

It is 8 a.m. on a Tuesday morning and the Director of the White House Military Office is on the phone telling me about a situation that is urgently unfolding overseas...

THUS BEGINS ANOTHER DAY RUNNING THE White House Situation Room – the President’s 24/7 operations and information center. From my tiny office, I can see the deputy secretaries of the departments of State and Defense arriving for a meeting. As they secure their mobile devices and head to the large conference room, I hear a buzz building on the watchfloor – something bad has happened. I step out of my office to overhear the chatter – a bombing in a foreign country – as the duty officers are reaching out to other federal operations centers to learn what is known.

Before the team can send an email notification about the bombing, the National Security Advisor calls for an update (based on a CNN report). The President’s assistant calls with an urgent request to connect the President to a foreign leader on an economic issue.

It isn’t even 8:15.

The Situation Room – actually a suite of small rooms taking up over 5,000 square feet of space in the White House – was established in 1961 after the Bay of Pigs to provide the President with timely and unbiased information. It is an information watch and warning center for the White House leadership and the National Security Council staff. Situation Room staff provide the first official alerts about events breaking worldwide. We are the hub for crisis management. The staff – mostly military and intelligence officers with backgrounds in collection, analysis, communications and technology – spend one to three years assigned to the Situation Room from other federal departments and agencies.

Leading the White House Situation Room provided a front seat to crisis leadership and the ways in which we prepare for and respond to crises, including the operational, such as standard operating procedures and training programs, and the interpersonal, focusing on relationships and leadership. Lessons from the Situation Room demonstrate the importance of these foundations.

LESSON 1: No two crises are the same. An active shooter at a federal facility in Kentucky versus a terrorist attack unfolding across Paris. These events have commonalities – unfolding in real time, casualties, Americans affected – but their differences are important. Different partners (homeland security organizations versus intelligence or diplomatic

SITROOM'S HOT SEAT

agencies), stakeholders (domestic response versus international engagement), even time zones (important when planning calls to a governor versus calls to a foreign leader).

Anticipating crises and having plans for how you respond are essential to successfully leading through a crisis. Plans help standardize responses and reduce pressures that arise by identifying initial steps to take. Since no two situations are the same, it is key that organizations keep thinking and innovating. During a crisis, questions of “who needs to know?” “what would I need to know to make a decision/respond?” or “what are we not thinking of?” keep the organization engaged in the crisis to ensure effective information gathering and facilitate an appropriate response.

LESSON 2: Train and exercise. Who briefs the President as a crisis unfolds? The military aide (milaide)? The National Security Advisor? What if the President wants to make a call – who sets the call up? In both real scenarios and in crisis exercises, these were often the tripwires for confusion: the milaide follows up on the President’s request by reaching out to the White House Communications Agency to set up a call to a foreign head of state without realizing that the National Security Advisor has tasked the Situation Room with the same call.

Training and exercises help socialize plans, generate creative thinking through worst-case scenarios, and build trust and communications within and across teams. Training and exercises are most valuable when you test communications and integration across relevant parts of an organization. In a hierarchical setting, it’s far too easy to simply relay information straight up without context. By setting up plans that avoid such stove piping, leadership can, in the moment, more clearly understand roles and responsibilities, and identify efforts that are duplicated and those that are left unattended. Training and exercises also provide feedback for plans, making

5

CRISIS LESSONS
from Brunswick’s
MAREN BROOKS,
former Director of
the White House
Situation Room.



sure they reflect current organizational structures, functions and responsibilities.

LESSON 3: First reports are indicators, but not the whole story. In the Situation Room, we first learned of a shooting at a federal facility in New York from social media. But a social media account would never be the source of a report we would share with the President. Our job was to use that tip to begin to build the full story – answering questions about who, what, how many, why – questions that could take hours or even days to answer.

When a crisis is unfolding, everyone wants to have all the information before briefing leadership or, if you are leadership, before acting. In today's world, where the media cycle is down to minutes and social media can share messages around the world instantly, there is often not time to ensure that the informa-

"IN A CRISIS, INFORMATION IS CONSTANTLY EVOLVING EVEN AS A RESPONSE IS NEEDED AND ACTIONS NEED TO BE TAKEN."

tion is accurate and complete. In a crisis, information is constantly evolving even as a response is needed and actions have to be taken.

However, you must act. In acting, you can demonstrate leadership, fostering trust and transparency. For us in the Situation Room, this meant working with partners (both internal and interagency) to gather information and let people know we were tracking a situation. It also meant clearly caveating initial reporting (for example, "initial press reports indicate that...") to help decision makers understand where we were in the story.

There is a related lesson about managing the flow of information in a crisis. In the same way that too many cooks spoil the broth, too many information sources create confusion and can breed circular reporting. A best practice during a crisis is to have a focal point (person or organization) to gather, deconflict and synthesize information as it comes in.

LESSON 4: There is no such thing as a dumb question. It is essential to ensure leaders and decision makers understand the nature and details of the crisis individually, but also that they share an understanding of the situation. Asking questions helps draw out information and points of confusion, misunderstanding or disagreement. For the Situation Room, questions can be tactical, like understanding precisely where an overseas terrorist attack or domestic incident happened. Or questions can be strategic, such as "does this make sense?" – does it make sense that a tribal group engaged in a civil war would conduct an attack against a foreign nation-state? Such details can help drive follow-up, clarify the narrative and sharpen a focus on facts.

LESSON 5: You are never more important than the job at hand. This is really about leadership, especially leadership in a crisis. Teams need to know they can rely on their leadership for top cover but also to do whatever needs to be done. Sometimes that is briefing the President; sometimes it is cleaning up coffee stains in a conference room, answering a phone or getting the Vice President coffee. Leaders who can demonstrate their willingness to do whatever needs to be done will not only build goodwill with their teams, they will build teams who will follow them into battle. ♦

MAREN BROOKS is a national security and counterterrorism expert and a Director in Brunswick's Washington, DC office. She has served in senior positions in the White House, National Counterterrorism Center and the Department of State.