Pandemic shows need to integrate human rights specialists in crisis management teams

By GBI CEO Ron Popper

Three months ago (it seems like a lifetime) a colleague and myself led a workshop and exercise for the crisis response team at a multinational company. The aim was to pressure test their overall crisis preparedness and capacity for dealing with a fast-moving scenario with likely human and business consequences.

The assembled, highly talented team comprised mainly people from the business and different functions, but also included human rights and sustainability specialists who provided valuable and nuanced input into discussions otherwise dominated by lawyers, communicators and business unit representatives.

How many other companies, apart from extractives – whose business resilience and continuity depends on in-depth community, environmental and human and physical security knowledge – have such people at the table when a crisis breaks? I suspect not enough; too often they are dismissed as being of peripheral value.

But corporate human rights specialists often have on-the-ground experience of particular issues, their subtleties and historical background. They may also have the contacts from whom to access early information.

Corporate crisis management teams, at a group or local level, need to be tightly organised, as small or large as the evolving situation demands, and act with speed, experience and insight to establish facts and initiate responses. One of the first tasks is to build a list of stakeholders who are involved, or who must be contacted, supported or engaged with.

Having a human rights specialist or sustainability expert at the table, or on standby, can immediately influence the list of stakeholders likely to be involved, and the approach towards them. Based on the human rights due diligence and stakeholder engagement that are their daily bread, these specialists can identify individuals or groups that may be particularly vulnerable in a crisis – and who may be missed by the business, security, legal, communications and human resources specialists around the table.

For example, women who often populate the end of supply chains, migrant workers, members of highly diverse communities and discriminated-against minorities – all of whom could have different histories, pressures and needs – may be particularly vulnerable in a crisis.

Human rights specialists are communicators by the very nature of their work. And while it is standard practice for corporate communications professionals and lawyers to be at the helm in drafting the first crisis stand-by statements, thereafter it is important to consult internal specialists who know whether a public repetition of standard corporate values in a given context is warranted or will stand the test of scrutiny in a complex, fluid situation. Human rights specialists may well understand subtleties on the ground – for example on land or labour issues and their history – which may be missed in the initial rush to keep pace with a social media-driven rollercoaster.

As we witness some companies refusing to fulfil contractual obligations with suppliers in different parts of the world, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, human rights professionals can point colleagues not only to the often dire social, labour and economic consequences of such

"Human rights specialists may well understand subtleties on the ground … which may be missed in the initial rush to keep pace with a social media-driven rollercoaster."

practice, but also to how it can affect business continuity once a degree of normalcy returns. Such nuances may be missed in the immediate rush to preserve the bottom line.

Human rights specialists also have a role to play in a crisis in helping managers ensure that victims have a means to communicate and air grievances, that they are heard and have access to remedy. In the highly charged atmosphere of a crisis, this is one of the key areas of work. A purely legalistic or communications-driven approach may fail to spot or appreciate the root of the grievance, or the true impact of the negative consequences of a crisis.

Involving internal – or indeed external – human rights expertise in managing a crisis may demonstrate that a corporate understanding of the negative impact on a victim may not tally with the perception of the affected person or people. These insights can facilitate remedy.

These are just some of the issues that need to be part of a crisis team's reflex or at least flagged and acted upon at an early stage.

Corporate crisis management teams which have not yet brought such expertise on board need to:

- Be trained on human rights issues that can arise during a crisis

- Know about international and national human rights laws and standards that are in place to safeguard human beings; it is, after all, people who are usually the victims of a crisis

- Increase their understanding of how companies may cause, contribute to or be directly linked to negative human rights impacts in a crisis, and the value that using leverage can add to the subtleties of crisis response

- Understand better the human rights factors that may determine an individual or group's background and response to or behaviour in a crisis

The bottom line is: Getting the human rights dimension right in a crisis can have a major positive impact and outcome – both for affected stakeholders and the corporation; the reverse is also true.

At this critical time, it is incumbent on companies to ensure the human rights dimension is included to ensure an effective, sustainable response to the pandemic that will stand the test of time.

Ron was formerly the head of corporate responsibility at a major multinational, where he was involved for 10 years in a wide range of corporate crises – ranging from product recalls and factory-related incidents through to country withdrawals, pandemics, acts of terrorism, hostage taking and natural disasters.

Access more on COVID-19 and responsible business practice here:

- [COVID-19 and business and human rights: adopting a responsible business response](#)
- [COVID-19: The mental health considerations for responsible business](#)
- [COVID-19 and stigma: a responsible business approach](#)
- [COVID-19 and contract non-performance: wise companies are guided by business and human rights thinking](#)
- [COVID-19 and the right to water: the crucial role of business during and after the pandemic](#)