

People at crisis point

Dominic Cockram explains how scenario planning makes all the difference when it comes to staff getting the organisation through an actual incident

When the phone rings, it is a person who takes the call, a person who takes the next step and people who respond and manage an incident. Working under pressure in the crisis arena presents a very different set of challenges to that of the normal work environment.

Arguments for crisis preparation are manifold: staff deserve to be prepared, and experience shows that rehearsed teams always outperform those that have not. The groundwork is also more likely to lead to a successful outcome for the affected organisation – whether it is a question of keeping clients happy, saving brand reputation or simply maintaining continuity.

I have watched many crisis teams, continuity teams and even simply groups of people pulled together at a moment's notice respond to various incidents and simulated scenarios. The lessons repeat themselves again and again. Those fortunate enough to have been trained and rehearsed in their incident management role over several years of a crisis management or business continuity management programme respond with increasing coherence, competence and confidence. However, many are not in this position.

Part 2 of the new British Standard for Business Continuity, BS 25999, rightly talks of exercising, maintaining and reviewing business continuity management arrangements. Using exercises to validate plans is quite right. There is also the crucial element of competencies which organisations should consider if they are to be truly prepared for the unexpected. In most organisations, there are clear guidelines relating to the competencies and training requirements for each role. Yet, too often, when it comes to putting in place crisis or business continuity teams, the concept that those people should be trained and rehearsed in competencies such as

crisis leadership, team building, crisis communications, and decision-making under pressure with scant information, is missed or deemed a cost too far.

A programme of rehearsals or exercises is an essential part of this process too. People will benefit not only from the chance to practice and develop their crisis role – or even decide they are not suited to it – but also the chance to identify issues not previously considered, such as fatigue, the need for shift changes and hand-over procedures.

A case in point

Chelsea Building Society's head office in Cheltenham was one of the many businesses that had to survive the impact of the 2007 floods, which caused the mains water in a building with 650 staff to be cut off. This is an FSA-regulated business which could not close its doors and they themselves were committed to keeping it operational. Despite having planned carefully for a crisis, the experience highlighted a number of key learning points, due in particular to the extended time period of the crisis and the effect this had on staff and output.

The Chelsea response was successful due largely to the IMT working well together as a team and the actions they took to encourage their staff to come to work rather than manage the impact of flooding at home. Divisional head of risk, Adam Evetts, noted, "The incident management team (IMT) all got on well together and communicated effectively which made things much easier." They recognised that staff commitment was key to a successful outcome and they introduced free sandwiches and a daily chocolate trolley hosted by executives to boost morale. They also arranged for staff and their families to use shower facilities at a local conference centre.

Their need for flexibility and an innovative approach was key – after all, no two crises are the same and one cannot plan for every potential scenario. Such flexibility is much more easily achievable if the starting point is teams familiar with their roles and confident in their crisis response procedures.

Chelsea came through the crisis well but agreed that more exercising on a larger scale would have helped them prepare for the scale of what they faced. They are now very aware of the importance of their people at every level in any response and the fact that they must be flexible, supportive and supported and those leading need to communicate effectively.

Far too many organisations today develop a plan without genuinely supporting it with training and exercising. Expecting staff to be part of a crisis response team without suitable training and preparation is both unfair to the staff and reduces the resilience capability of any organisation that follows this approach. The plan can only tell people what to do – only people can actually action the response and if they do not understand their own responsibilities, those of the people around them and the purpose and scope of what they are doing it is unlikely that the planned response will be successful.

If the team is close and has worked together before, whatever happens, they will be able to respond effectively and – even more importantly – in a flexible way. In so many cases, as shown by Chelsea, what hits you is unexpected and needs that adaptability. As the mains failed, calls from staff came in within minutes and there was no time to open the crisis manual and wonder what came next.

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