Building Team Resilience on Social Media

By Iffet Türken , INSEAD EMCCC '17

Guidelines for how a team can use social media to foster resilience in crisis situations.

The world faces a new crisis situation more or less every day – be it political, economic or humanitarian. Wherever a crisis is experienced, echoes are felt around the globe. In the digital age, social media conveys crises in real time, resulting in rich portfolios of pictures, videos, written records and more.

In this hyper-connected world, executives face unprecedented challenges regarding crises. With mobile phones in hand, not only do executives encounter problems constantly, they are now expected to solve them straightaway.

As people become more connected, the mobile messaging application, or 'app', is emerging as the instant form of communication. As of 2016, more than 1.4 billion people were predicted to use mobile messaging apps. With more than one billion users, one of the most popular, WhatsApp, connects people via text, images, video and audio. Users are also forming social groups through the app, as well as specific interest and business groups.

Better connectedness

Social media, specifically WhatsApp, is an important communication tool within the business community because it enables connectedness on more levels than voice calls and e-mail. Virtual teams, who work at different locations, are increasingly common. The synchronised communication offered by WhatsApp means that distributed team members can communicate effectively in real time. Aside from facilitating decision making, it can help build trust and a sense of community among virtual teams, improving working relationships and thus performance. Encrypted at both ends, WhatsApp also offers a level of privacy not guaranteed by other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The benefits of security are amplified during times of crises.

As part of the **INSEAD Executive Master in Consulting and Coaching for Change**, I conducted an exploratory **study** on the executives' use of WhatsApp and WhatsApp business groups. In all 84 international executives using social media (including LinkedIn) completed a survey about their use of the groups. Ninety-four percent of the executives already used WhatsApp. When asked about the importance of the app in their lives, 49 percent of the participants stated that WhatsApp was important; 17 percent confirmed that the app was very important. In total, 52 percent of the executives participated in WhatsApp business groups.

I then interviewed the 16 active participants in WhatsApp business groups who had recently experienced national crises. The resulting data were subjected to thematic analysis. The interviewees reported heavy use of their WhatsApp business groups during crises and seemed to derive specific benefits from it. Executives were found to engage in intense, quick and reciprocal communication in the groups, sharing emotions, resulting in hyper-connectedness.

Heightened resilience

These bursts of connectedness can increase a team's effectiveness in the face of adversity by facilitating resilience. Resilience relates to people's ability to positively adapt to adverse circumstances. During a crisis, intensified sharing and increased connectivity via instant, cheap and easily accessible social media tools may bolster resilience in teams, particularly virtual ones. In addition, the accelerated connectedness facilitated by WhatsApp may also enhance emotional expression within teams. The sense

of being a part of a group or simply feeling one is "not alone" allows collective action, thereby facilitating team resilience.

In addition, considering **Bion**'s theory of containment, WhatsApp business groups can, during times of crisis, become coordination centres for collective action and safe spaces for expressing emotions.

Among survey participants, sharing of positive and negative emotions freely, especially in adverse situations, seemed to enhance virtual group dynamics, resulting in enhanced collective action and resilience. Overall, the executives suggested that using WhatsApp helped them and their teams to "bounce back" from adversity. Firms could create groups like these as spaces for reflection and the navigation of uncertainty.

Such an approach does, however, have the potential to breed anxiety, Executives should be aware of this when overseeing groups. With this in mind, I have created a list of evidence-based guidelines for executives to consider when setting up WhatsApp business groups, including recommendations specific to crisis situations.

Guidelines for general use

The goal of these recommendations is to promote a more effective use of WhatsApp business groups or other social media tools.

- Carefully consider the number of group members; too many could lead to superficial discussions.
- Purposefully select members for focused functioning.
- Ensure all members share a common interest in the topic.
- Provide explicit guidelines regarding the group's intended function prior to participation.
- Declare explicit rules (such as "no sharing about personal lives in the group").
- Appoint a moderator to facilitate communication if the group is not homogeneous (geographically, occupationally or culturally).
- Data should be stored and backed up, with the consent of group members, if it includes many photos and files that will need to be accessed in the future.

In preparation for crises

Executives in my study found WhatsApp business groups effective in crises. The following recommendations may help.

- Provide a simple structure on how to communicate during crisis times.
- Define roles within the group for crisis situations, such as who will make announcements to the team.
- Choose a group leader to facilitate decision making and curtail anxiety.

WhatsApp business groups have the potential to improve communication within virtual teams. Among other benefits, these groups can improve their day-to-day work and resilience during times of crises. They are easy and convenient to use. Employees and executives, even non-digital natives, find them useful.

In a crisis-ridden world where instant solutions are expected, we should shine a light on the possibilities afforded by new communication tools and advocate preparation for a future where there will inevitably be more uncertainty.

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