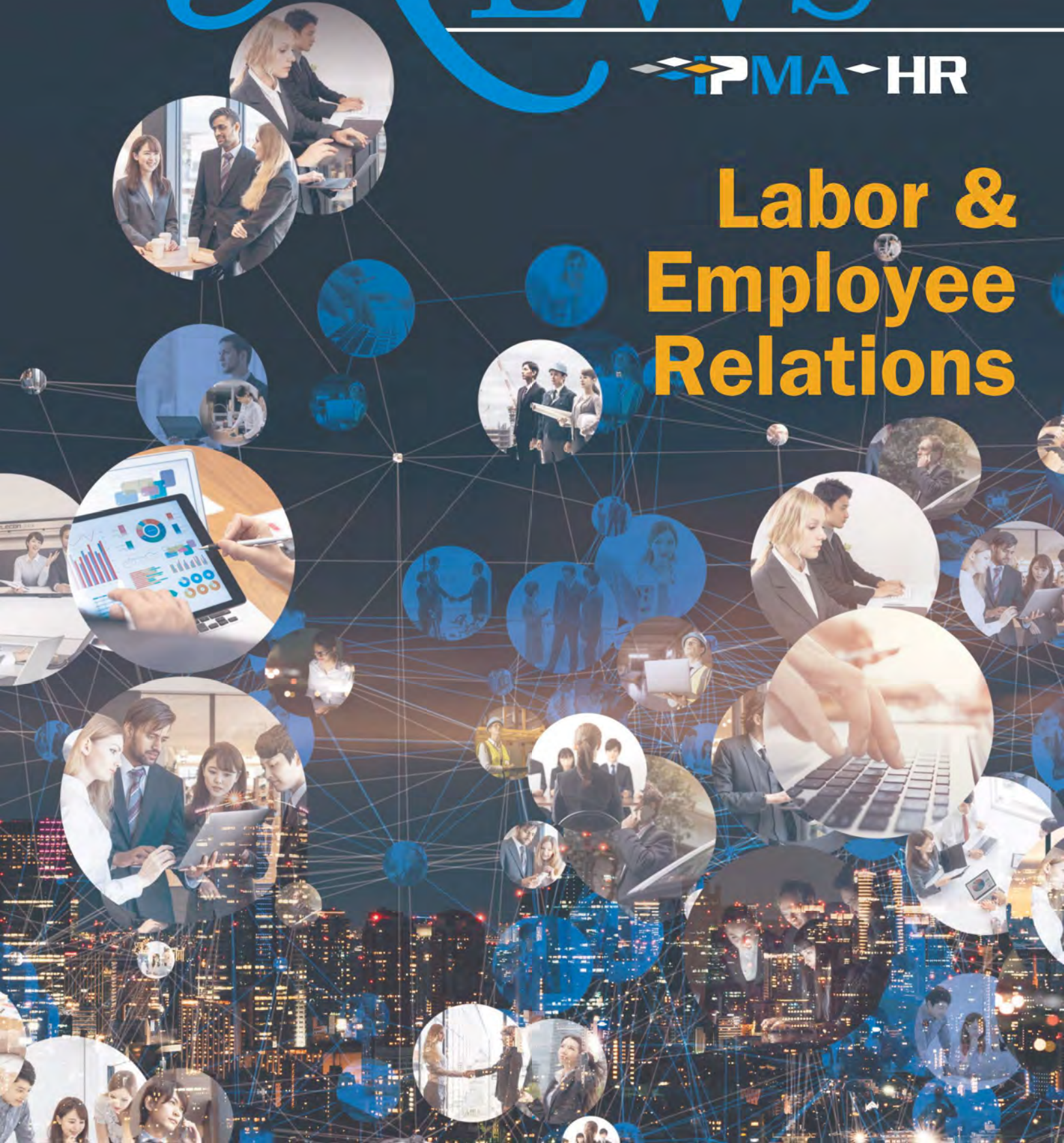


# HR NEWS

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## Labor & Employee Relations



# Crisis Management Strategies for HR Leaders

By Megan Paquin, APR, CPRC and Jackie Labrecque

If there's one thing we all learned from this year, it is that no one is immune from a crisis. The coronavirus pandemic tested every organization, from small businesses to large corporations and government agencies. With it came additional challenges for human resources teams.

While most organizations have a crisis response plan, PwC's 2019 Global Crisis Survey revealed that fewer than a quarter of organizations actually derived value from their plan during a crisis. That finding reflected the fact that outdated models for crisis response plans fail to account for the complex and interrelated nature of crises. Plans can also fall short on facilitating effective team coordination, and many place far too much emphasis on top-down leadership.

HR professionals can help fix those shortcomings. With a broad range of responsibilities that touch every individual and team within the organization, HR professionals possess valuable business acumen, organizational leadership capabilities and employee relations insights. This unique combination of skills and experience firmly positions HR leaders to help take charge of crisis management and of ensuring their organizations emerge stronger.

## Build a Crisis-Ready HR Team

It is not uncommon for HR executives to have established roles on the crisis management team. Whether this describes your current situation or you are seeking a seat at the table, ensuring that crisis awareness carries through the entire HR enterprise is critical.

Start building a crisis-ready HR team by conducting an in-depth risk assessment for your organization. Carry out the assessment while considering your organization's mission, vision and values, and make sure to list which of the organization's current initiatives, assets and stakeholders are mission-critical.

Next, just as you would do when conducting a SWOT analysis, consider what direct and indirect issues could threaten success. Consider asking others in the department to help so you create a comprehensive list of potential crises. Generally, crises will fall into the categories of human, financial, technological, legal, operational and reputational. Assign the items on your list to the proper categories and set priorities for developing action plans.

Effective action plans outline specific steps to take to help the organization achieve a best-case scenario outcome. For each step, consider the role of the HR department and write out ways you and your HR colleagues could help or harm the organization. Going through this exercise will help you define strategies and tactics that add value while shining a light on issues that could arise if everyone is not on the same page. You will also want to identify stakeholders for each strategy and tactic, including external stakeholders such as community partners and vendors, to ensure effective coordination.

Once you have written, detailed action plans, do not set them on a shelf and forget about them. Bring your team together regularly to review and test each action plan. Quarterly practice sessions, sometimes known as simulations or tabletops, are great ways to increase crisis awareness and ensure team members are well-prepared to fulfill their roles when a crisis arises.

## Take Your Seat at the Table

Getting your department's house in order and sharing insights gleaned from that experience are good ways for emerging HR leaders to demonstrate executive leadership capabilities. In fact, many professionals credit successfully managing an organizational crisis or contributing in significant ways to a crisis response as the thing that got them noticed for more senior roles. But serving on an integrated crisis management team is quite different from managing one's own department.



On crisis teams, HR professionals wear the two hats of department leader and organizational leader. In their departmental leader role, they are responsible for implementing crisis management strategies that affect employee stakeholders. As organizational leaders, they empower individuals to lead from the top, middle or bottom of the organization.

The organizational leadership role is often forgotten in the stress of a crisis. However, this is where HR leaders add tremendous value.

Ensuring effective teamwork makes all the difference in successfully managing a crisis. This means that organizational leaders must draw on their knowledge, skills and abilities to help define roles and responsibilities across the team; maintain structure in the face of uncertainty; and be ready to secure and deliver resources to bolster colleagues' leadership capabilities.

Another critical role on the team for HR leaders is to prevent burnout. Keeping a watchful eye on team members throughout the organization for signs of mental and/or physical fatigue is essential.

## Don't Be Afraid to Ask for Help

Crises test organizational culture and values, which are two of the pillars of HR leadership. Naturally, HR leaders should prioritize upholding those values by engaging in effective internal communications and ensuring members of the crisis management team stay true to the organization. Maintaining alignment across employee groups is also important.

In most organizations, HR and communications staff maintain a collaborative relationship. A crisis can introduce unaccustomed challenges such as litigation and absences of key personnel, leaving

even some of the most seasoned team members wondering who is in charge of drafting, approving and delivering key messages.

In such situations, it can make sense to contract with a crisis management firm. Doing that brings external structure to a system that is at risk for not holding together.

Experts from a crisis management firm who have experience coordinating internal communications can help team members divide and conquer responsibilities. The experts will arrive with a broad range of skills and knowledge that team members may lack. They will also focus solely on managing the crisis while organization staff continue doing their usual jobs. Continuity of operations is critical to fostering the organization's short- and long-term recovery.

## Readiness Builds Resilience

We may one day have a cure for COVID-19, but other unique crises will befall organizations. HR professionals who provide proactive leadership within their departments and across their organizations will contribute to building the resilience required to overcome whatever may come.

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