

Crisis Management - Interview with Simon Langdon

Director CEDARthree Limited, The Crisis Management Specialists

What are the most important steps after a Disaster happens?

To understand the scale of the disaster. Firstly to assess the impact of the disaster on people. The safety of people is always the first issue and of prime concern however the disaster may have been caused; whether it be natural or man-made. Secondly to assess the impact to infrastructure; to buildings, transport, communications and any other equipment including IT and data and thirdly to assess the impact to business. Of course it depends how wide-scale the disaster is and who or what it has affected in order to be able to assess the impact to business. A very wide scale disaster such as the recent monsoon floods in Pakistan or the earthquake in Haiti may impact the business of national, regional and local government as well as national industries and individual businesses.

Once the scale of the disaster is known priorities can be identified and an action plan developed for the implementation of the immediate response. Of course the better prepared an organisation is to respond to a disaster the quicker and more effective the immediate response will be. Ideally there will be a Disaster Management Plan which is understood by those who are responsible for implementing it, the plan is practiced regularly and can be invoked quickly when disaster strikes.

It should be remembered that very often in a disaster the immediate response comes not from the Emergency Services but the people caught up in the disaster and their neighbours. It is the local people who are on hand and human nature and compassion compels them to respond. The Emergency Services may arrive in minutes and take over coordinating the response but the initial re-action and response comes from those at or very near the disaster scene.

How many times do those responsible for crisis management have to act/ react?

It is difficult to say and it depends! It depends on the risk for instance. I have recently returned from the Philippines, one of the most disaster prone countries in the world, where they have 22 active volcanoes and volcanic activity and earthquakes are quite frequent. They are also subject to more than 20 typhoons per year, to floods and landslides and the

list goes on. The invocation of Crisis or Disaster Management is not an everyday occurrence but it is quite regular.

If your business is in a location which is prone to terrorism then it depends how active the terrorism is. London in the 80s' and 90s' suffered a number of terrorist attacks; now thankfully they are much less frequent although a significant threat remains. The multiple terrorist attack in London in July 2005 was a stark reminder on how sudden a disaster can strike and how important it is to have a coordinated disaster response plan.

Generally, however, although disasters or crisis are not frequent, their very nature means that it is often impossible to predict when, where or how a disaster will strike. It is therefore important to be prepared. When disaster strikes is not the time to be drawing up your disaster management plans!



EU helpers in Haiti, 2010

How many people are involved in a Crisis Management process? Who are the decision makers?

It is good practice to develop a Crisis Management Team (CMT) comprised of representatives from all the main departments within an organisation. As I mentioned before the key areas to address in a crisis are People, Assets and Business so the CMT will need a representative from HR for the People issue, Facilities Management, Security and IT for the Assets issues and Operations for the business. That is 5 members of the CMT. There would also be a chairman, a secretary to take the minutes of the meeting and someone representing Communications or Public Relations. That makes 8 members. Additionally organisations may have other key departments depending on their business such as Engineering,

Customer Services, Transport etc. It is preferable, however, to keep membership of the CMT to no more than 12 members otherwise decision making can become too cumbersome.



Flood in Madeira, 2010

Decision making in a crisis is crucial. The CMT as a group are the decision makers, however, in a split decision the chairman will have the deciding vote. Crisis Management is better conducted as an autocratic process rather than a democratic one as time is often at a premium. There is no real time for lengthy discussions and prevaricating. Ideally key decisions that may have to be made in a crisis should be pre-identified as this saves time. A workshop for senior management is a good idea to identify what decisions may have to be made in a crisis and when, where the information will come from in order to make the decision, who has the responsibility for making the decision and whether that responsibility needs to be delegated e.g. from the CEO to the Chairman of the CMT. Finally who needs to be told of the decision once it has been made.

Which bodies have to work together and how?

Within an organisation it is good practice to have three levels of command and control, sometimes known as Gold or Strategic i.e. the CEO or equivalent, Silver or Tactical – typically the CMT and Bronze or Operational – at departmental level or at the scene of the disaster. So within an organisation there is coordination and team work at every level. Disaster or crisis response is not just one persons responsibility it is everyone's responsibility.

Outside an organisation it is the major stakeholders who should be involved or at least informed. The Emergency Services are an obvious example but also local authorities, neighbouring businesses, the media, suppliers, customers, shareholders

and the public. The specific bodies working together will depend on the disaster. Think of the BP disaster in the Gulf of Mexico and you very quickly see how specific the stakeholders might be. Of course media handling is crucial, as how the media report the response to the disaster will affect people's perception, good or bad. A poor media report, even though it might be inaccurate, may damage an organisation's reputation, affect its share price or even ultimately threaten its very survival.

What was your most challenging or formative experience?

Some years ago I joined a Train Operating Company in UK as the Emergency Response Manager. The day before I joined one of their high speed trains crashed into a goods train on its way to London and tragically seven people were killed. My first appointment on my first day was the Crisis Management Team meeting dealing with the rail disaster. I sat at one end of the table and listened. The meeting was chaired by the deputy Managing Director as the actual Managing Director was on the train. He wasn't injured but he was off sick for four months with stress. The first lesson was that every member of the CMT needs a deputy.

When everyone had had their say at the meeting the chairman turned to me and said, "Well Simon, you are the new Emergency Response Manager, have we missed anything?" I replied that I thought they had just about covered everything but I could not be sure. You see they did not have an Agenda for the meeting. I ensure that all the Crisis Management Plans that I write have an Agenda for the CMT meeting which is very bespoke and acts as a kind of 'tick list' to ensure that nothing is missed in the heat of the moment.

I spent about 18 months, following that disaster, developing the company's Crisis Management Plan. I can now do it much quicker than that!

To what extent can countries prepare for Disaster Management?

To a great extent! In reality the amount of effort put into a country's disaster management is directly related to their experience of disaster. One of the truisms in disaster management is that money follows disaster it does not precede it! UK, following the experiences the country faced from terrorism and the foot and mouth epidemic, now has a government led Civil Contingencies Secretariat to increase the country's resilience to disaster or crisis and a Civil Contingencies Act 2004 to enhance civil protection. A great deal of effort is put into Disaster/Emergency/Crisis Management but of course more could be done.

Disaster Management is never complete. It is important to keep up with the constant state of change in which we all live. No sooner has the Crisis Management Team been trained and exercised than the business reorganises, roles and responsibilities change, managers leave and new ones arrive. There is always more to do.

What are the most important changes of the last years concerning Crisis Management- learning's / experiences?

I think the development of communications in all its forms which has had an affect both in the way and speed that we hear about disasters and in the way organisations are able to coordinate their response. We are all more aware of disasters with the development of 24 hour 'breaking news' programmes, citizen reporting and innovations such as 'twitter' on the internet. I think that essentially this is a good thing as people expect and demand rapid and effective disaster response. When this falls short pressure is applied for improvement via the media.

Whenever there is an official report or inquiry into the effectiveness of a disaster response one of the first issues to be mentioned is the requirement for better communications. Well now we have better communications. Organisations must apply it to their crisis management plans to make best use of it.

What is most difficult when handling the response to a Disaster – what is most challenging?

Often it is accounting for people. As I have said the safety of people is the number one concern in a disaster. Organisations have a duty of care towards their staff. They must account for all staff by name. This is often easier said than done as in a large organisation it is not always possible to know where everyone is at any one time. Nevertheless accounting for all staff should be the aim however long it takes. To do anything less, I believe, is simply unacceptable.

What can be optimized concerning Disaster Preparedness Management?

The training of the Crisis Management Team and how they operate. A football team full of highly paid and skilful stars will be no good unless they train together and practise passing the ball. If they don't they won't get the ball in the net! The same is true of the Crisis Management Team. The members of the team must be clear about their roles and responsibilities and also, and almost more importantly, they must understand the roles and responsibilities

of the others within the team so they know how they interact and work together. This requires practise through training and exercising i.e. team training. It is after all a Crisis Management Team.



Simon Langdon

is chairman at the



European Conference: Disaster Management

on 22nd – 24th November 2010 in Berlin

Simon Langdon, Director of CEDARthree Limited, is an acknowledged authority on crisis management and has worked on projects with the media, central government, the rail industry, the aviation industry including air traffic control in UK and Europe, the Financial Services industry both in UK and Switzerland, a major international organisation with one of the largest databases in the world and the Emergency Services. Simon has also worked on crisis management projects in Georgia for the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Dubai and Oman. Simon was chairman of the International Disaster and Emergency Resilience conference (IDER) held in Sweden in October 2009. He has recently led an international mission to the Philippines to assist with the country's resilience to disaster including earthquakes, volcanoes and typhoons. He has a background of a career in the Army to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel with experience of anti-terrorist operations. Simon is currently assisting the British Standards Institute on the development of a standard for crisis management. He was awarded the Business Continuity Consultant of the Year in 2005.

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