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contents

News	4	Lawyers and communicators together	28
Comment		Conflict between legal and communication advice is still a real problem, says Tony Jaques	
Environment, economy and peace	8	Systems and people	30
Serge Stroobants and Lea Perekrests explain that ecological crises are significant threats to international stability		David Wales says contemporary crises models are fundamentally unsuited to future needs	
Unveiling the systemic nature of risk	12	Crises & urban areas	
We can learn early lessons to assist a green and sustainable recovery from the Covid-19 crisis, according to Rosalind Cook and Sebastien Penzini		From refugee to responder	34
Leadership & innovation		Alistair Harris describes how the Palestinian Civil Defence in Lebanon has been transformational for young refugees	
Terra Incognita: Vision and action	14	Complex urban environments: Beirut	36
Today's global situation demands that we lay to rest our pre-established crisis visions and move towards creative and flexible leadership, say Emily Hough, Patrick Lagadec and Matthieu Langlois		Albrecht Beck, Marc Arnold and Andra Covaciu argue that a focus on operational governance remains crucial in adopting the resilient cities concept	
The danger of too many fresh eyes	18	Disaster recovery by design	38
Crisis leadership demands acknowledgment of knowledge limitations and humility in taking advice from those paid to know the subject. As crisis leaders, do we listen to our people?		Idrees Rasouli outlines why he is setting up the Institute for Post Disaster Recovery	
Kaleidoscopic learning	20	Response & security	
Most of us prefer to be optimistic rather than look at the downsides. But we can combine positive and negative thinking towards positive action, says Gareth Byatt		Deliberate mass casualty incidents	40
Leadership, AI and the collective brain	24	There is a multiplicity of medical care protocols, writes Juan José Pajuelo, but optimal co-ordination among first responders remains elusive	
Artificial intelligence and data centres are causing social transformations that are changing our world. Jean-Jacques Martin asks what this means for leaders		Technology to rebuild communities	44
Leadership powers	26	Pix4D collaborates explores a use case in California following this year's devastating wildfires	
Randall Collins explores how different bases of power relating to leadership apply to emergency managers		Enhancing rural safety and security	46
Leadership vision p14		Charles L Werner shares the success stories of the Lincolnshire Police drone programme	
		Keeping an eye out for deception	48
		Andrew Staniforth explores the need to review and reform the radicalisation risk management process	

Leadership vision p14



Ann Kiernan

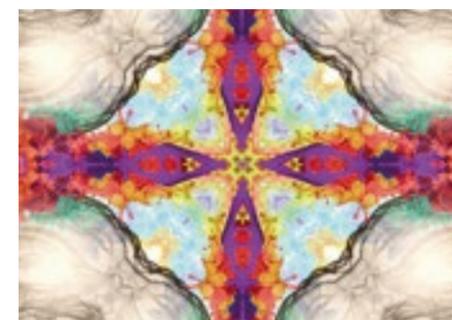
Too many fresh eyes? p18



Lovelyn Medina | 123rf

Embassies and security	52	Medically fragile & socially vulnerable	78
Embassies, consulates and diplomatic missions are a desirable target for terrorists, militants or mobs, writes Lina Kolesnikova		Marcus T Coleman and Sarah Baker provide insights to help officials and community leaders lead their communities through crises	
Covid-19 crisis analysis		Lockdowns and lives lost	80
Pandemics and national insecurity	54	Lyndon Bird presents an objective examination of the rationality of government policies and decisions around Covid-19	
Confusion, disparate policies and indecision contribute to collective denial and reluctance to give up freedoms, says Jennifer Hesterman		'Hidden' threats	82
Private security services	58	Andy Blackwell explores hidden and insider threats to civil aviation and provides guidance on the actions organisations can take to protect themselves and safeguard their people, assets and reputation	
In times of crisis private security services are essential, but they need both support and recognition, notes Catherine Piana		Pandemic psychosocial problems	86
Covid-19: Gaza	60	Todd Benham, Michelangelo Bortolin and Gregory Ciottono say it is imperative to address the psychosocial effects of Covid-19	
Azzam Abuhabib, Samer Abuzerr and Said Abu Aita look at responses in the Gaza Strip		Connecting with young people	88
No breathing room	64	Attempts to encourage young people to change their behaviour during the pandemic show that more needs to be done to connect with them, observes Amanda Coleman	
Covid-19 and Pakistan's smog problem have devastating parallels – and they're about to collide, warns Luavut Zahid		Take a deep breath	90
Covid-19: India	66	Lyzi G Cota offers techniques that can help people who are accumulating signs of anxiety, depression, PTSD and even suicidal behaviour	
Peter Patel reviews the pandemic management and challenges faced by this diverse and enigmatic country		Regulars	
Global risk perception	72	Events	94
Ali Malvern questions whether governments are considering how society behaves when setting strategy and managing their response		Mary Robinson, Chair of the Elders, and Asahi Pompey of the Goldman Sachs Foundation provide some enlightening insights ahead of the next World Humanitarian Forum event	
The unrelenting challenge	74	Frontline	98
Jacqui Semple explores how resilience professionals can find support to help prepare for the next stages of the pandemic		Tamer Khatib of the Palestinian Civil Defence in a refugee camp in Lebanon tells Claire Sanders how the scheme is a force for good	
Survive and thrive	76		
Flexibility, agility and inventiveness shown by organisations should provide the confidence needed for recovery, advises Mike O'Neill			

Kaleidoscopic learning p20



Sergey Nivens | 123rf | Chris Pettican

Handling the next waves? p74



Maxim Usik | Ikon Images

Cover story: A year of cascading, complex crises
Cover image: Miles Cole

comment

This edition's front cover depicts some of the events that have occurred in 2020, which has most certainly been one of the most challenging and tumultuous years any of us will have experienced. We may be overworking the Pandora's box (or jar) analogy, but these last 12 months truly exemplify the myth of 'great and unexpected troubles'. Of course, many of these had been foreseen, or were heralded by clear precursors and signs.



But unheeded warnings notwithstanding, these events have certainly combined to strain individual, professional, community, business, national and international resilience as never before.

Twelve months ago, CRJ's front cover warned leaders that: "All eyes are on you." In today's landscape of repeated shockwaves, cascading crises and, "instant systemic contamination that piles up challenges on multiple fronts," leadership across all disciplines – political, business, governance and institutional – is being scrutinised as never before. Sadly, reactions and responses to the pandemic have been, to put it politely, erratic in many areas.

Worryingly, we know that more shocks are on the way – wishful thinking will not magically sweep away the harsh onslaught of climate-related events. The "toxic polarisation, anti-scientific mindsets and retreats into alternative realities" mentioned on p14 are symptoms, not the cause of today's lack of coherence and solidarity in the face of global threats.

Yet, as with Pandora's box, there are glimmers of hope. Human innovation, creativity, business and science have combined to develop vaccines and deliver other life-saving products and services in record time. Stories of self-sacrifice, dedication and love abound. People are still caring for others.

All of us in society, but particularly our leaders and those responsible for the safety and security of communities, must not let the next wave of crises come to pass in a wilful paroxysm of inattentive blindness.

And here's hoping that 'deceptive expectation', which is the alternative interpretation of 'hope' in the Pandora myth, does not hold true.

Leadership in Terra Incognita: Vision and action

It is a sad but inescapable fact: today's global situation demands that we lay to rest our previous, established and comforting crisis visions and navigation. We must move into the new paradigm, with creative and flexible leadership, say **Emily Hough, Patrick Lagadec** and **Matthieu Langlois**

The Covid-19 crisis is akin to a period of mourning. Here lie our best practices and lessons learned. Mapping, procedures, techniques, human factors, co-ordination, communication, training, exercises... all were clear, practised and ready-to-use. Now, our previous experience, assumptions and expectations are teetering on the brink of chaos, as the many disordered national and local responses to Covid-19 have revealed.

But while we are mourning, we must not forget our past practices. Excellence must still be secured and developed. Equally though, everything must be revisited and this throws it all into the unknown, starting with the crisis leader. The traditional role of managers has been superseded by the need for *discoverers*, and we need such pioneering people now more than ever.

Let's home in on how the bedrock of our emergency-crisis philosophy has been shattered.

Previously, we planned with the 'accident' in mind – a specific, isolated, limited and rare failure in a 'normal' world. Today, we are experiencing a vortex that is engulfing our capacities with off-scale megashocks, low to high probability cataclysmic events and instant systemic contamination that pile up challenges on multiple fronts



– tight coupling is the new normal. Even worse, the whole context is now prone to further crises erupting, owing to multiple additional factors such as the degradation of safety practices, economic tensions, terrorism and more.

The social bedrock is weakening dangerously, leading to a loss of credibility and trust, the disintegration of social contracts, growing collective public distress and the sense of a vanishing future, particularly when it

comes to shocks such as climate upheaval or Covid-19. All of this is triggering a flight towards anti-scientific mindsets and alternate realities, magnified by a torrent of polarisation on social networks. It therefore appears that rationality, science and democracy are also on the brink.

Disappointingly, many leaders are surfing these rogue waves, trying to secure or obtain power through appalling manifestations of chaotic moves, false promises,

the mockery of science and irresponsible conduct.

So, where does this leave leadership?

Even if the usual 'must dos' are still valid – we must have instant and clear leadership that can mobilise resources, co-ordinate organisations, communicate rapidly, honestly and supportively – today's uncharted territories call for additional and different sets of visions and capacities.

Leaders in charge – whether of public, private or third

Images:
Ann Kiernan

sector organisations – must demonstrate their ability to step back and reflect. This is a far more decisive and positive skill than just rushing onto television and social networks to comment upon or describe what is happening, or surfing the wave of collective emotion. The rolling news media shares the blame – it sometimes seems that we live in an era of the ultracrepidarian.

Making sense in a chaotic world is the key, but this demands the energy and courage to ask new questions, to clarify the emerging challenges at stake, to suggest new landmarks and offer bold perspectives so as to shape new routes. In other words, when the system is thrown into the unknown, the leader's central task is to restore some perspectives, landmarks and even some certainty in an ocean of unpredictability.

Leaders must engage decisively with chaotic reality and its operational quagmire but must simultaneously remain open and share the tasks inherent in responding to these challenges. In a systemic, hypercomplex and mutating context, no one should expect to be the central and unique focus point – the distribution of expertise, questions, perspectives, dynamics and operations has to be rapid and wide.

Obviously, sharing does not mean shying away

unfamiliar and dark pathways with their fingertips.

We should be mindful of the words of Bertolt Brecht in the *Life of Galileo*: “The aim of science is not to open the door to infinite wisdom, but to set a limit to infinite error.”

Leaders must listen to scientific experts, but in a different way. They need to ask all experts a seminal question about the *limits* of their expertise. Leaders must also emphasise that errors are inevitable – on every front – but that these errors will be corrected, thanks to everyone's feedback.

Leadership must not focus on finding silver bullets and leaders will have to envision, construct and implement a combination of creative impulses. The goal is not to find ‘the’ overarching and magical solution, but to navigate creatively within black holes amid huge disorder, where traditional maps have been lost, sensemaking is difficult and the horizons are shrouded or invisible. The message should be less about reassurance, more about demonstrating complete personal engagement, deep listening and very open and confident sharing. Opening the way forward should be a collective endeavour, anchored upon intelligence, creativity and trust.

In crisis management, much work goes in to helping prepare those in charge, and these efforts must be sustained. But a lot more is required if we are to face the rapidly emerging challenges on the agenda.

One motto in particular sums up what any leader must bear in mind: “Barriers in the mind, fiasco on the ground.” People must be prepared to accept and face the unknown and the chaotic. Usually, education and training prepare us to grasp the risk and crisis scenarios that need to be brought under control, to learn the conventional answers, the plans at hand, the organisational designs and the communication essentials... Crisis exercises tend to focus on mastering the key principles, and they present typical scenarios. A shift is required – from educating people in the best answers in order to avoid surprise, to being prepared to be surprised, as Todd LaPorte suggests. They must be ready to confront the unknown. This leap is drastic, but crucial.

Many leaders are prepared to take the weight of a crisis on their shoulders, but another leap is necessary – a willingness to share the burden with others, especially the private sector, elected officials, NGOs and citizens, without abrogating their own responsibility.

This means cultural gaps have to be crossed and cleared, presenting an acute challenge that involves much more than merely conjuring up new organisational designs or lists of procedures.

We therefore propose a series of specific moves.

At the centre of government, emergencies have traditionally been viewed as secondary priorities, best left to those technical agencies in charge of relatively rare events with no real national consequences. But our crises are now vital challenges and must be approached on those terms. Addressing the consequences of global destabilisation creatively is a matter of national survival. As such, it must find its rightful place on the political agenda and within government organisations.

In terms of specific preparations, it is usually second ranked officials who are trained for crisis events. Now, it is urgent to train the highest levels of personnel within the public sector, including heads of state and government, ministers, key circles in charge of crises,

regional officials and the heads of key agencies. This also holds true for the private sector and the NGO constellation. The aim is not to give top officials typical presentations of already-known organisational designs and procedures, but to explore the unknown and prepare them for the conditions of leadership when conventional bearings are lost – where there are no previously-learned answers that can be applied.

It is equally important to train experts to help prepare them to confront situations where the unknown dominates, the stakes are vital for a nation and where they are being asked to provide their expertise in the most fatiguing and protracted situations.

Crises have become so complex and unreadable that it will become increasingly difficult to work without a process such as Rapid Reflection Forces (RRFs), the concept of which has been covered previously in the *Crisis Response Journal*. RRFs comprise a small group of people, selected for their mental agility, modesty, flexible expertise and ability to work in the dark, who are prepared through tough processes to focus on four key questions:

- What is the essence of the problem?
- What are the key pitfalls to avoid, both immediately and in the long run?
- What is the map of actors to be considered? And last, but not least,
- What kind of combination of initiatives can we offer leadership?

Again, such a leap cannot be underestimated; we are used to focusing on answers, but now must work on the questions. And the first task is inevitable: which questions have been overlooked, are unseen – or even worse, are psychologically impossible to bear?

New deals with society at large, starting with citizens, are imperative. In a volatile and chaotic world, a large number of responses will be triggered and invented by a wide spectrum of stakeholders. Anticipation during crises involves accepting the fact that mistakes will happen, procedures will be subject to perpetual reinvention and, of course, the focus should not be purely upon answers, but on a constant process of understanding. That dynamic is certainly difficult for central governments and agencies to grasp, but it will be a crucial asset. It is necessary to invent, stimulate and magnify initiatives coming from the ground; these should not be treated as marginal assets, but as vital resources.

From an international perspective, the Covid-19 experience illustrates how little is being done at a global level to enable prompt and intelligent co-operation. Here too, preparations are needed, and these should be far from the usual presentations of what is already known. The focus must be on how so many can work on such a black hole, and this requires genuine global co-operation.

A tiny example of what can be achieved is illustrated by a workshop organised by the Paris Fire Brigade in June 2018 on ‘Thinking differently’. Officials from New York, Singapore, Tokyo and Harvard University came together to share their questions and perspectives. The most important aspect of the event was not so much the outcome, but the process: people with first class experience and knowledge were happy to share, not their lessons and assurances, but their best questions and emerging ideas for opening unknown pathways.

Nor should human resources be neglected.

Organisations tend to select and promote conventional people who can reassure leadership by respecting their rules and visions. The new world we are experiencing calls for a shift in such dynamics: we need creative people in difficult times. In other words, we need cognitive diversity (CRJ 15:1).

If such creative minds – or those who don't fit neatly into the organisation's accepted boundaries, vision or ethos – have been biologically expelled, the battle will be lost, owing to a lack of people who are in tune with a turbulent world. Crisis leaders should not hire staff based on their paper qualifications or experience or their preparedness to use off-the-shelf answers,

When the system is thrown into the unknown, the leader's central role will be to restore some perspectives, landmarks and even some certainty in an ocean of unpredictability

rather on their capability to step back and view the whole and their ability to avoid the tunnel effect.

And finally, we come to research. Here, time is of the essence. We are used to focusing on the best lessons gleaned from past events and documenting cases that illustrate those known lessons. Today's crises compel us to focus on the most creative experiences, moves and initiatives. New networks have to be developed, linking people in countries and around the world who are already prepared to navigate the unknown and have tested previously unheard-of initiatives.

In his book on the Spanish Flu John Barry writes: “Shortly before the Great War began, the men who wanted to transform American medicine succeeded. They created a system that could produce people capable of thinking in a new way, capable of challenging the natural order.” Leaders, scientists, commentators and citizens have to meet a similar challenge today. It is essential that we open up new visions and decisive action to respond to the present challenge, not only on the front line of Covid-19, but on other fronts as well, because risks and crises have migrated into another universe. The immediate need, however, is clear: we must do everything we can to avoid ‘Dying in a Leadership Vacuum’. 

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from tasks; the leader must not abandon his or her own responsibilities. Finding the right balance is difficult, but such instability is likely to become normal, and remain so for some time to come. Leadership will have to set the tone and the trial-and-error process amid an atmosphere of error and doubt.

Some tough and unusual paradigm shifts therefore have to be accepted and tamed. Far from pretending that they have the knowledge and expertise, the plans and the power, leaders must accept and clarify a couple of crucial facts, namely that they – and everybody else – will struggle with the unknown; experts will need to feel their way through

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