CRISIS RESPONSE

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Hurricane Katrina, Deepwater Horizon, H1N1, the Eyjafjallajökull eruption (p40), snow over Europe (p36), the upheavals in the Middle East (p28) or the Japanese disaster (p18): what next?

Our formerly ‘house-trained’ crises are reverting back to the wilderness, but we appear frozen and incapable of rising to the occasion. We revert to the same defence of our responses: “But this was exceptional!” or: “You can’t expect people in charge to deal with unconventional situations!” After a catastrophe, we reach the same tired conclusions: “We should have more plans... better co-ordination... smarter communication with the public...”

Cascading Emergencies

But it is time to accept reality: something is broken in our risk machinery. Global interconnectivity and cascading emergencies have transformed the scale and nature of crises today. This is the time of mega crises, but our responses remain as if we were dealing with the type of incidents common in the last century, or with medium-range disasters.

The last decades of the 20th Century witnessed stimulating advances in risk understanding and crisis management. But “more of the same” is no longer enough. Other theoretical foundations have to be developed to face our new world of risk, crises and structural turbulence.

Enormous crises have become part of the natural tempo and rhythm of the world, they are no longer unusual. The challenge is not to limit the eruption of specific events in an otherwise stable world, but to navigate through turbulent and uncharted environments. Stability is the exception to the rule.

Two urgent needs have to be addressed – today. First, a paradigm shift is needed, even if this is difficult, risky and unwelcome. Undoubtedly, it will be a long foray into the unknown. But in the meantime, we can and must, at the very least, clarify the radar screen used in crisis intelligence.

The most pressing duty is to launch a rapid audit of our organisations’ ability to address crises, including mega-crisis, as they sweep across our day-to-day lives. This audit should be launched at international, national, local levels; across international bodies (generally frozen), governments (in denial), agencies (still waiting for the experts), and major companies – especially those in charge of critical infrastructure (probably at the vanguard, but still acting defensively and reactively). Immediate action should follow the audit.

If we are to re-map our crisis territory,
of outmoded best practice; being creative enough to shape unknown futures with unknown actors; the ability to inject positive dynamics and trust, when everything combines to trigger distrust and despair.

With regards to auditing crisis response, the goal is not to check whether people and organisations are prepared for success. The urgency lies in checking that they are not doomed to fiasco in the face of catastrophe. This five-level framework, which delineates performance zones, could be useful:

- Level -1: Fiasco
- Level 0: Danger
- Level +1: Basic
- Level + 2: Encouraging
- Level + 3: Advanced

It is not difficult to sound out organisations and people; the test questions are simple: What is the date of your latest exercise? What kind of scenario did you test? What was the level of difficulty? Who was involved? What kind of debriefing was organised? What lessons were learnt – and implemented? Other questions include: Who is in charge of the crisis planning? What is his or her position with regards to, and links with, the CEO level? Is there any clear assessment of the level of preparation of the system? What initiatives have been taken to improve levels of professionalism? Emergency response capacities must be checked, including the existence and maintenance of specific instant reaction capacity, as well as the capacity of other bodies – not just those specifically in charge of emergencies and risk control. If no tests have been run, the system must be labelled as being potentially vulnerable to large scale failure.

Crisis management capacities will also have to be checked. As a minimum the existence of basic tools must be verified. These include whether there are basic tools, such as written plans, in place and whether people – especially at senior levels – can use them. Further questions also arise: Have crisis rooms been set up and can people use them effectively? How realistic is team training and exercises?

It is vital that those in charge are trained to detect elusive problems, to report and mobilise on unclear issues; they should also be taught to lead crisis teams and to focus on strategic questions that lie beyond an immediate emergency. And, of course crisis team members must be specially-trained to work in unconventional environments; all must be prepared to cope with trans-organisational issues.

A number of experiences, launched and developed in some leading-edge organisations...
around the world, have afforded some progress.
Committed and stimulated people, in close co-operation with the very top level of one organisation, are working on complex and surprising scenarios. The goal is not to fix robust responses in order to avoid surprises, but to prepare people to be surprised, to detect aberrant signals, to mobilise and work together creatively in ambiguous and unknown contexts.

Debriefings on internal and external complex crises have also been launched to learn from those involved, to recognise mistakes and to identify promising and innovative responses. Specific work with senior leaders prepares them to confront unknown situations – an occasional ten-minute focused drill can prove helpful.
Finally, benchmarking against other, similarly advanced organisations, is also taking place.
We must assess innovative abilities to deal with major dislocations and prepare for discontinuity and chaotic contexts. The objective is to train people to confront the unthinkable and to prepare leaders to mobilise and lead creatively.
But we must also envision a swing towards civil society as future crises will both emerge from, and affect, the fabric of society. The answers will have to emanate from – and work with – all those who make up a community and empowerment will be a key; people must continue to learn and take responsibility for their communities.

Education and research have a decisive role to play; as long as key questions and the global environment are ignored or excluded by distinguished academic courses, it will be difficult to mobilise leaders and organisation and we cannot expect creative leadership.

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It is important to appreciate the dynamics of severe crises and chaotic contexts. Situations are complex and, in crises, any swing from the norm is generally violent. Yet it is not so difficult to evaluate how organisations and systems would probably react should a rogue wave occur. At the very least, it is our responsibility to ring the alarm bells when so little is being done to avoid the certainty of defeat.

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**ASSESSMENT GRID ‘ADVANCED COMPETENCE’**

**Level -1:** The leadership refuses to consider any questions beyond ‘crisis management’ as learned in the 1990s. This closed attitude is disguised with over-investment in hardware purchase and media-training sessions with well-known journalists or ex-journalists. Any other line is rejected with the definitive and protective argument: ‘Do not scare our leaders’

**Level 0:** There is no opening towards ‘outside of the box’ issues, but no opposition to that kind of question either

**Level 1:** Some advances have been made on these avenues; but the whole remains episodic; leadership commitment is accidental and limited

**Level 2:** Real advances are made, the whole process is conducted, continuously, and somewhat robustly

**Level 3:** Leaders and organisations have made the crucial step, and are now open to explore, prepare and invent in the new unknown territories of large dislocations, unstable contexts, and incredible discoveries.

**ASSESSMENT GRID ‘ADVANCED COMPETENCE’**

**Basic Competence Assessment Grid**

**Level -1:** Whatever the item, the assessment shows critical failures and more: a strong in-depth resistance to taking the issue on board. If a crisis occurs, one must expect catastrophic failure from the very beginning: signals rejected, paralysis, flight, optimistic protestations – ‘everything is under control’ – bunker mentality, etc

**Level 0:** The organisation does not possess minimal capabilities, but is open to upgrading efforts

**Level 1:** The organisation has basic essential know-how and tools, but will not be able to navigate through turbulent environments with skill and creativity

**Level 2:** The organisation shows a good level of ability to control conventional crises and is interested in developing its competencies and its external links and networks to learn, share and explore

**Level +3:** The organisation is working beyond ‘crisis management’ as developed at the end of last century. The focus is on issues without answers, leadership commitment, reflection groups next to CEO level, and bold initiatives with outside stakeholders in order to learn, share and explore.

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A water pipe spews water into the frosty morning air after being damaged by the tsunami in Japan. Unconventional systemic risks can trigger massive, instant, global upheaval, affecting climate, economy, health, environment and even the fabric of society itself.

US Military/Master Chief Petty Officer Daniel Sanford