

Crisis Response and Execution

By C&H Patriot Security

An organization's successful crisis response must include superb execution of a well-thought-out and supported contingency plan. Quality contingency plans include:

- a vision of the desired end state for a variety of scenarios;
- the necessary coordination with other public and private entities;
- pre-established lines of communication between the organization's operations center and its other entities;
- a public relations strategy (internal and external); and
- how the organization's crisis management "team" will be organized.

Superb execution will not happen without experienced leaders/managers. When both of these elements are combined, the organization will fare far better than its peers who are exposed to the same crisis but may not have prepared as well.

We have found that the probability for successful crisis planning is enhanced if "scenario-based planning" is employed. Scenario-based planning includes several detailed and varied scenarios of future events. In terms of crises, these would be considered extremely taxing and potentially debilitating to the organization. The point is to work through the organization's response to the scenarios. Ordering the elements of the responses and actions will yield sound approaches to crisis response.

Scenario planning allows management the luxury of considering choices and making predetermined strategic decisions that comport to the organization's mission and values. This significantly reduces the crisis' risk to the organization. The value of thinking through scenario(s) that will tax an organization (whether public or private) cannot be overestimated. When that pre-crisis planning and testing is done via simulation, the realism sharpens the assumptions made and the strategic approach leaders take toward their organization's response, recovery, and business continuity.

What remains, then, is executing the plan. This is itself a challenge to the organization's leadership and management capability. Crises cause responders' and victims' adrenalin to flow, which in turn sharpens emotion. This can be an asset in directed decision making - essentially implementing a plan by being able to quickly see the scenario decision indicators that have already been discussed by management. But adrenalin can also be detrimental, exposing cracks in a plan not fully agreed to, or amplifying personnel flaws in those expected to implement the plan. Successful execution of a crisis plan includes understanding the anatomy of a crisis, identifying the signs that indicate the crisis is forcing a deviation from the plan, realizing the opportunities to get the response back on plan, and keeping the core vision amidst the growth of response possibilities.

Another important component is the courage to make decisions. A crisis will cause self-doubt in many managers who have not previously been through one. Experience, on the other hand, is a wonderful catalyst for courage in a crisis. This reprise of "having done it before" manifests itself by differentiating between a manager paralyzed with shock and fear, and one who rapidly organizes his/her mind into a contingency response. The latter cohort is able to break the crisis into manageable "chunks", and assign

quality personnel to attack the sections. Subordinates will immediately support the organized visionary leader, enhancing the contingency plan's implementation.

The modern response protocol can be confusing: a disaster may remove pre-crisis organization controls/authority of other participating organizations. The number of other participating organizations may be quite large, with unfamiliar people claiming to have the authority to do things that may impact an organization's contingency plan. This can be an unnerving reality that if not previously experienced, exercised or simulated, or if limited effort has been made to meet with leaders from these other organizations. Failure to adapt or anticipate this will likely magnify the negative impact to one's own organization. Senior leadership has a direct responsibility to manage the crisis in this dynamic environment.

So how do the crisis managers for an organization garner the experience that will give them both the courage and skill to execute the organization's plan? There are three paths to follow. First, the organization and its managers might have already gone through a similar crisis, or the managers may have been hired with crisis response experience in their resumes. Second, crisis managers or advisors can be hired to assist the organization through the crisis. Third, the organization's crisis managers could undergo training, and participate in training exercises or simulations of the scenarios identified during the planning stage. In fact, forward thinking organizations will often use exercises or simulations on the front end of planning as a means to assist in developing a scenario-based plan.

C&H Patriot Security's partners have considerable experience in crisis response management and recovery. We have observed and/or participated as senior crisis managers in both the public and private sectors and offer these recommendations to organizational leaders to consider in planning for and executing a response to a crisis:

- Organizations must both respond to the crisis and "maintain their day jobs". This is one of the most important aspects of crisis management and too often management gets it wrong. A poorly managed crisis response will quickly lead to a loss of confidence in the organization's leadership/management team, internally and externally, which in turn will significantly impact the day job. (Remember the pictures of thousands of Exxon credit card holders cutting up their cards, following their perception of a poor response to the Exxon Valdez oil spill.) The emotion of the crisis amplifies perceptions of incompetence or insensitivity to the crisis' victims. Most often the crisis' impact on the organization is underestimated until damage to the organization's reputation or its leaders' reputations have been done. What are the organizational risks of not getting it right?
- The organization's crisis manager and his or her relationship with the senior management team must be exercised in advance. It is critical that senior leaders have confidence in the crisis manager's ability to husband the organization through the crisis. For major crises, very senior, very competent leaders must be appointed.
- An important strategy in crisis response and recovery is to always give the organization options. An organization that neither plans or practices for crises, will very early in a crisis run out of options, and find themselves reacting to someone else's actions.
- Since true crises occur infrequently, attention to planning and training are very important to a successful organization's response. Though it is often difficult to find time for these apparent non-revenue producing activities (planning and exercising), senior managers must ask themselves, what is the cost of getting it wrong? A properly managed crisis will often generate external goodwill, internal morale, and opportunities to leverage the competence of a well-managed response - thus enhancing the day job.

- We have found that breaking the response training into smaller pieces, but thoroughly exercising/simulating those pieces, is an excellent way to deal with the conflict between preparation for crisis and daily productivity expectations. By putting the smaller segments together, organizations will have exercised their whole plan with the appropriate attention to detail.

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