURING THE DISASTER

- **Shelter or evacuate:** Follow instructions from local authorities on evacuation or sheltering in place.
- **Check on employees:** Stay connected, if possible—encourage managers to message their teams and ask how everyone is holding up. Doing so ensures employees are treated as people first, and this also helps leaders know early on if someone will need extra support in the coming weeks.

AFTER THE DISASTER

- **Offer time off:** Give employees **time off** to address the material and emotional impact of the natural disaster. If it's financially feasible, offer **paid leave**.
- **Share emergency resources:** Share information about emergency resources, such as shelter locations, food and water distribution sites, and options for FEMA assistance. You can also share volunteer opportunities.
- **Help with benefits:** Employees may need to make use of benefits like disability insurance or an **EAP**. Your team can make the process easier by posting benefits FAQs in an **employee community hub** and hosting HR office hours.
- **Determine the furlough or unemployment process:** If your organization needs to temporarily or permanently close, consult with your legal team to figure out how employees will be put on **furlough** or **let go**. Be prepared to answer employees' questions about continuation of benefits, severance pay, and furlough timelines.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- [OSHA Tornado Preparedness and Response](#)
- [National Weather Service Hurricane Safety Tips](#)
- [Red Cross Wildfire Safety Guide](#)

WORKPLACE SAFETY INCIDENTS

Unlike some crises that might unfold gradually, like a bad weather forecast, a significant workplace safety incident—such as a severe work-related injury or a grave emergency like a building fire or an active shooter—can occur suddenly and have immediate, life-threatening consequences.

An emergency safety incident can result in serious injuries, long-term disabilities, and even fatalities. Traumatic safety events can also impact the **morale** and **psychological wellbeing** of the entire workforce.

Aside from the physical and emotional toll, a safety incident can carry legal and financial risks, as well as hurt your reputation as an employer. Case in point, a 2023 exposé on SpaceX revealed **hundreds of workplace injuries** connected to unsafe conditions, a company scandal that continues to be reported on today.

Free resource: HR compliance checklist

To run a successful (and above-board) business, HR needs to get compliance right every time. Our HR Compliance Checklist can help you start auditing your processes—and get some much-needed peace of mind.

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HR TIPS & ACTION ITEMS

- **Develop and enforce safety policies:** Collaborate with relevant departments to create safety policies, response plans, and reporting procedures that cover all potential hazards, including machinery operation, emergency evacuation protocols, and workplace violence prevention. Make sure your policies align with OSHA and other legal standards.
- **Conduct safety trainings and drills:** Implement mandatory, recurring safety trainings for all employees, covering topics such as emergency procedures (e.g., fire drills, active shooter drills, worksite injuries) and proper use of safety equipment.
- **Choose a communication channel:** Decide how you'll communicate with employees during a workplace emergency. This should be something accessible that can reach all employees, such as a special Slack channel, community hub, or text alert system.
- **Coordinate with emergency services:** Work with local services, such as your fire department, to review workplace safety protocols. In an emergency, follow all instructions from first responders.
- **Offer support:** After a safety incident, provide support to affected employees, including counseling and **mental health services**. Facilitate a **return-to-work** program if necessary.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- [OSHA Compliance Assistance Specialists](#)
- [FBI Active Shooter Safety Resources](#)
- [National Park Service: Fire Evacuation Drills in the Workplace](#)

TECHNOLOGY AND CYBERSECURITY FAILURES

A worst-case scenario crisis doesn't require a bunch of drama or fanfare: send one bad link, and a technology failure could spell disaster for your entire company.

A tech problem can bring systems to a grinding halt, potentially costing you millions of dollars and damaging your company's reputation. The cybersecurity company CrowdStrike provides a now-infamous cautionary tale—in 2024, an error in a

software update caused a **global systems crash**, impacting major sectors like air travel, hospitals, the stock market, and government. The outage caused more than **\$5 billion in losses**.

Whether it's an innocent mistake or an intentional attack, a tech crisis will escalate into a far-reaching disaster if your company is unprepared. As an HR pro, you can stay ahead by training employees on **cybersecurity awareness** and using best practices for **employee data storage**.

HR TIPS & ACTION ITEMS

- **Develop technology use policies:** Collaborate with your cybersecurity team to create a clear policy for how employees should properly use technology, **including AI**, and handle company data.
- **Train employees:** Require employees to complete quarterly cybersecurity trainings so everyone is familiar with company policies and knows how to prevent and report cybersecurity breaches.
- **Store employee data properly:** HR manages essential employee data like social security numbers and personal addresses. Keep employee data safe in a secure, cloud-backed HRIS. Look for a platform that uses industry best practices, like **zero-trust architecture**, **defense-in-depth** strategies, and **SOC-2 compliance**.
- **Secure systems and mobilize:** In the event of a data breach, follow instructions from your cybersecurity team to immediately secure physical and digital access points. If employee data was impacted, prepare an **internal communications plan** and review liability concerns with your legal team.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- [CISA Cybersecurity Best Practices](#)
- [KnowBe4 Security Awareness Training](#)
- [Best Practices for Employee File Storage](#)

Free report: The State of HR Data Privacy

Cybercrime is alarmingly common—and employee data is a major target. BambooHR surveyed 1,500 US workers about their experiences and how HR can better protect their personal information.

[GET THE REPORT](#) →

DISRUPTIONS AND DISTURBANCES

It's hard to run a business when things don't feel like business as usual. Throughout its lifespan, a company will experience all kinds of disruptions, from industry upheavals to major internal changes. During those times, your HR team will need to take the lead with supporting employee relationships and keeping your organization stable.

As you develop a crisis response policy, there are a few types of workplace disturbances to think about.

BIG CHANGES

The first is a serious internal change that affects employees, like a merger, a round of layoffs or furloughs, or a significant restructuring of the company. Internal changes need to be handled carefully, in close coordination with leaders. A clumsy or disrespectful approach will permanently damage professional relationships and your **employer reputation**, as when the CEO of Better infamously **laid off 900 employees over a Zoom call**.

INTERNAL SCANDALS

Some disruptions are less about structural changes and more about drama and rumors. Ideally, you have a company culture of trust and positivity. But sometimes things go wrong, and you have a workplace scandal on your hands. This could be an abrupt firing of an executive or an **internal investigation into employee misconduct**.

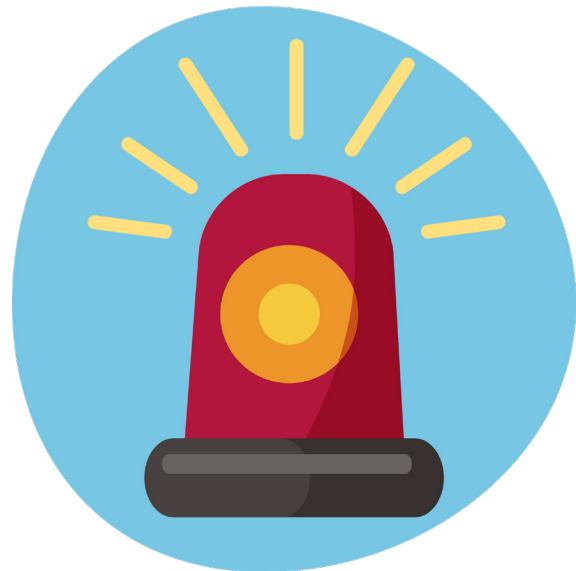
Your HR team will likely be in the thick of it, shutting down misinformation, **protecting confidentiality**, **deescalating conflict**, and upholding the values of a fair and **compliant** workplace.

LEGAL PROBLEMS

In certain cases, you might experience workplace drama of the courtroom variety. Lawsuits brought against your company can cause panic and distrust among employees and hurt your **employer brand**, like **Apple getting sued for surveilling employees' personal devices**. In addition to working with your company's legal team, you may need to take extra measures to reassure employees and preserve relationships.

INDUSTRY UPSETS

A disruption can go beyond just your organization. In the midst of an event that affects your entire industry, like a competitor's legal troubles, a change in public policy, or a financial crash, your HR team will need to get into gear to manage internal communications and **help leaders make crucial decisions**.



HR TIPS & ACTION ITEMS

- **Make a communication plan:** Before announcing a major change or addressing an external disruption, craft a **communication strategy with leadership**. Include what information will be shared with whom, when it will go out, and who will be the face of communications. You should also consider what communication channels you'll use.
- **Stick to the facts:** Address any internal rumors and set the story straight. Make sure employees have a clear understanding of what's really going on and where the company stands.
- **Train leaders on sensitive communication:** Train executives and managers on **how to deliver difficult news**. Prepare key talking points and answers to common employee questions.
- **Offer outplacement services and support:** In cases of layoffs or furloughs, provide resources such as **resume** writing assistance, job search support, and counseling to help affected employees transition.
- **Address employee concerns proactively:** Offer ways for employees to ask questions and express concerns. This could be town halls, anonymous forms, or special HR office hours.

- **Provide guidance on professional conduct:** Remind employees of company policies on **conduct outside of work**, especially regarding public statements and social media commentary related to internal affairs or industry issues.
- **Monitor morale and engagement:** Conduct **wellbeing surveys** or informal check-ins to gauge employee sentiment during periods of disruption. Use the feedback to inform your ongoing strategy.

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HELPFUL RESOURCES

- [Furloughs vs. Layoffs: Legal Differences & Best Practices](#)
- [How to Conduct an HR Investigation](#)