ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE
CONFRONTING THE GLOBAL CRISIS

PLUS: Brexit; Flooding in France; Nanoparticles & First Responders; Agriculture & terrorism; Search & Rescue in Antarctica; Crisis leadership; Stability policing; Public information & social media; Conflict de-escalation; Robotic developments; Command & Control in the 21st Century
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Crisis Response Journal

September 2016 | vol:12 | issue:1 CRISIS

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After all, it is not beyond experts’ capabilities to predict, identify and calculate the human consequences of most devastating disasters. Terrorism, natural catastrophes, conflict. This edition addresses and provides insight into all of the above.

At this time, we don’t have definitive statistics for 2016. But, despite the widely-held perception that terrorist attacks are increasing, the US Department’s annual terrorism report notes a 13 per cent decrease in attacks in 2015, with 14 per cent fewer deaths. This year’s figures might be higher (page 86), and modus operandi may be shifting, but the line between criminality and terrorism has become blurred, and we must be wary of classifying all violent criminal acts as terrorism, as Christine Jessup warns (page 54).

Again, we know that natural disasters are on the rise. But Munich Re says last year saw a fall in losses from natural disasters, which are on the rise. This year, the report notes a 68 per cent fall in insurance losses (page 85).

CRJ has touched upon in past editions (Prof Steiner, CRJ 10:1), and it is not that it is no longer able to ignore. Deaths in a world without antibiotics could dwarf all other catastrophes, killing up to ten million people a year (page 92).

How sobering it is to reflect that, despite all our technological advances, prevention, co-operation and hard work in crises and disasters, an absence of antibiotics would not only claim more lives than climate, conflict and terrorism combined, but augment their effects immeasurably. Let’s hope that the high level UN meeting on this subject in September will introduce the unequivocal commitment that this smouldering global health emergency demands.

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Our crisis management techniques cannot handle today’s unmapped and poorly understood critical challenges, says Patrick Lagadec. It is time for training to challenge leaders to cope with the unknown.

Our global crisis landscape is one of shockwaves that rupture the environment, technology, economics, safety and security, affecting society as a whole. But leaders have been trained to deal with well-defined situations, within clean-cut typologies in globally stable contexts. Leaders are generally chosen for their efficiency in the use of the best answers and managers are generally chosen for their ability to navigate the unknown.

This paradigm is especially dominant in the emergency world. The initial and essential function today is to quit that mindset, to switch from response to questioning. A leader’s task is to struggle with the unknown, to open up unmapped roads, not to ou-stumble but set of conventional responses brought by a predefined mix of well-known players according to specific plans. This is very hard, both culturally and psychologically, since such a struggle with questions means that individuals and teams are rapidly thrown into the void, forced into the wild land of discoverers, far from the managerial or administrative spheres. The key battlefield is the blind spot. The critical point is not to act rapidly, but rather take time to reflect and wonder: “Which questions did we forget to ask? What are the hidden challenges, the invisible dark matter, and intractable dark dynamics?”

The operational translation of such a demand is well known, even if rare. Even today’s seminars, executives, and their immediate aides must be prepared during specific seminars devoted to helping them to change visions, grammars, and rhythms. Possing impossible questions is the ultimate stage, but if leaders want to find the appropriate pathways and operational responses, they have to go through this key of challenging and surprising seminar to discover how to envision, tackle and navigate unexpected social challenges. This is a precedent step to avoid immediate paralysis when confronted by unreadable dynamics.

The dynamics of such seminars demand that ready-made PowerPoint presentations are banned, pre-planned responses and organisational maps must be put aside. The only objective is to give leaders the opportunity to feel understood, and test the kind of void, beyond borders, that a crisis has in store. And it executives refuse to participate in such seminars, they should be considered incapable of leading in today’s crisis.

The next move is that of specific drills. Crisis exercises are currently too often randomly designed to put leaders to the test and to train them. Instead, participants are expected to react, co-ordinate and communicate. It is very rare to see real surprises – such as the recent flooding of the Saone, where the floodwaters rose during the wrong season, from the wrong tributaries and where critical sensors were out of order. It is even rarer that leaders are afforded the opportunity to be confronted with the unknown, to deal with experts in the void, to interact with unfamiliar actors, to test essentially new: borders, drills are generally emergency-based scenarios that do not really test leadership.

A decisive leap is now necessary. Leaders and executives have to be reminded to participate in such critical exercises, which must be short. A large-scale exercise, stretching day and night over two days, is only appropriate when the objective is to see how individuals can resist fatigue. The real issue is to train leaders to find ‘the’ good solution in the usual toolbox, but to clarify the strategic maps into the unknown, and to prepare creative answers. Experience in the field shows that it is not difficult to have everyone understand that the Rapid Reflection Force is in fact extremely useful (see CRJ 2:3 and 4:2).

Obviously, a more global preparation is necessary, preparing everyone to open their minds and capabilities for this new brave world of the unknown. It requires that everyone maintains excellence in his or her specific job, knowing better than ever the best processes and usual responses. But, in addition, it demands the ability to envision total surprise, deep changes and mutations in visions, objectives, and operational rules. The serious difficulty is that in the crisis world, the bulk of our preparation in all cultures, tends to produce rigid protocols and fixed codes and responses.

The practical advice to success lies in bold personal engagement of leaders, large conferences for all in order to clarify the new challenges and positive dynamics to confront them. The message should be clear: “Yes, you must keep your competence, but in addition, we need your intelligence, your practical ability to navigate the chaotic world.” Three years ago a vice-president in Silicon Valley told his employees: “Now, the unknown is your field of responsibility.” This comment applies to new discoveries, but it should also be considered as the fundamental mindset in crisis handling and preparation.

We are used to considering that our leaders are advised by technical specialists who bring the best expertise, clarifying uncertainty and prescribing the few remaining options. The point now is to establish a group of experts in the unknown who, from the very start, have to work on four questions: What is the essence of the problem? What are the triggers? Who are the actors? And last but not least, what could be the few dynamics in crisis management?

Which questions did we forget to ask? What are the hidden challenges, the invisible dark matter and intractable dark dynamics?