The RRF is a group that’s task is to help the Chief Executive (CE) level grasp and in training exercises. The conclusions of this incident, as the RRF underlined, was for EDF to rise above a simple ‘name and blame’ response and to instead focus on leadership and crisis resolution empowerment. In December 2007, a very diverse simulation exercise was held by EDF, based on the scenario of a breakdown in information systems. The ‘top war’ was very diverse: it was unclear whether the event was due to a national terrorist attack or merely to a localized disruption. This raised a serious challenge for the CE level, as the appropriate posture would differ dramatically depending on how the situation was interpreted. The RRF proved invaluable in helping the upper echelon make sense of the resulting ‘fuzzy war’.

It was essential to weigh both possibilities very carefully: no ready-made tool kit could provide a technical answer, or determine the appropriate communication strategy. The RRF was the first to understand that the situation was not a case of a global terror, but was owing to insufficient procedures at a single site – a conclusion which called for a specific communication strategy. In December 2007, a second large-scale exercise was organised, involving, this time, a (fictional) nuclear incident. EDF had, of course, trained on many nuclear-related scenarios in the past, but the RRF had become an ‘essential’ tool, not only useful, but truly essential for upper-echelon leaders. The ambition is not, or cannot be, to put our finger on the magic formula, but – more modestly and more responsibly – to create conditions and avenues for improvement. The point is not to appear successful, but to be wise.

Unfortunately, official reports often do little more than string together a litany of recommendations that call for more of the same. Such conventional thinking is not the way to confront emerging risks and crises.

One year on, the RRF has matured into more than just a promising concept. The learning curve has been steep, and the practicalities of this innovation have been refined. But the RRF is much more than an organisational success story. More to the point, it has shown itself to be a seminal concept in approaching the terra incognita that are modern crises. The RRF arguably holds a crucial answer to the question raised by the US House of Representatives in its report on Hurricane Katrina, namely: ‘Why did we seem to be continuously one disaster behind?’ It lays the groundwork for a new culture, new operational ‘grammars’, and – last but not least – new networking capabilities when the name of the game is partnership, collective innovation and resilience. The new cartography of risk and crises that we are called upon to develop requires new biases and charting instruments: the RRF is a good place to start.
Therefore, a new special training programme was created which combines both teaching (lessons drawn from recent on-site case studies at worldwide level), and simulations confronting very difficult and ‘strange’ scenarios.

The second imperative is that each team working in the crisis centre should be given specific preparation to improve its capacity to interact with the RRF. A programme is now underway creating an operational tool-kit on unthinkable crises, or even conventional crises that suddenly mutate into inconceivable events. A DVD will be available by this March, combining basic texts, slides, and short videos aimed at heightening the viewer’s awareness of these issues and to prod them to modify their approaches.

In addition, specific sessions for each group (operations, communication and leadership) should be held to cultivate the necessary change in dynamics.

The key outcome, to date, has been a near-universal acknowledgement that critical improvements are required. Even the best practices developed over the last decades must be revisited – and all agree that the RRF can help this happen.

Today’s crises tend to overwhelm traditional crisis management mechanisms and organisational frameworks. In so doing, they trigger ‘stun effects’, as even trusted best practice becomes outmoded. In this context, it is crucial that teams and individuals in charge feel that their organisation includes a group of people devoted to precisely addressing such impossible challenges, and available to help where and when needed – all the while trusting that their own role is not undermined in the process.

PILLAR OF STRENGTH

Real life incidents and exercises have shown that the RRF can genuinely become a pillar of strength around which an organisation can coalesce. The RRF can benefit all. On a global scale, it can help an entire organisation develop strength, coherence, stability, and international – have now expressed their interest in the RRF, fully aware that this is not enough, that a "terra incognita" somehow lies beyond old and outmoded approaches.

The RRF is a gateway into this unknown area, a new instrument to begin charting emerging risks and crises, and the appropriate responses. This is because it focuses on questions, on creativity, rather than on ready-made answers. It calls for, and elicits, the sharing of questions, intuitions, and open-minded approaches. It concentrates on flagging specific ways out, not on the absurd ambition to develop global, final answers. Those are no longer attainable – if they ever were – in today’s chaotic environment.

This capacity to provide a pillar of strength that doubles up as a signpost explains why so many officials – private and public, French and international – have now expressed their interest in the RRF, fully aware that it is more than a just another tool, another best practice. With increasing frequency, many have asked to come and see the RRF at work during simulation exercises for themselves.

The RRF has also proven to be a stimulus for high-level meetings on an international scale, through its attractiveness as a promising new avenue to grasping and confronting emerging issues of global import. It was one of the focal points of a seminar held by the Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Transatlantic Relations in Washington, in March 2007, and again during the international seminar on emerging crises convened by Morocco’s government in Casablanca in May of that year. The RRF initiative is also the cornerstone of another recently launched initiative with critical operators (from the banking, transportation, telecommunication and water sectors) in France, with the aim of setting up a European partnership to tackle the most difficult issues related to crisis management in a chaotic world.

In a nutshell, the RRF has shown itself to be much more than the organisational add-on to crisis cells that had initially been envisioned. It is, in fact, a rare lifeline in today’s emerging environment of risks and crises. In this sense, it has undoubtedly gone far beyond expectations. It now behoves us to look forward and build upon this cornerstone. In the authors’ opinion, the best means to do so is to open new avenues for co-operation, be it with academia, experts, or leaders, with the crucial support of EDF.

This article will have fulfilled its objective if it brings us any closer to this goal.

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