

# Crisis Prevention – It's Not Rocket Science!

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Last month I looked at the way in which effective Risk Management could help in identifying both potential problems and potential control measures that would either prevent those unwanted incidents from occurring or would at least minimise the impact of any unwanted event that did occur. As we all know however, the SNAFU scenario is an ever-present risk in any security operation, and this week I want to look at what are the factors that can either increase or decrease the likelihood of an unwanted situation developing into a major crisis. (SNAFU is the well-known military term for 'Situation Normal – All F\*\*\*\*\* Up!').

There are a number of problems involved in trying to predict where a crisis will occur, and developing response options to deal with them. Firstly, and the most obvious one, is that we don't actually know what the crisis is going to consist of, when it is going to occur, and what problems it is going to cause us. If we knew those things, it wouldn't (or at least, shouldn't) be allowed to develop into a crisis state. The second thing is that one predictable outcome of a crisis situation is the 'Law of Unintended Consequences': any intervention that we take in order to control the crisis is likely to cause secondary effects that may be worse than the original crisis itself. The third problems with crises is that by definition they involve total system breakdown – all of the options that you had originally planned on using to respond to your planned crisis scenario are themselves inoperative. So, given that there is not much happy news in all of the above, what exactly can we do to either prevent or respond effectively to a crisis situation.

The problems where response planning of any nature can go wrong can basically be divided into three clearly identifiable areas: Firstly, the nature of the potential problem has been misunderstood, so that either it is not considered as a major threat, or because the scale has been misunderstood the impact when it does happen comes as a surprise. Secondly, the response options themselves are not effective in combating the potential problems, either because they are completely inappropriate, or are appropriate but inadequate. And the third problem that can cause a breakdown in incident response is that both the threat and the response options are well-understood and correctly developed, but a breakdown occurs in responding because the response teams themselves are inadequately trained or led.

Given that the number of potential crises that we might face are limitless and unknowable, what we need to do are find the common factors that occur in all crisis,

irrespective of their unique individual characteristics. Luckily, there is a well-known model of crisis development that can be used to describe pretty well any disaster in any environment. 'Pathways to Disaster' (a theory developed by Steven Toft and Brian Turner), lists six steps which are almost inevitably linked to disaster situations. The first predictable step, and one that I touched on briefly last month, when discussing the High Likelihood – High Impact zone of risk assessment, is the fact that the seed causes of the crisis are inbuilt into the system. Understaffing, lack of effective team management, poor protocols, weak transfer of information because of multi-language situations, lack of back-up and reserve resources, etc all create an environment where the escalation of a normal incident into a crisis situation are inevitable – they are literally a crisis waiting to happen. The second factor of crisis development are what are called 'Normal Accidents', those daily breakdown in operational management that are signals that there is something wrong, but which we ignore and try and pretend are not happening. The third stage in crisis development is when a 'Normal Accident' develops into a crisis situation - but nobody notices, because it has happened so many times before. A classic example is when a team allows bad time keeping to become acceptable, and members of that team regularly arrive late. It will then not be noticed – until too late – that a vital member of the team is not just late, but is actually not going to be turning up. From such small acorns do massive crises grow! The fourth stage in crisis development happens when a crisis is finally recognised, and there are not enough resources to respond. It is hardly a secret that in most situations manpower and equipment are cut back so far that there are not enough people to handle even normal situations, never mind crisis situations. (It is likely that the three areas where resources are going to be insufficient are manpower, equipment and, crucially, management skills). The fifth stage of crisis development is when the team does respond to the situation, and something completely unexpected happens that not only doesn't do what you had planned for, but makes the whole situation worse rather than better! And the sixth and last stage of crisis development? That's easy – when it is all over, lessons are not learned and everything carries on as though nothing ever happened!

It would be an interesting exercise to compare a crisis that you have personally been involved with, map it against the six stages listed above – and then compare it with what happened in New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina was completely expected, and the effects that it would have on New Orleans were completely understood. The flooding of New Orleans (which lies largely below sea-level) was one of the most well-researched disaster situations in America. The seeds of the disaster were certainly present, in that the geographic location, the lack of investment in upgrading the protecting levees (the walls that were meant hold the waters back in the event of flooding) and the fact that it was

well-known that they wouldn't be effective against a major hurricane were all well-known and well-recognised. The response options developed were both inappropriate: the responsibility for the first response action was left to FEMA, (Federal Emergency Management Agency), who treated every emergency as a terrorist threat, and responded to Hurricane Katrina with NBC (Nuclear, Biological, Chemical) response teams. The management of FEMA was inadequate, in that the CEO was a political appointment who had been friends with President Bush. There were unintended consequences in that the original response options often consisted of moving groups of people from one danger area (their homes) to another danger area (the Louisiana Superdome and New Orleans Convention Centre), where they were left without any support, information or leadership....and so on and so on.

A wise man once said that the problems with disasters is that they are completely unthinkable, until the moment that they happen – then they appear completely inevitable! Disasters, like most problems we deal with in security, happen because we let them. Crises are almost always just the last event in a long line of mistakes, and this is one area where effective planning and operational management can have a real impact on the safety of your operation. Each day look around you, and see what you need to do to make you, your team and your clients safer.

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