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Lucien G. Canton, CEM (LLC), is a management consulting firm specializing in the development of effective solutions to crisis planning.

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## Pandemic Flu: It's not over 'til it's over!

My colleague Jim Rush recently remarked on the IAEM list that we, like the Chevrolet Power Glide of the 60's with its high and low gear, seem to have only two mental gears these days: hysteria and complacency. While "hysteria" might be putting things a bit strong when we consider the past few weeks of the influenza pandemic, Jim's certainly right that if it isn't immediate, in-your-face news we have a tendency to ignore potential problems. It's what I call the "flavor of the month" syndrome – letting the current problem obscure everything else that's going on around us.

However, before we let the next crisis grab our attention, we really should take another look at influenza A. A lot of folks remember the big hoopla over SARS and how it just faded away after the single outbreak. It's easy to compare influenza A with SARS and say that we've probably seen the last of this it, too. History suggests that we'd be wrong to do so. The Spanish Flu of 1918 was first identified in March then was dormant until September. The highest death rates, as one would expect, occurred during the winter months.

So what does all this mean to you and your organization? It means that as you brace for the fire, tornado and hurricane seasons, you'd better be planning for a potential problem this winter. Unfortunately, a lot of the plans I see focus on dealing with an infected employee or stockpiling supplies like masks, gloves, and disinfecting hand solutions rather than with substantive policy questions.

There are two strategic sets of questions you should be asking. The first deals with your customers. Will they still need your product or services if there is a major outbreak of disease? If yes, can you meet that demand with over 40% or more of you work force out sick? If no, do you have sufficient capitalization or insurance to ride out the low periods? What about after the pandemic? Will demand for your product or services increase, decrease or stay the same?

The second set of strategic questions deals with your supply chain? Will your critical suppliers be able to continue providing goods and services during a pandemic? If not, should you increase on-hand inventory? Have you identified other sources of critical supplies? Again, what happens afterwards? Will your critical supplier still be there? Can they meet increased demand? If you reduce demand, will they go out of business?

A third component that is sometimes missing from plans is a realistic understanding of the type of employee issues that might occur in a pandemic. What will you do with the employee that comes in sick because they have expended all their sick and vacation leave and cannot afford to take leave without pay? What will you tell the foreign national who wants to go home to an infected region to care for sick family members? What will you tell people traveling in infected areas on business or vacation and can't get home because of travel restrictions? Will you continue to pay employees if you have to temporarily close your facility? These are the issues you should be thinking about now, before you're caught up in a crisis.

An infectious disease plan is more than just dealing with the first sick employee or stockpiling supplies. It needs to be based on a realistic appraisal of the impact a pandemic will have your company, in terms of your customers, your suppliers, and your employees. Sounds a lot like business continuity planning 101, doesn't it?

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