

Break-glass: A step-by-step guide to outage management

Something has gone very, very wrong with your systems. You don't yet know the full extent of the problem, but your team is reporting multiple service outages and it's clear this will impact customers.



Congratulations! You now own this problem. You're responsible for directing activities until it's resolved or handed off to someone else. So, where do you start?



Immediately pull whoever is most suited to resolve the issue from a technical perspective and ask them to start working on a fix. Any obstacles they encounter, developments etc. should be communicated with you directly.



Next, you must inform the wider company of the current situation. You should also let them know of any high-level impacts.



Assign somebody to own customer communications. Their first duty is to inform customers what you know and what you're doing about it. This should be their one and only focus until service is restored.



Open a conference call with the person responsible for the technical fix. Included on the invite should be anyone they feel can help resolve the situation.



Wait ten minutes
(increase this interval as time passes)



Assess the current state of the fix



Update the company of relevant changes/developments



Update customer comms of relevant changes/developments

Outage management: 11 tips for success

1 **Let the people working the problem work the problem.** Aside from scheduled status updates, there should be no interruptions.

2 **Keep communications concise.** Most of your colleagues don't need to know the technical details of the problem or the steps you're taking to resolve it. Only provide updates on the current situation as it affects them and your customers.

3 **Don't take negative comments personally.** Stress will be high during major outages and some people handle it poorly. Ignore negative comments and attitudes for now - there'll be plenty of time to deal with them during the post-mortem.

4 **Watch out for fatigue.** Burnout poses a significant threat to technical teams during protracted incidents due to the added pressure. Move roles around and ensure staff take regular breaks.

5 **Stock up on supplies.** Ensure everyone working on the problem has access to a healthy supply of food and drink. It could be a long night...

6 **Use the right people.** In the early moments of an outage, if someone's not part of the solution, they're part of the problem. You may need to throw more resources at the problem or tag people out further down the line, but for now, move non-essential staff onto other duties.

7 **Assign subject matter experts to the relevant areas.** If the root problem has generated knock-on effects in other systems, assign the right people to deal with it. "Clean up" after a major outage often takes a lot longer than fixing the initial root cause.

8 **Don't share hunches.** Outside of the people working the problem, anyway. Retracting company-wide statements suggests you lack control, reducing faith in your leadership.

9 **Avoid finger-pointing.** While it's important to explore all available avenues when addressing a service outage, avoid evaluating on-going situations prematurely. If people start pointing fingers, tell them to capture their thoughts. You can review them later during the post-mortem.

10 **Create a logbook.** Capturing an accurate timeline of events as you go will help with both debugging and later post-mortem activities. This is especially important during prolonged service outages.

11 **Take breaks.** Coordinating an effective response to a major outage is a high-stress activity and it can be difficult to keep tabs on your own welfare. Don't be afraid to hand the baton to someone else if necessary or take a break. Your team can always pick up the slack.