

Why exercise your disaster response

"The safety policy and procedures were in place: the practice was deficient." - extract from Lord Cullen's report into the Piper Alpha disaster

Introduction

This short document is relevant to Chief Executives and managers from all organisations, including local and central government departments, whether delivering a service or goods and whether in private or public ownership or within the voluntary sector. All organisations are at some form of risk from the hazards of everyday living. These hazards are either natural in origin, such as those arising from extreme weather conditions, flooding or drought, or are man made which includes fire, collision, falling objects, explosion or pollution, or some other consequence of personal, organisational or technological failure.

If the organisation is to recover and continue to provide satisfactory goods and services to its customers or the community it must develop contingency plans; indeed in many areas there is a legal requirement to do so. The only way to ensure that these plans can effectively be implemented is to test them in regular exercises to assess the validity of the arrangements and then to update the plans in the light of experience.

What is an exercise?

Exercises are an important management tool for informing and motivating personnel and giving confidence to those who may be required to respond in a crisis. They provide the only comprehensive way of realistically evaluating contingency plans. They bring together those who may be involved with responding to an incident and they allow scrutiny of their responses under controlled conditions. Thus exercises should reflect reality as far as is practicable. They can establish and reinforce relationships between those taking part, often under stressful conditions. They bring people from different areas together to work as a team, to realise clear goals and to get to know and respect each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Benefits of exercising

The clear benefits of exercising for any organisation are:

1. Significant increase in the likelihood of the organisation or business surviving a disaster, whatever its cause.
2. Minimising interruption to business operation or service provision.
3. Preservation and enhancement of reputation.
4. Minimising the impact of disaster on the community and environment.
5. Minimising the social, political, legal and financial consequences of disaster.
6. Identifying an organisation's areas of vulnerability.

7. Training those who may be involved with responding to an emergency.

The exercise programme

The support and commitment of senior management is crucial to the success of the exercise programme. Exercises must not be seen in isolation but rather as part of a programme of learning and validating plans. Exercises should meet their aims and objectives in the most appropriate manner. Exercises need not necessarily be major undertakings in size, duration or involvement, but good exercises, whatever their format, can take a considerable amount of preparation and follow up assessment.

Types of exercise

There are basically three types of exercise, although there are variations on the theme of each of them. The choice of the appropriate exercise is important; it should provide the most cost effective way of achieving its aim and objectives. The three main types are seminar, table top and live exercises.

Seminar exercises are generally low cost activities and are designed to inform participants about the organisation and the procedures which would be used to respond to an incident. Those involved can be either new to the job or established personnel. This type of event will bring staff together in order to inform them of current developments and thinking. These events may take the form of lectures or panel discussions and are primarily designed to focus on one particular aspect of the response. The emphasis of this type of exercise is on problem identification and solution finding rather than decision making.

Table top exercises are a very cost-effective and efficient method of testing plans, procedures and people. They provide the few players involved with an excellent opportunity to interact with and understand the roles and responsibilities of the other agencies taking part. They can engage players imaginatively and generate high levels of realism. Participants will get to know the people with whom they may be working in responding to an emergency. Those who have worked together and know each other will provide a much more effective response than those who come together for the first time when a disaster occurs.

Live exercises range from a small scale test of one component of the response, like evacuation, through to a full scale test of the whole organisation to an incident. Live exercises provide the best means of confirming the satisfactory operation of emergency communications, and the use of 'casualties' can add to the realism. Live exercises provide the only means for fully testing the crucial arrangements for handling the media.

The media

Following a disaster certain sections of the media can and will attack any organisation or individual they regard as culpable. They will demand instant

information and details, and interviews with experts, survivors and the distressed. They will strive to pin the blame on someone and will focus intensively on the human elements of the story. However, by understanding the media's needs, preparing a proper strategy in association with them and testing it during exercises, the senior managers' and organisations' chances of their contributions being accurately reflected are greatly enhanced.

Post exercise evaluation

Whatever type of exercise is chosen it is important to record and evaluate the event. Provision of a succinct report of successes and failures to which management can refer is a vital part of the overall learning process. In the event of a disaster previous exercise reports demonstrate to the community, and any subsequent formal enquiry, the commitment of the organisation to the safety of people and its surroundings.

The next step

It is every manager's ultimate responsibility to demonstrate that procedures are in place which will ensure that, in the event of any incident, the organisation will respond effectively, survive and continue to be welcome within the community. Preparation of contingency plans and verification of their efficacy are fundamental to achieving this objective.

Coda

"I thought they were marvellous. They seemed to restore order and provide help. The whole organisation seemed to be very smooth and efficient." - eye-witness quoted by Anthony Hidden QC in his report following the Clapham Junction rail disaster.