

Traumatic events and their impact on the collective

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The previous column (Fall 2004) explored the impact of crisis on individual behavior. The focus of the current article is on the collective—organizations or groups whose performance is altered by the experience of a disastrous event.

As emergency managers, we need to appreciate what, to the group, constitutes a crisis (Table 1). The definition probably involves a significant turning point in an organization from which they need to recover at the risk of suffering a serious decline in capabilities and performance, perhaps to the point of extinction.

Keep in mind that emergency management (EM) organizations also fall into this category. The focus here is on organizations in general; however, EM specifically will be addressed in a future column.

GROUP CRISIS CONSIDERATIONS FOR EM PERSONNEL

Organizations have a life of their own, separate from each individual. The lifeblood of the group is its ability to achieve a mission and create profit (not necessarily financial profit, although that helps!). The group entity can lurch from crisis to crisis or gradually grow from one event to another. Several factors affect this:

- self-determination (the ability or inability to sustain a chosen direction);
- social responsibility (achieving social change versus rigidly keeping to an order that is out of step with the times);

- timeliness (loss of time affecting production or service delivery);
- stewardship (ability/inability to use and allocate resources, e.g., stock control);
- collective self-determination (agreed-upon strategic direction); and
- maintaining positive relationships with employees, customers, and suppliers.

EM agencies can establish relationships with collectives to help them prepare rapidly employable, adaptable, and responsive plans to cope with whatever crisis they might encounter. Establishing these relationships benefits response teams and, more important, the wider community, in many ways. Not only does it help protect people, it also helps organizations think preventatively. In today's environment, it can also have a financial impact by reducing risk and, in some cases, insurance rates. In addition, such relationships foster the effective sharing of often scarce resources and promote EM departments as agents of community problem-solving.

Organizations often don't have the motivation or desire, unless forced by the "bean counters" (insurance companies, accountants, etc.), to address crisis management unless it directly involves their ability to make more money or reduce expenses. These collectives often

Table 1. Traumatic events that affect the collective

Types of crisis	Definitions and examples
External	
Mass disasters	Natural causes (fire, tornado, flood, hurricane, earthquake)
	Accidental causes (transportation crash, explosion, hazardous materials spill, water damage, contamination, loss of utilities)
	Incited causes (vandalism, arson, sabotage, civil unrest)
Competitive surprise	Competitive product developed and released without your knowledge (new technology, repackaging of established product, new market development)
Regulatory imposition	Impositions on the organization that challenge its functioning (increase in taxes, product regulations, environmental laws)
Internal	
Organizational disruption	Breakdown of organizational structure and support (management change, difficulties with management/leadership)
	Breakdown of the infrastructure (problems with buildings, roads, utilities, etc.; equipment difficulties; work process difficulties)
	Major change affecting the way the organization does business (merger and acquisition, key leadership change, restructuring of the company)
People breakdown	Breakdown of the social system (union/management conflicts, strikes, management incapacity, uncooperative production or service groups)
Product breakdown	Product failure (poor quality, unsuspected risks [e.g., choking hazard], product recall)

have no contingency or crisis plan in place and have little or no practice in responding to a crisis. Their actions mainly focus on production or delivery of service.

After a disastrous event, organizations often know the crisis couldn't be avoided, but the fallout could have been minimized. They understand that the potential for crisis is part of the risk of conducting business, but that they can take steps to prevent avoidable risks. Preventive measures require discipline on the part of individuals and collectives. Barriers that stop organizations from preparing for crises include the following:

- not knowing of or recognizing a potential threat;
- denial ("it won't happen to us");
- feelings of invincibility;

- leadership that refuses to entertain the thought of failure; and
- not having the money or resources to dedicate to crisis management.

The goal for emergency managers is to work with organizations to help them see the value of reducing disaster risk, preventing obvious calamities, and minimizing damage. This involves selling organizations on the importance of identifying vulnerabilities, assessing capabilities and available resources, preventing breakdown during a crisis, defining a response hierarchy and protocol, implementing an ongoing risk-reduction protocol, and minimizing loss.

During an EM consultation with a major automotive producer, the opportunity arose to bring together the city's EM coordinator with the company's human resources department. The goal of the meeting was to

assist the plant in establishing a relationship for internal and external crisis management. Objectives of additional meeting included establishing mutual understandings of the business and city entities; determining actual emergency-response protocols; creating a collaborative relationship between the two entities; and creating a model that could be implemented by other businesses in the community.

Organizations are sometimes hesitant about calling in public personnel because they believe government entities do not understand business needs and goals. In this case, the new collaborative relationship created an environment for the company and city to work together to keep the facility performing and preserve the community's interests. The two organizations created a plan that benefited both; i.e., it maximized the company's ability to continue working after a crisis while protecting its employees and enabling the city to protect the community at large. The company would receive training for its personnel by qualified city personnel, thereby creating a working relationship between the company and city and ensuring an integrated response between the city's emergency services and the company's EM teams. The ramifications of this relationship will be discussed in a future column.

CONCLUSION

The collective interpretation of crisis differs from the individual, encompassing traditional EM concerns as well as crisis mitigation and prevention. Focusing on the collective opens new avenues for emergency managers to reduce risk and sustain productivity in their own and other organizations. Skillful collaboration with businesses and other

groups strengthens community ties, streamlines response, and mitigates damage and liability both for the collective and the response team. Understanding the psychological and business issues manifest in organizational resistance to EM concepts, planning, and response will be addressed in the next column.

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