

Between calm and chaos: The unseen work of resilience

In security, risk, and crisis management, resilience isn't built in the heat of the moment; it is forged well before disruption strikes, writes **Matthew Porcelli**

When it comes to strategic risk and crisis management, along with operational security, a prime objective for managers and professionals in these sectors is to ensure that once a serious incident or crisis occurs, operations can recover and return to normal (or some semblance thereof) as quickly as possible.

Regardless of whether the incident or crisis is natural or human-caused, contained or on a mass scale, or whether the affected asset(s) are tangible or intangible (such as a brand), taking proactive, practical, and productive steps in the planning stages of a crisis management plan are imperative. These factors set a strategic and operational standard that can be applied rather than created in the heat and chaos of the moment. Disruption often creates disorder not only in the organisation's operations, but also in its greatest assets: its employees.

Just as there are microcosms of individuals and organisations that are more aware of security than



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others, there are also psychological strains weighing on individuals' minds. For example, if the incident or crisis is widespread, concerns about family members' welfare may come into play. Mindsets are unpredictable during incidents or crises; however, following proactive, practical, and productive steps helps strengthen the physical and mental resilience of organisations and their employees.

People do not actively seek chaos. People and organisations rely on structures and routines. When the organisation's structure and routine are compromised or disrupted, the severity of the disruption and the organisation's preparedness can determine whether the organisation transitions smoothly to strategic contingency operations, ensuring its survival, or experiences an abrupt halt that jeopardises lives, services, and assets.

It is crucial that the organisation, its departments (human resources, legal, and information technology), and vendors (security, maintenance, and janitorial) are all aligned, not only with the organisation's crisis response plan, but, in the case of vendors, also with their own organisation's crisis response plan.

The challenge is that without adequate training and mental preparedness, an organisation or its individuals could have the best incident or crisis response plan, but still be poorly prepared mentally, or vice versa. There are no guarantees. Phillips-Wren and Adya (2020), in their article *Decision Making Under Stress: The Role of Information Overload, Time Pressure, Complexity, and Uncertainty*, found that individuals in emergency

situations, such as security and crisis management leaders responsible for rapid decisions, often do not sufficiently consider alternatives and tend to oversimplify strategies, leading to suboptimal outcomes.

Just as individuals or fixed structures cannot be completely free from risk, there cannot be a blanket of level thinking during a serious incident or crisis. Many emotions will spike. Strategic risk, security, and crisis management professionals are not always tasked with quelling frenzied emotions, which are an inevitability of the job, but to ensure proactively that a framework has been set long before there is a disruption or shock to the system.

Over the last 20 years in this industry, I have had the pleasure of meeting many global security and risk

management professionals, and we are all unanimous on a sentiment when either presenting, writing, or training our teams: "You do not want to be meeting people (that is the contacts you should have made, such as local

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emergency services, tenants, merchants, clients, colleagues, and so on) for the first time while a serious incident or crisis is unfolding."

Proactivity pays off. This is especially true for incoming security and risk managers, as their predecessors may have had different approaches and varying relationships with their contacts. The current or incoming security or risk manager can usually gauge the security culture and the health of the organisation's

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crisis response plan based on items such as past incident reports, conducting security breach tests (also known as red teaming) and vulnerability assessments, and getting any pertinent information from anyone currently on the security or crisis management team.

Many organisations and individuals, whether advertently or inadvertently, maintain a reactive posture against serious incidents and crises because of the frequency with which they may occur or owing to budgetary reasons. Natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, and wildfires are an unavoidable aspect of life. However, individuals who lack a risk or security mindset often overlook the fact that, just as we, as chief risk officers, chief security officers, security managers, and security officers, monitor and report on these events, so do their adversaries. Criminals, delinquents, and terrorists often capitalise on the distractions caused by chaos and panic to test and eventually breach security to carry out their objectives.

If individuals are panicked or distracted, the opportunity for criminal acts or unnecessary vulnerabilities can widen, increasing the risk of theft and damage. People are naturally unsettled by changes in routine; however, a security or crisis management professional can stay grounded and practical amid external pressures through regular preparedness and clear, concise communication.

However, preparedness does not rely solely on written words found in security post orders or crisis response plans. Perry & Lindell (2003), when discussing the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center substantiate this: "A written plan does not guarantee preparedness; preparedness is dynamic and contingent upon ongoing processes. A written plan is an important part of, but not a sufficient condition for, community emergency preparedness."

In essence, everything appears to be well-planned until a serious incident or crisis occurs. It is also very important to set up clear communication within organisations because, during a serious incident or crisis, the organisation's operations and security must stay strong to keep the company running and reduce risks to its assets.

The professional and personal lives of individuals are anything but dull. Even if routines seem mundane or monotonous to some, such as filling up your vehicle with gas, relying on public transportation, or following directives for an organisation, each part matters for the livelihood of both the individual and the organisation. A serious incident or crisis disrupts that routine, turning what once seemed tedious into crucial tasks.

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While we live in a digital age where many can work remotely, security and crisis management leaders, and often their frontline teams, must report to a post or office to provide on-the-ground information. The C-suite or clients then receive this information, enabling them to make crucial decisions that could determine the survival of the organisation. This is a heavy mental burden for security and risk managers throughout their careers, but as the saying goes, practice makes perfect. 

Sources

- *Perry R & Lindell M (2003): Preparedness for Emergency Response: Guidelines for the Emergency Planning Process, School of Public Affairs, Arizona State University, Volume 27, Issue 4, p 338;*
- *Phillips-Wren G & Adya M (2020): Decision Making Under Stress: The Role of Information Overload, Time Pressure, Complexity, and Uncertainty, Journal of Decision Systems.*

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