

A CRISIS IS A LIVING, NEARLY IMPONDERABLE dynamic, fluid in its unfolding – scientists term this a complex system. Simple, small interventions can yield unpredictable results.

Yet the handling of crises tends to be the opposite: linear, static, rigid. As networks of organization and communication grow ever more complex, the complex nature of crises can only increase. Traditional, reductionist responses can worsen the damage.

Flaws in the linear approach become obvious only in retrospect: The problem wasn't taken seriously enough; a plan to manage it wasn't rigorous enough or was put in place too late; data is faulty or outdated; the digital sphere is not sufficiently considered; scripts created by overly specific scenario planning prove woefully inadequate; the task of handling it is given to the wrong people or to no one; too few stakeholders were considered; departments have separate, uncoordinated emergency plans; information flow is not regulated; compliance is not considered, and so on. Given these potential pitfalls, it's no wonder small incidents lead to full-fledged crises. Particularly in the first moments, mistakes made often cannot be reversed.

The key to a complex challenge is a complex response. This means setting up a self-organizing and agile team, pre-nominated and well-prepared to deal with the risks, given the structure of the organization and its needs in the face of the unknown. The team should have contemporary tools at their disposal and clear, simple rules, protocols and authorizations.

Policies regarding the quality of information have to be rigorous. Bad data results in wasted time and damaged reputations. Overall however, managing a crisis is not typically about achieving perfection, but about finding, as quickly as possible, the least bad compromise in harmony with long-term goals.

As in a complex system, the personal strengths of team members are as relevant as technical expertise or specific job functions. Real teamwork and open interaction toward common higher goals are necessary and become easier when individual abilities are prized and freely put to use, without fences around pre-determined positions and scenarios.

The team is a circle of confidentiality as it gathers and analyzes information, involves appropriate specialists, categorizes the incident, informs the top decision makers, gets approvals and takes action. Board members are not part of the team, but informed or engaged as it becomes appropriate.

Organizations are often severely penalized after a crisis. A more positive perception along the way can help reduce that burden. Management and commu-



The Hornet's Nest

A complex crisis calls for a complex response, says Brunswick's **RONALD SCHRANZ**.

nications need to be completely integrated to best relate to stakeholders. Moral and ethical questions need to be answered adequately. There are situations like cyber attacks or raids for which one needs guidelines, but generally the mindset for the team is “whatever comes our way” with a focus on emergency and protection measures, stop loss, damage control, compliance, liability and stakeholders.

Goodwill built in advance, in fact, can make an enormous difference to an organization's success in handling a crisis. Complexity comes to bear here too.

Think of the variety of skeptical, well-informed and even activist stakeholders your organization serves. Think of the problematic media landscape. Whatever the message you deliver to one group, the others will zero in on what it means for them.

The single most decisive factor in that moment will be the quality of the relationships that you have built with them over time. In a turbulent world, the one thing that can be controlled is the continuous attitude and behavior shown to stakeholders. Any deficits here will be costly in a crisis. Organizations that do well by their stakeholders are highly robust and resilient. When things go wrong, it will be seen as a one-off lapse, rather than a systemic problem.

“Coming out of a crisis stronger” is a cliché, but can also be reality. Two things will help: a crisis management system that allows for controlling the controllable in the real time of an unfolding crisis; and a history of fair, respectful treatment of stakeholders.

Beyond these, nothing else matters as much. ♦

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