

Keep Calm And Manage On

Danny Koontz

Facility professionals know a disaster will eventually happen with their restaurants or property. Having seen it from the restaurant facility side and now from the vendor side, the two most important words to keep in mind are: stay calm. Have a plan and execute the plan. As the facility professional, people will be looking to you and your team to provide guidance and support, so if you are scattered or emotional, it will cause others to worry more than necessary. The four steps of disaster management are:

1. Plan
2. Prepare/Practice
3. React
4. Recover

Hurricanes, floods and earthquakes are the most common disasters. When a disaster happens, typically these are the problems that occur:

1. Loss of power
2. Closed restaurants/Loss of sales
3. Damaged property
4. No way to communicate to team members

Now, let's take a closer look at each step involved in disaster management.

Step 1: Plan

Most companies have a manual or a guideline for steps to take if a disaster strikes. It is a good idea to review those documents at least once a year or at the conclusion of a disaster to make changes, updates and add lessons learned.

Include several people from various departments on a taskforce so all needs of the company are addressed, and ensure they have input on the plan. For example, include a representative from facilities, risk management, legal, HR, distribution, marketing, media, IT and others. Then, use past disaster experience to make plan improvements.

Step 2: Prepare/Practice

This is a critical step because it determines how you will respond to a disaster. Here are a few examples to consider:

- For a hurricane, when do we board up the properties? Is it determined by the storm's category, whether the location is in the storm's path or simply because it is located on the water? It may seem easier to be proactive and board up the property, but if the storm is downgraded or changes path, you may not be able to get a contractor on site fast enough to remove the boards, and the restaurant can't open and will lose sales.
- Will we use generators at certain sites? Will we rent or buy them? If renting, when do we make the call to ensure units are still available? If we buy, when do we send them out to locations, and how do we handle fuel?
- Communication can be extremely challenging after a disaster. I learned this the hard way. Often, a cell phone number is listed but no address. You can usually contact all your managers and leadership, but for hourly team members, you must gather additional information beforehand so you can follow up to ensure their safety. Another best practice is to send walkie-talkies to your contracting partners and some operation leaders in case phone lines and internet go down.

Practice your plan to identify any issues that need to be discussed or changed prior to a disaster. Ensure your distribution partners and your contractor partners are in sync with what to do if a disaster happens.

Your contractor partners, along with the facilities team, tend to be the first people on the ground. Have a letter on hand from your corporate office stating they need access to the sites on behalf of the company. It may help them access the damage quicker.

Step 3: React

Now that the disaster has hit, what is the plan? First, have a meeting every morning, with all the key departments, to share the information you know and set your plan.

Many people within your company will want updates, so it is a good idea to put out a statement every morning of the latest updates and plan for the day. This is a timesaver because it helps minimize repeat calls to you and your team.

Rely on input and updates from electrical companies and other local restaurants. All of this will matter as you decide on your plan of recovery.

If you have a restaurant on the same electrical grid system as a nearby hospital, it has a good chance of coming back on line quickly. If you have multiple closed locations in a market, pick one in each market to reopen. This will get sales flowing again and allows some team members to return to work. Plus, it gives the emergency workers in that market a place to get food. Work with your operations team to coordinate what you can get open and staffed.

Step 4: Recover

The disaster has passed. You have gathered information, and everyone needs their restaurant back opened at once. Finance wants to know the cost; distribution needs to know when to schedule deliveries and so forth. This is the most crucial time for you and your team.

Put your recovery plan in motion based on all the information you have gathered. You will need to be very flexible, as details will change day to day, and the plan will be altered depending on the level of progress.

Seek input from others, then start your process. Consider where you will get the biggest bang for your buck, and work your way through the system. Use your contractor partners to establish ballpark budgets, work with your insurance provider on their requirements and start putting the pieces back together.

Also, have a backup plan. If progress isn't moving at the expected pace, have a plan to move on to another area. Don't let outside noise distract you from your goal. Your leadership team will assist you in setting the plan for recovery, and once it has been decided, follow up on it. All locations can't be addressed at the same time, so accept that and move through the process. Continue to communicate about the latest progress and barriers. Be honest, and don't over-promise.

By following the steps of plan, prepare/practice, react and recovery, you will be able to attack any situation or disaster that may occur. And remember, others will be looking at you and your team for guidance and support, so always stay calm.

Danny Koontz has more than 38 years of facilities experience— 36 of them with Ruby Tuesday as Director of Facilities Management. Koontz is now the Vice President and Director of Operations for VMC Facilities LLC. He has been a member of RFMA since its inception, serving on the Board of Directors, as the 2011 Board Chair and now as a member of Advisory Council.