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4 KEY ELEMENTS
OF EFFECTIVE
CRISIS MANAGEMENT

White Paper:
4 Key Elements of Effective Crisis Management

Introduction

I don't know about you, but I am fascinated with crises and disasters. Some companies have a major incident and seem to sail through it; others, not so much. There are many aspects to effective crisis management but there are four absolutely essential elements that must be present for an effective response. If these four aren't present in the initial moments of the crisis, it will likely be a long and painful response and recovery.

Do You Plan for the "Worst Case?"

One of the things I often hear continuity and emergency professionals say is that they "plan for the worst-case scenario." Whenever I hear someone sat that, I immediately stop them; this is simply not true. Continuity professionals don't plan for the worst-case scenario, they plan for what they think will happen, what is called a "routine" emergency. What they plan for may be a really bad situation, but there is not enough time, money, or risk appetite for anyone to plan for the truly worst-case scenario.

"Routine" Emergency

To be clear, routine emergency[1] does not mean "easy." A routine emergency can still be difficult and challenging. In this context, "routine" refers to the relative predictability of the situation that permits advanced preparation. This risk is in the company's risk profile and the company is likely to have been able to take advantage of lessons learned from prior experiences. Continuity professionals are likely to have thought about what to plan for and what is needed, and they have probably trained for them and done exercises for them. Incident management, crisis communications, business continuity, and disaster recovery plans are filled with strategies to manage routine emergencies.

"Crisis" Emergency

A crisis emergency[2] is a much different animal. These types of events are distinguished by significant elements of *novelty*. This novelty makes the problem much more difficult to diagnose and then deal with. This type of emergency can have the following characteristics:

- The threat has never been encountered before, therefore, there are no plans to manage it.
- It may be a familiar event, however, it is occurring at unprecedented speed, therefore developing an appropriate response is severely challenging.
- There may be a confluence of forces, which, while not new individually, in combination, pose unique challenges to the response.

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[1] Managing Crisis: Responses to Large-Scale Emergencies, Arnold Howitt and Herman Leonard, CQ Press, page 5.
[2] Ibid, page 6.

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The novel nature of a crisis emergency becomes a game-changer. Plans, processes, training, and exercises that may work well in routine emergency situations are frequently grossly inadequate in a crisis emergency, and may even be counterproductive. Companies realize that they have to start their response from scratch.

The first thing that must be done is to *identify* the elements of the novelty; determine what makes this situation so different from others. Companies begin the process thinking the situation is one thing, and then over time, realize it turned out to be something quite different. For example, you may think you are dealing with a routine problem or outage; over time, you see it is something more significant and sinister.

Once the real problem has been identified and it's understood that the routine plans won't work, response measures must be improvised that will be suitable to cope with the unanticipated aspects of the incident. In other words, you're in new territory; this hasn't been done before. Handling a crisis emergency may feel like you're building an airplane while flying it at the same time. It's not pretty, but it may be necessary.

Lastly, in a crisis emergency, you must respond in creative ways and, *at the same time*, be extremely adaptable executing these new and improvised solutions. You have to be on "full alert" at all times, as you don't know how the situation will change, and you must be prepared to shift or dart at a moment's notice. All of this can make people quite anxious.

To Manage a Crisis You Need These Four Essentials

To be successful when responding in a crisis, we have found that there are four things that a response team must have mastered to effectively handle a routine or crisis emergency:

1. Clearly defined team structure, roles, and responsibilities.
2. Defined incident assessment team and process.
3. Written incident action plan to guide and document team activities.
4. Effective and timely communications.

Team Structure, Roles and Responsibilities

In order to organize your response teams to be effective, there are several options to consider. The first is to identify how many teams you need. Most companies will have "tactical" teams and a "strategic" team. The tactical teams represent managers from key departments such as facilities, security, technology, human resources, legal, communications, finance, and key lines of business. The strategic team is usually made up of members of the executive team. Very often, the only time tactical and strategic teams are combined into one team is in a smaller company; usually one with less than 500 employees.

Once you've decided how many teams you need and who will be on them, you need to think about the organization of those teams. Again, there are choices. Do you structure the organization based on the Incident Command System? Your "usual" reporting structure? Or perhaps something else?

Organizing the response teams around the usual reporting structure is a default choice for most companies; after all, it is a known entity. But there are some downsides to doing what you always do:

- The span of control may be too large for effective management. The ideal number of people reporting to a manager is between 5 and 7. In a crisis, it might be less.
- There may be too many silos of responsibility to be efficient. The "usual" structure may present communication challenges and reporting issues in a crisis.
- There is a great opportunity for duplication of effort and things getting missed altogether.
- There may be no clear authority.

Organizing the response teams around the Incident Command System (ICS) would be a potential option. ICS has been in place since the 1970s and is used exclusively by all forms of government in the United States and in many places around the world. The basic structure is comprised of five teams with clear leadership in each team, a reporting structure, and defined responsibilities. To read more about it, check out the FEMA website or google "ICS."

Once you've identified your team's structure, spend time defining what each group within the team does. Spell this out; don't make any assumptions. Decide on the specific roles of each team and how they work with other teams. There should be a checklist for each member of each team so there is clarity on what everyone is doing. Try to identify all of the things that need to be done in the first few minutes or hours of an incident, then clearly define and assign those tasks.

For example, a list of assignments could include:

- Assist emergency responders and support their work. This may include providing keys, maps, MSDS, floor plans, details, or expertise.
- Conduct initial damage assessment of the facilities and technology.
- Contact contractors and vendors.
- Order supplies and equipment.
- Develop and release initial communications.

Brainstorm with your team members about all of the activities that would likely need to be done in most emergencies, and develop detailed checklists to assist everyone on the team in staying organized and communicating status. Develop a list and use it in your next exercise, then continue to refine it with each exercise or plan activation.

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Incident Assessment

When an incident occurs, there are often a lot of assumptions about how information will be routed, who will be engaged, and how an activation will occur. When reviewing emergency plans, the path from the starting point of an incident to activating the plan is often completely silent.

It is critical that you develop a clear incident assessment plan that includes who evaluates the situation and the process that is used. The group that performs this function is called an Incident Assessment Team (IAT). An IAT is often comprised of key individuals in departments where most of the incidents likely occur, such as facilities, security, technology, and key lines of business. The IAT also would include the Incident Commander (the person in charge of your tactical team).

Incident assessment plans include clearly defined processes, identification of the team members who make the assessment, and the plan activation decisions. A simple flow from incident awareness to plan activation often includes six steps:

1. *Awareness.* An individual Initial Assessment Team member becomes aware of an incident through a variety of different means. If it could disrupt a mission-critical process, the team member then goes to step 2.
2. *Assembly.* In the event that the Initial Assessment Team member feels the incident may be significant, s/he will activate the full IAT which then performs a formal assessment. This can be done face-to-face or virtually.
3. *Decision.* The Initial Assessment Team decides if the plan will be activated.
4. *Activate.* The organization's Incident Management Plan is activated.
5. *Plan.* The team develops an Incident Action Plan (next section).
6. *Brief.* Executives are briefed on the incident.

Incident Action Plans (IAP)

The Incident Action Plan (IAP) is one of the hallmarks of the Incident Command System and is critical for keeping your team organized, informing others of what you are doing, and getting assistance. It's valuable for any response team, whether it uses ICS or not.

An IAP formally documents the operational period objectives, and the response strategy defined by team during response planning. It contains general tactics to achieve goals and objectives within the overall strategy, while providing important information on event and response parameters.[3]

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[3] What is Incident Action Planning, Public Health Emergency
http://www.phe.gov/preparedness/planning/mscc/handbook/pages/appendixc.aspx

An IAP is comprised of five component steps:

1. Gain situation awareness / situation status (find out what is going on).
2. Develop tactical objectives (identify what you are doing to do).
3. Assign all objectives (to a team or individual).
4. Determine the operational period (how long before the team comes back together again to assess status).
5. Communicate the plan to all identified stakeholders using all identified tools.

Situation Awareness / Situation Status

There are many possibilities for gaining situational awareness (i.e., finding out what's going on). It could include personal observations, or getting information from employees, vendors, emergency responders, traditional media, social media, government officials, and more. Think about all of the options and then determine how you will validate the information to ensure you are not acting on rumors or speculation. You will also need to decide how you will keep track of all of the data. In many fast-moving emergencies, people describe the amount of information coming at them as "drinking out of a fire hose."

Tactical Objectives

The tactical objectives are a high-level statement of what you are going to do in this phase of the emergency. These objectives are short, clear, and descriptive, and state what action is to be achieved. The best tactical objectives are written with an action-oriented verb as the first word. This clearly tells the reader what the desired outcome is and provides guidance to the person assigned to achieve the result. The team or person who receives the objective may have many tasks listed under the objective to achieve the result.

Key action verbs might include words such as:

- Inspect.
- Evaluate.
- Develop.
- Conduct.
- Alert.
- Prepare.
- Communicate.

Assign All Objectives (to a Team or Individual).

Assigning all objectives to a person or a team is done to ensure that everyone knows who is doing what, and prevents other teams from "swimming in someone else's lane." In many emergencies, if ownership of an action is not clear, there are likely numerous people or teams all working on the same thing – or worse, no one is working on it at all.

Determine the Operational Period.

The operational period is how long to work on these objectives and actions before the team comes back together to (re)assess status.[4] There is no set time for an operational period; they might be quite short in the beginning of an incident and get longer over time. They do not, however, exceed a 24-hour period.

Communicate the Plan to All Identified Stakeholders.

Once the Incident Action Plan has been developed and written, it can be then used to communicate to all of the key stakeholders. This includes the entire team, executives, other locations, emergency responders, Boards of directors, and others who require detailed information of the response effort.

Effective and Timely Communications

To issue effective and timely communications, you must know several key things well in advance of the crisis:

- *Stakeholders:* Who are the key stakeholders and who has the primary relationship with them.
- *Communication tools:* What they are, who has access to them, and who is trained to deploy them.
- *Messaging:* What the initial messages are that you can send immediately once the situation becomes known (templates).

These three basic things are critical for effective and timely communication. Work with your communications professionals to ensure that they have them in place now and are effectively trained in how to deploy them.

Going Forward

Remember, building a successful response team for any type of crisis requires only four things:

1. Clearly defined team structure, roles, and responsibilities.
2. Defined incident assessment team and process.
3. Written incident action plan to guide and document team activities.
4. Effective and timely communications.

Your next disaster could be just around the corner. Get started today.

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[4] ICS Training https://definedterm.com/a/definition/48051

Biography

Regina Phelps is an internationally recognized expert in the field of crisis management, exercise design, and continuity planning. Since 1982, she has provided consultation and speaking services to clients in four continents. She is founder of Emergency Management & Safety Solutions, a consulting company specializing in crisis management, exercise design, and continuity and pandemic planning.

Ms. Phelps conducts over 100 exercises per year for her large multi-national clients. She has lectured extensively at international disaster and business continuity conferences. She is the author of three exercise design books: *Emergency Management Exercises: Exercise Design, From Response to Recovery, Everything You Need to Know to Create a Great Exercise; Emergency Management Exercises: The Instructor's Guide;* and her latest, *Cyber Breach* (released March 2016). Ms. Phelps has also designed college-level courses in exercise design, written numerous papers, and has given hundreds of lectures on the topic.