



NEED HELP IN AN EMERGENCY?

When emergencies happen, the British Red Cross provides immediate support to people caught up in a crisis, so you can concentrate on tackling the task at hand.

No matter how large or small the incident, you can count on our support.

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Refusing to ignore people in crisis

CRISIS RESPONSE

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JOURNAL

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Resilient leadership and

CRISIS IS A WORD THAT IS BANTERED around easily in our profession and one that is most commonly misused. It may help to look at the difference between a 'routine emergency' and a 'crisis emergency'. This concept was developed by two Harvard professors, Arnold M Howitt and Herman B 'Dutch' Leonard (see page 17) and is helpful for planners to understand.

A routine emergency is still challenging and is certainly not easy. This is the type of emergency that is usually found in our risk profile; in other words, it is expected, we have plans to accommodate it, and we train and exercise to manage it. It is its familiarity that makes it 'routine'. After all, this is what we all do for a living.

On the other hand, the classic definition of a 'crisis emergency' is an event defined by significant novelty, an emergency unlike those previously experienced. Other key aspects include events occurring at unprecedented speed, existing plans that are completely inadequate for the purpose, and the fact that training and exercises did not account for the magnitude and sheer number of events.

Leaders must improvise new approaches to manage this type of event.

Unanticipated novelty

A crisis emergency requires a different approach. First of all, leaders must diagnose or determine the elements' novelty. What is different about this situation? How does it vary from current plans and processes?

Once clear about the differences of the novelty, leaders must then improvise response measures to cope with the unanticipated aspects of the event. This will often make leaders uncomfortable, as they are deviating from plans and moving into uncharted waters. These actions, however, are born out of necessity and, in some cases, the actions and responses may be quite different than what they have ever done before.

In any major crisis, be on the lookout for a dangerous element called 'cognitive bias'. This is a persistent force that shapes people's thinking and organisational awareness. Some refer to it as 'faulty thinking'. There are many cognitive biases that appear in crisis situations; some of those to consider are outlined below.

Overweighing one's experience: The

What allows one leader to trudge through the mire in a tough time or crisis and come out the other side with a team and company intact? **Regina Phelps** identifies the skills that are critical to this ability

'Been there, done that' syndrome. I have often seen this with clients who have gone through repeated events and think they have seen it all.

The illusion of experience: This is a tendency for individuals to think that they have more experience than they actually do. They inflate their self-worth and knowledge.

Overconfidence, both in one's abilities and in one's ability to predict the future: This results in some people believing they can actually control the future.

Failure to observe or believe

are: Situational awareness; improvisation; creativity and adaptability; decisiveness; action; communication; and re-evaluation.

The first is situational awareness, which is key to managing any incident, large or small.

Begin by gathering and assembling as many key facts as possible, even when under conditions of great confusion and uncertainty. Once you have the basic facts as you know them, assess how the company and the team are positioned to deal with the emergency.

disconfirming

evidence: For example, not believing, or stating, that an event is actually occurring, even as the water is lapping at their ankles.

Escalation of commitment: Once it has been noticed that the solution is not working, people recommit to that same solution.

Cognitive bias is very common in emergencies. It is likely that you will have observed it in others, or even in yourself.

To manage a routine or crisis emergency successfully, crisis managers, and their teams must be aware of and employ these basic skills, which are cyclical in nature – you reach the seventh and loop back around again. These skills are used repeatedly during the course of an emergency and

Ideally, situational awareness is obtained from multiple sources. Decision-makers must project forward the implications of the information they acquire and anticipate possible consequences of a fast-changing and still-moving incident. This requires the ability to generate possible alternative courses of action and to assess which of them holds the most promise of dealing with the situation.

Next, we have improvisation. Using situational awareness, review routine plans and checklists

team skills

and determine whether customisation is required to make them work. This is like matching up puzzle pieces. The presence of significant novelty (ie crisis emergency) calls into question whether routine plans will work. What you might find is that the situation may require unplanned and unrehearsed actions.

In a true crisis, leaders, often under extreme pressure and with high stakes and compressed timelines, must formulate a totally new approach and then execute new responses or a combination of responses. In other words, leaders must improvise.

Creativity and adaptability are also important elements within the crisis leader's skills.

A novel situation requires a leader and team to adapt rapidly. By its very nature, a crisis changes quickly and the first response to the

time to make a decision. This can cause angst in some company circles, but people need leaders to stand up and make the decision or decisions.

Remember, though, in our world, nothing is ever 'done'. If, after a while, it becomes apparent the wrong decision was made, make another one. The goal is to keep moving forward.

Keep in mind that when things are happening quickly, no one can control the situation, but a leader can assume control of it. In other words, the disaster cannot be controlled, but the response can be.

Once the plan has been developed and vetted, it is time to move things forward and enact the plans and observe the response.

This is also the time to verify that you have sufficient feedback loops in place in order to assess response so you can track progress.

Keep moving forward, obtain new situational awareness, then adjust the plan accordingly.

This step is the one that most people are familiar with, but remember that there were four previous stages. You cannot jump to action until you have wrestled those other issues/problems to the ground.

Step six is critical – there must be clear, crisp, concise, and timely communication to all of the identified key stakeholders. This is essential; in the day and age of smart phones and social media, everyone is a reporter. The challenge is getting your story out. You need a well-written crisis communications plan with template communications (including lots with 140-character messages) that can be deployed rapidly. Tell your story, be transparent, set

situation will likely not be the last

response. In true crisis situations, the leader cannot be welded to a single strategy; he or she must continue to take in new information, listen carefully, consult with frontline experts who know what is happening, and work to plot a creative plan to manage the incident. That is what creativity and adaptability are all about.

Once situational awareness has been obtained, the response has been improvised, and creativity and adaptability have been exercised, then it is

In any major crisis, be on the lookout for cognitive bias, a persistent force that shapes people's thinking and organisational awareness

realistic expectations, and, as the old saying goes: "Communicate early and often."

The last skill – that of re-evaluation – is essential. You must set regular intervals to re-evaluate and reassess progress. Whether or not you organise your team around the Incident Command System (ICS), I strongly recommend embracing one of its hallmarks, the Incident Action Planning process. This allows you to gather and assess current situational awareness, develop clear written strategic objectives (an action-oriented to-do list), and then determine when you will meet again – the operational period – to assess status and re-evaluate the plan against the objectives (the re-evaluation activity).

This critical regular re-evaluation period allows you the organised ability to tweak (or carry out a major overhaul of) the plan. Questions that should be asked and areas to be discussed during this activity are:

- How are we performing measured against our objectives?
- What are we missing?
- Check for cognitive bias;
- Recommit or redesign; and
- Keep moving forward.

To be resilient in a crisis emergency, we must recognise what we are facing and employ these seven critical skills, whether you are the crisis leader or the person supporting them. **CRJ**

Author



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contingency planning, and is the founder of *Emergency Management and Safety Solutions*. She has provided consultation and speaking services to clients in four continents since 1982. Ms Phelps is the author of *Emergency Management Exercises: From Response to Recovery – Everything you need to know to design a great exercise*; released by *Chandi Media*