

CAN YOU PLAN FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT

"When written in Chinese the word 'crisis' is composed of 2 characters. One represents danger, and the other represents opportunity.)

(John F Kennedy, (1917 – 1963), 35th US President)

It is not a case of whether you can plan for crisis management but rather it is imperative to plan for the possible occurrence of natural or man-made disasters. During the last 12 months we have heard, seen and read about numerous and varied circumstances and conditions that have led to the need for urgent and rapid responses to situations that have developed, mostly, not through design either by accident or by nature or 'Acts of God'.

There is no need to elaborate but disasters have covered fire, famine and flood as well as on land, sea and in the air. And, in each circumstance and on each occasion human beings, usually in some particular professions, have had to react in an organized and co-ordinated manner. In order to do this, individually and in teams, they have to know not only how to deal with their particular area of expertise but also how to co-ordinate, communicate and integrate their efforts with other groups of individuals in other professions and organizations.

The groups that immediately spring to mind are military personnel, the medical professions, fire fighters, policemen and all kinds of security organizations. I think it is reasonable to suggest that all hospitals, certainly the accident and emergency departments, operate under what can be described as crisis management conditions. However, because the people who work in those areas, doctors and nurses, are trained to respond to a plethora of life threatening circumstances on a daily basis they might not say it is crisis management but, simply, responding to difficult situations. That suggests, to me, that it is paramount for any organization to have a business plan and emergency plans and procedures to deal with crisis situations.

A crisis, according to the concise Oxford dictionary is, among others, "a time of great danger or difficulty", or "a decisive moment". In my view, that translates as any set of circumstances that suddenly develop over which those involved have little or no control but to which they can re-act; and, that those reactions can have a positive or negative impact on the outcome depending on the decisions taken. Again, in my view, that implies the need for training and practices in the formats, procedures or processes necessary to react in the manner most likely to achieve a successful outcome, and the need to have immediately available the right type and amount of equipment in the right place. Indeed, there are, apparently, management consultancies who teach and train companies how to identify possible risk scenarios and help to produce, in consultation with the staff, guidelines for crisis management.

However, each scenario that springs to mind necessitates co-ordinated effort and implies the need for teamwork, a concept that consultants and business schools occasionally resurrect as a management fad that achieves a high profile for a period and is then forgotten about. But, teamwork is not a fad neither is it simply about setting numerical targets to achieve over a given period of time or pulling people together for survival weekend training. No, teamwork is about leadership, practical and professional knowledge and ability, knowing where you fit in a group and understanding and commitment. Teamwork is also about having trust, essential for any form of co-operation, in others around you to carry out their part of the task as effectively, efficiently and sometimes as quickly as possible.

But there are other situations or conditions, which, whilst not necessarily involving dangerous circumstances or the lives of human beings can, perhaps, be described as a crisis for a company or organization and others can be of a purely personal nature.

For example, a manufacturing company suddenly discovers that it is churning out left-handed instead of right-handed widgets on the production line, or, a slight change in the mixture or ingredients in a type of flavouring leads to total rejection by consumers. Other possibilities include a financial institution discovering that one or more of their staff has been dishonest in their dealings or moving, shifting or siphoning off profits for personal use, or crippling economic indicators necessitate a devaluation of a currency. Or, what about educational institutions suddenly determining that they have over-estimated the number of students in a given intake and have too much capacity or have underestimated and are very short of lecturers?

Others have suggested that with not only BSE but now also foot-and-mouth disease the UK farming community and the countryside are in crisis. What farmers, the ministry of agriculture, fisheries and food (MAFF), health and safety organizations and the veterinary professions must do is address how and why these things happen and make recommendations and plans to deal with future outbreaks, and that means having the necessary manpower available to deal with such outbreaks.

Another major area of concern in UK is the rail network, which, after successive accidents, can be said to be in some form of crisis. Again, without wishing to sound complacent real lessons have to be learned and procedures put in place to ensure that risks, from problems such as broken rails, faulty signalling, safety braking systems and track access security arrangements, are minimized.

The list is almost endless but for many sets of circumstances it is possible to train people in groups, sections or divisions to respond in a pre-determined manner to overcome a developing difficulty before it turns into a crisis.

Therefore, it is incumbent on directors and senior managers in particular to develop, with due consultation at every level, crisis management plans so that employees have an idea of how to respond and what to do if and when a difficult situation arises and to regularly practice those procedures. After all, directors are, apparently, only accountable to their shareholders but surely then shareholders ought to be questioning whether or not the company has guidelines to cover every possible eventuality and to test the effectiveness of any continuity plans? Besides, if you do not think and plan ahead how on earth can you possibly know how to react and respond?

From my own experience, as a former naval executive officer and an operational radio communications and telecommunications professional, military personnel are presented with difficult conditions or developing circumstances that demand rapid responses, on a regular basis. In the radio communications fields, by that I mean voice, telegraph and data circuits, it is not possible to guarantee that circuit connectivity can be achieved and maintained on a permanent basis. That is why contingency plans, to cover eventualities, are necessary to provide alternative routes or alternate circuits to ensure continuity and why they are tested regularly. It also means having alternate command and control centres such that in the event of an evacuation of one place there are several other sites that can assume the duties and responsibilities of the primary site. This way the whole concept of teamwork and leadership is developed through exercises to simulate eventualities, check responses and update guidelines and instructions.

That is why all military personnel are trained, over and over again, to be able to recognize what has happened, what is happening or what might be happening and, further, trained to respond by following set procedures and to communicate sufficient details and information to other personnel and to senior officers so that they can set in train or in motion their own actions. However, it should be recognized that no two sets of conditions or circumstances are identical and, therefore, it is imperative to exercise certain scenario so that other eventualities can be thought through, assessed and appropriate responses produced. The only way to do that is to encourage active involvement and participation and questioning based on the reasonable assumption that a question from one source or another may highlight a weakness in a plan or order.

As an example, it is feasible that, in severe weather conditions, high seas and high winds, that all forms of shipping can sustain severe damage not just to the superstructure but to internal systems and to personnel. Whilst it may be obvious that ships should avoid putting to sea when weather forecasts suggest the possible development of say a hurricane, monsoon or storm force winds it is not always possible to head for the nearest shelter of land when already at sea. However, knowing what might happen means that procedures can be put in place to reduce or even minimize the risks and danger to the vessel and crew.

The first thing to do is to warn the ship's company of the possible danger through appropriate broadcast communication messages. All personnel should ensure that materials and objects, including chairs and personal possessions, that are not actually part of or bolted to the hull and bulkheads are locked away or secured or fastened to the deck or superstructure so that they do not break loose. Further, heavy seas and driving rain also mean poor or bad visibility so it is imperative to check that all radar systems are functioning correctly, that radio communication systems are working and that navigation lights are switched on. Additionally, the officer-of-the-watch will, if he is anywhere near land or if land is clearly painting on radar screens, take additional fixes, including satellite navigation systems where fitted, to more accurately pin-point his position on the chart.

From a seamanship point of view it is sensible to alter course and get out of the area if possible to avoid the conditions but if not to reduce speed and to point the ship's head into the direction of the wind to ride out the danger. But, that is not the end of the situation it is only the beginning. There are basically two main areas of danger to all seamen and that is fire or flooding.

It is possible, in extreme circumstances that waves can, through successive pounding, either force some objects on the upper deck or superstructure to snap or break loose causing damage in itself. If the sea breaks in somewhere it could lead to flooding especially in sections in the lower decks and that is why bulkhead doors are always closed between compartments. In between decks there are so many items of electronic equipment or electromechanical machinery that can be affected necessitating repair or replacement or even causing fire to break out.

So, personnel have to know where they should be and where spare or replacement equipment is available or where pumps can be connected to deal with such eventualities. And, it is why training is conducted on a regular basis and exercises carried out daily, even alongside, to make sure that duty personnel are aware of their tasks and responsibilities. Most importantly, we must always be aware of where other members of the crew are at all times and more especially under all dangerous circumstances.

But, that is enough about life and problems at sea although it provides the right introduction to the subject of disaster planning and the need to produce policies and plans to respond to possible threats. Think of another major area of possible crisis management much closer to home. Nowadays most, if not all, companies rely almost entirely on computer systems, and the databases contained therein, for everything from personnel records to customer details and accounts and financial transactions. Also, most organizations rely on electronic mail systems, telephone or facsimile systems at the very least, for the rapid exchange of financial and operational information, for exchanging information messages with customers and suppliers and for ordering supplies.

In other words, if electronic systems were to fail through fire, flood or loss of electrical power supplies how would you conduct business and how soon would it be before you went out of business? Surely that is one area where crisis management is essential? Is there an alternate site that can be put into action to maintain minimum services? What is the fallback plan to ensure the rapid restoration of services and to provide information to your customers and suppliers?

I sometimes wonder if we all become comfortable with the way that organizations and our personal lives are progressing that we become so complacent as not to consider let alone think about what might fail or even go wrong. But, companies and organizations cannot afford to be complacent. Problems and disaster situations arise on a regular basis and they are not confined to individual industries or to individual professions. Therefore, I would suggest, recommend perhaps, that directors put together a list of possible crisis scenarios and really think through what could happen and what should or might be done to deal with each situation. As the novelist, Vladimir Nabokov suggested,

“Complacency is a state of mind that exists only in retrospective: it has to be shattered before being ascertained.”

(Vladimir Nabokov, (1899 – 1977), Russian-born US novelist, Lolita (1974))

To begin individual directors must be nominated to be both responsible and accountable for overseeing various areas of the business, for example, telecommunications and IT systems including electronic security, electricity and other forms of power supply systems associated with heating, lighting, ventilation and lifts and physical security and safety systems. Groups or teams must be identified and established with clear lines and areas of responsibility and actions to undertake. The groups and teams should be involved, through brainstorming sessions, in drawing up plans and procedures and make every effort to cover every eventuality.

Once initial drafts have been produced each plan should be tested, under exercise conditions and with the minimum amount of disruption to daily routines, using those who were involved in the planning process as marshals forming an assessment team and tasked with producing comments and reports. Again, all those involved in covering the exercise should come together to discuss their views and opinions and reach consensus on amendments to the draft plans. It is only through commitment, effort and teamwork that procedures can be produced to enable companies and people to put crisis management plans in place. As Dwight D Eisenhower suggested,

“In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable”.

(Dwight D Eisenhower, (1890 – 1969), General and 34th US President)

In the present political and social climate and economic downturn it may be difficult to justify additional expenditure on providing full radio and telecommunication and other services at another building or site that is well away from the primary headquarters. However, it would, frankly, be ludicrous to provide an alternate headquarter site close to, and I am thinking in terms of miles if not tens of miles, the primary site.

At the least, at the very least, any reasonable sized organization, and by that I also mean and include government, politicians and government departments should have a policy and plans to enable their employees to continue to offer a minimum service to customers and be able to communicate what has happened and what is being put in place to enable the company to continue operating and trading. This planning could involve providing telecommunication networks, personal computers and connectivity, to enable a number of key personnel to work from home in the event of a disaster. As the American physicist and educator, Richard Feynman, suggested,

“Theoretically, planning may be good. But nobody has ever figured out the cause of government stupidity and until they do (and find the cure) all ideal plans will fall into quicksand.”

(Richard Feynman, (1918 – 1988), US Physicist and Educator)

After all it is not just the reputation of the company that is at stake it is the reputation of the directors and senior managers, perhaps even the reputation of the country and its ability to deal with natural disasters through the allocation of manpower and other resources and planning, and their perceived ability to be proactive that will be under close scrutiny when things go wrong and be able to identify if and when there is clear fault.

(2670 words, including quotations)

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