

## PandemicBuzz: An Interview with Facebook's Global Head of Crisis Management

Witt O'Brien's values the insights of renowned industry experts as society faces the outfall of the COVID-19 pandemic. This blog entry highlights the interview on a podcast series entitled [PandemicBuzz](#) launched by Witt O'Brien's [Devin Sirmenis, Managing Director Corporate Resilience](#). We invited [Larry Cristini](#) who heads Global Crisis Management efforts for Facebook for a wide-ranging discussion on the company's approach to managing the impacts of the global pandemic on its business, lessons learned and why taking more time to build relationships with your clients and fellow co-workers is even more important now.

---

### **Global Guidance with Regional Considerations**

Like a multitude of companies, Facebook has scores of offices and operations worldwide which means they have countless considerations and implications for the decisions they make related to COVID-19's effect on the company's daily operations. It's important to analyze and consider the local conditions and mandates related to pandemic, as well as the ability of the region to respond on the ground. Firms should develop several key indicators to help assess risks and make decisions.

The early development of global guidance processes is critical to the overall response effort for each of the regions. However, the key is to provide the regions and sites with flexibility in the prescribed guidance in order to promote adaptive leadership and enable them to respond as needed to regional nuances. When this is accomplished, the global guidance serves as a baseline that provides the necessary local autonomy for an efficient and effective response from regional and local leadership.

Companies should also consider the differences in types of sites, too. There are unique considerations for offices, data centers and manufacturing plants, including the number of employees at any one location, and what critical operations are housed there.

### **Phased Response**

Because the pandemic will be with us for some time, companies should consider taking a phased approach to returning to the workplace. Facebook considers four-phases which feature:

- Phase 1: Office closures completed expeditiously and as warranted in order to keep employees safe.
- Phase 2: Transition to work from home. In a company with more than 50,000 employees, this was no easy feat and presented challenges in some cases for the company. The lessons learned from these efforts will go to help leadership in the future should something of this magnitude occur again.
- Phase 3: Re-open offices in safe mode, as the health of the employees remains the paramount consideration.

- Phase 4: Business as usual, which will likely occur post-vaccine or with a treatment or cure for the virus.

This phased approach allows for the variances in both the increase and decline in cases across the world and phases will vary from one region to another. As the spread of COVID-19 stabilizes in more cities and countries, companies can repopulate offices and facilities accordingly.

### **Planning for the Future**

Companies shouldn't only be looking at the immediate future, but also what the next 4-6 months and the next year will bring. What does the horizon look like and what are the probabilities that can be planned for in advance? Offices will likely open and then may have to close again as spikes in cases increase. Planning for the second, third and fourth order effects of these unpredictable changes will only serve to prepare companies for what may come.

In a world where we all are contending with the 'new normal', it's hard to imagine compounding risk beyond COVID-19, but it's a reality. Companies must plan for concurrent disasters, such as hurricanes and wildfires, which are highly probable realities. Adjusting plans now considering the ongoing pandemic will certainly help your organization respond more effectively to a second and simultaneous catastrophic event.

### **Applying Lessons Learned**

It's important to take pause, even while the pandemic is still ongoing and take stock in how your company culture is contributing to your crisis management and business continuity efforts. Larry Cristini provides some noteworthy examples that illustrate the power of positive introspection.

A company culture that prioritizes "moving fast" can be great for innovation. However, it can also serve as a challenge in a global crisis. Leadership must be able to pause and adjust for a global response to meet an unprecedented global challenge.

The strong internal culture of Facebook has paid dividends during their company's response efforts. The attitude that "nothing is someone else's problem" allows for all employees to speak up and offer insight and guidance during a time of uncertainty.

The likelihood that a company's response efforts will go well are increased exponentially if they develop scenario plans for both the immediate and long-term future. These response scenarios should be shared broadly among employees as it will allow them insight into the company's planning efforts and abilities.

There are several positives that serve as outgrowth for firms, too. Resilience practitioners in every industry are familiar with the struggle of working across silos in an organization. At Facebook, leaders have used the pandemic as an opportunity to work cross-functionally across silos. These strengthened working relationships will serve as a positive outcome for the business in the long term.

It goes without saying that nobody knows what's going to happen, even on a day-to-day basis. Business leaders want to make information-informed decisions – however, in a crisis we don't always have the ability to do so. In a firm's everyday business decisions, they make

suppositions and guesses about the future and plan or react accordingly. The pandemic is no exception to this approach and companies should remain mindful of this fact.

Moreover, emphasized attention will be given to employees' self-care, stress levels and overall burnout. Even when these things may have been a firm's focus in the past, we as a world have come to realize that additional factors are now at play, including the stress of the pandemic itself. More than ever leadership should be communicating with its staff that a positive work-life balance is key to seeing this through.

### **Social Media Policy**

Companies should remain transparent and open during a crisis and always get out in front of any issues that may arise, including on social media. Know who your key stakeholders are and understand their concerns and expectations during a crisis. Always remind yourself 'how do we want them to remember us when the crisis is over' and build your messaging accordingly.

### **The Challenges and Opportunities of a Remote Workforce**

Many companies will likely remain remote for the foreseeable future, or, in some instances, forever. There are innate challenges that go along with working from home, including how to best support employees during this time of crisis when they have other obligations such as families and helping teach their children during the school year.

Leadership must continually evaluate how to support staff from home and not strictly as it relates to the tools needed. Leave policies should be revisited and the option of flexible work schedules must remain on the table until the pandemic is over. These allowances will help provide the necessary options employees will need to be successful for the long haul.

The challenges also come with opportunity. Facebook is evaluating how remote work locations can increase their ability to identify and recruit top talent around the world. Balancing a campus-centric mindset, with the concept of remote work locations may yield a significant human resources advantage in the marketplace, if approached and rolled-out right.

### **Building and Maintaining Positive Customer Relationships**

Now more than ever we need to take time out to help build and maintain positive internal and external client relationships. Engaging with each other has never been more necessary, especially given the virtual restrictions we all face. Carve time out of your schedule to get more connected, even on a personal level.

---

Please listen to all our PandemicBuzz episodes on one of your favorite platforms:

[Apple Podcasts](#)

[Spotify](#)

[Buzzsprout](#)

Witt O'Brien's looks forward to the opportunity to guide our clients. Please [contact us](#) if you would like to discuss your company's approach to managing this crisis, need support to do so, or if you would like to brainstorm next steps.



**Devin Sirmenis**  
MANAGING DIRECTOR, CORPORATE RESILIENCE

Devin Sirmenis is a risk and crisis specialist focused on corporate resilience and has served clients for 20 years as a trusted advisor. Devin works with executive leadership at Fortune 500 firms to assess and develop their crisis management programs, train crisis leaders, and stress test the ability to manage an enterprise threatening crisis through simulations. Prior to joining Witt O'Brien's, he led consultant programs at Deloitte, Booz Allen Hamilton and Perot Systems Government Services. Devin pairs his years of client experience with continuing education and has completed Harvard Kennedy School's Crisis Leadership Program and holds a Change Management Advanced Practitioner certification from Georgetown University McDonough School of Business.

**CONTACT DEVIN**