

Building Capacity for Enhanced Societal Security through Crisis Management Training¹

Abstract:

What can crisis management training provide?

Societal security is an emerging concept developed from the legacy of the total defence system that was employed by the Nordic countries and other European nations during the cold war.

Societal security is an all-hazards *plus* approach for managing severe strains on society that go beyond everyday “normal accidents” in peacetime. A severe strain on society can be defined as a situation that arises suddenly with little warning, which threatens citizens’ life, fundamental societal functions and values and demands swift and coordinated consequence management.¹ Such events can in a worst-case scenario, lead to a breakdown of the rule of law and other institutions that guard the principles of democracy. An integral part is a strong emphasis on preparedness of which training is a key instrument.

Crises present decision-makers with critical choices; poor decisions may yield severe consequences in terms of loss of life, health, financial values and credibility. The complexity, urgency, uncertainty, and unpredictability of crises and their consequences demand greater organizational and mental preparedness for decision-makers, to manage crises effectively and legitimately.

Building preparedness and improving societal capacity for crisis management needs to be a balanced effort where resources are invested in both technical and human infrastructure. Too heavy reliance on technical systems and/or hasty organizational reform may only offer a false sense of safety and security. People-- *human infrastructure*-- will make and implement critical decisions, and therefore they need high-quality, continuous, training.

This paper will discuss training of generic crisis decision-making skills for public leaders and business executives working on a strategic level.

¹ This paper brings together the lesson learned about best training practices acquired during our tenures at Crismart (Center for Crisis Management Research and Training) at the Swedish National Defence College. Bengt Sundelius was the founding Director and Jesper Grönvall was the co-director of Training before moving to their current positions. More information on Crismart can be found at www.crismart.org

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a wide range of crises where decision-makers had to make critical decisions to protect and safeguard human life, preserve and maintain political, economic and social structures; and uphold values such as the freedom of movement and freedom of the press. The terror attacks of 9/11/01 against the US homeland, as well as attacks in London, Madrid, Beslan, and Bali painfully exposed vulnerabilities to international terrorism. The cascading effects of power outages in North America and Europe in 2003 displayed the dependency on tightly coupled critical infrastructure systems within and between countries. The tsunami in South-East Asia in 2004 showed the power of natural disasters where a local disaster scene often has transnational consequences. The SARS virus in 2003, provided an example of the formidable speed a disease can spread around the globe. The anthrax attacks in the US in 2001 and the following hoaxes around the world showed how easy it was to instill fear in a society. The SoBig.F computer virus in 2003 caused havoc when it raced through global computer networks and caused millions of dollars in losses.

These events are not historic irregularities; crises are part of our open, complex and interconnected societies. As crises tend to spill over jurisdictional, sectoral and geographical borders splendid isolation will not be a possible strategy for any nation. The capacity for prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery needs to be high within and between nations. The public will hold public leaders accountable for their performance in such high-stakes situations. Crisis management capacity is emerging as an expected criteria for modern good governance.

*“Being an effective crisis manager is rarely at the top of the mental checklists that voters use to evaluate candidates for high office, but many political executive will find out during the course of their tenure that it is a crucial quality they must possess if that want to stay in office and remain effective”.*²

It has also been shown in the corporate domain that effective decision-making is rewarded with higher shareholder value after a well-managed crisis.³ An investment in crisis management capacity can insure the protection and even enhancement of the brand name.

It is impossible to predict the exact nature and course of future crises, but it is possible to provide decision-makers with better skill-sets to manage crises more effectively and more legitimately through crisis management education and training.

What is a crisis?

Many definitions of crises are being used. The definition of crisis in this paper highlights three criteria, “A crisis is a situation in which the central decision-makers interpret the situation as [there is]...”,

- A **threat** to core values, e.g. protection of human lives, preserving and maintaining political, economic and social structures, up-holding basic principles of society such as freedom of movement.
- Limited **time** is available. The events in combination with an increased pressure from the media, the citizens and other actors limit the amount of time that is available. There is a need to make critical decisions, and that there is no time for politics, business or research ‘as usual,’ with a wait and see attitude.
- The situation is cloaked in **uncertainty**. There is often a lack of information or a surplus of information which makes it hard to determine what is happening, what should be done, who should be involved etc.⁴

Sitting in the hot seat of crises often creates high stress levels for decision-makers. Up to a certain degree stress often have positive effects, as it heightens awareness, but if prolonged it can deteriorate the quality of the decision-making process. It can also lead to psychological effects such as wishful thinking and groupthink, all with a negative effect on decision-making. What adds to a high stress level is the knowledge that the consequence of a decision (or non-decision) is higher than during “normal” times. The media, other stakeholders, and the public will observe what actions are taken or not taken.

Crises bring occasions for decisions, often with dilemmas that challenge the decision-maker. Some of these dilemmas will be tragic choices, thorny decisions that offer a choice, as a Swedish saying goes, “between plague and cholera.” One example is on 9/11 when the US president and his advisors had to wrestle with the decision to shoot down any other hijacked

commercial airliners. Another example can be illustrated by the need to choose who would receive limited resources, which arose with the unexpected flu vaccine shortage in the US in 2004. Decision-makers will need to be prepared for the burden of making critical decisions.

However, if investments are made to prepare decision-makers through training, a crisis can serve as an opportunity. If prepared, an organization can emerge from challenging situation with an intact or a higher degree of perceived legitimacy and credibility. As a crisis is often an opportunity for reform and change, the organization that is prepared can be a *driver* of that change, rather than being in a position to merely *experience* change.

Rehearsal for the future

Crisis management is a difficult task. Decision-makers need to be prepared for unknown problems with unforeseen consequences. Events often happen unexpectedly. If decision-makers are not mentally and organizationally prepared through previous experience (where lessons have been learned and not only observed) and/or education and training it may turn out to be more of chaos management rather than crisis management. The kind of training that will be discussed in this paper is for generic crisis decision-making skills aimed at decision-makers primarily on a strategic level.

In contrast to more procedural crisis decision-making education (e.g. first responders learn and practice steps to extinguish a certain type of fire or for medical personnel to execute complicated medical procedures), crises at a more strategic level seldom follow a predetermined scheme. Such crises demand outside-the-box decision-making, i.e. creative and flexible decision-making. It requires more than procedural knowledge, where one step follows after another. For the most part there will not be “one” correct solution to an unfolding event.

There is a need to accomplish a shift in thinking about training, especially at the senior strategic level as they will have central roles in managing a crisis. A culture of systematic and continual education and training should be present at all levels in an organization. A

commitment from the strategic level sends a strong message within an organization that education and training is important and valued. Inspiration should be taken from the military and first-responder communities such as the fire services and police organizations that traditionally have a more developed and institutionalized culture of training.

Historically it has been difficult to involve top leadership in taking part in training activities. Reasons could be an underestimation of its importance or a fear of exposing themselves in front of their peers and staff. Decision-makers need to be aware that-- new technologies come into play; new threats emerge, legislation changes; organizations die, reorganize, or are born; or new research knowledge becomes available.

Training critical decision-making skills

What may work under “normal” conditions will not be sufficient in crises marked by complexity, urgency, uncertainty, and unpredictability. Public leaders and company executives are not confronted by crises frequently; some may not even encounter one in their whole career. However, it is necessary to take steps before decision-makers are thrown into the hot seat of acute and reactive crisis management.

Critical decision-making skills can be provided by or enhanced through education and training modules.⁵ The purpose can for example be to gain experience of crisis management in general or of a particular situation that occurs with such low frequency that decision-making skills do not exist. It is especially vital that training involves a high degree of psychological fidelity so that decision-makers can experience stress. This has been found to be more important than physical fidelity in a training simulation. By engaging in training processes there will be opportunities to try and evaluate different strategies and decision-making styles in “safe” and “forgiving” environments. Eventual mistakes cause no real-world consequences and can be eye-opening and valuable lessons for the future.

Several education and training tools that can be used to build skill-sets;

- Lectures on general crisis decision-making theory and principles
- Presentations and analyses of crisis management cases

- Case exercises
- Simulation exercises
- Computer-based tools/educational (serious) games

The traditional way of transferring knowledge is through lectures, which can provide generic knowledge and will give a framework to better understand the idiosyncrasies and commonalities of crises. Researchers and practitioners have valuable insights. The scientific communities' research-based knowledge combined with practitioners' real-world experience usually provides a very fruitful combination. A more interactive educational and training method is case-exercises. These include a scenario based on real or fictive event, and are a very useful method of transferring knowledge. The most interactive and ambitious format is to construct and implement an interactive simulation where the organization, in whole or in part, is involved.

A new and potentially useful tool for teaching crisis decision-making can be computer-based educational (serious) games. These have been used in more procedural training, or at least more highly specialized and narrow expertise areas, e.g. flight simulators and medical training tools. But the potential of educational computer games should be explored further as they offer several interesting possibilities for transferring decision-making skills as a complement to other modules mentioned above. This tool should also be useful for providing just-in-time-training that can be delivered irrespective of geographical proximity, available time frame, and at low cost. The digital promise seems to hold many benefits for crisis management education and training methods.

Although several of these modules of education and training can be seen as stand-alone, it is preferable that all or a good number of modules are included in a continuous education and training program. Participants are often at a different stage of knowledge, naturally influenced by previous education, training, and experience. To improve the ground for learning, training activities should be preceded by educational lectures and/or seminars to place all participants at a level playing field. By doing so it will facilitate establishing a common goal and commitment to learning where all participants feel that they can contribute to an exercise without having to camouflage their eventual factual or emotional

uncertainties. Motivation to engage and commit to do well has been found to be of vital importance to create grounds for learning.⁶

Benefits of crisis management training

There are numerous benefits of utilizing different education and training tools, as practice makes perfect.

1. **Activities can contribute to awareness.** Although it will not be possible to know exactly what future crises will bring, an awareness of generic vulnerabilities and dilemmas of crisis decision-making is important. Which are the dilemmas, the tragic choices that can emerge during a crisis management process?

2. **Acquiring skills:** Skills that are central to crisis decision-making can be acquired or enhanced through education and training. For example; how can group dynamics be kept positive; leadership skills; how can decisions be made and communicated; how can information be collected, analyzed, and distributed; how can experts be used in the decision-making process; and how can communication be established with the media and other stakeholders.

3. **Horizon scanning:** It can be used for horizon scanning to have updated threat assessments and to be aware of possible future challenges. Scenarios do have an expiration date. Rules and regulations and existing networks and relations to other actors (both within and outside the organization change constantly. It is imperative to have innovative, multiple-source threat assessments to prepare for and understand future risks. What are the trends, what are the recent events that have happened in the sector nationally and internationally and what implications does that bring forward for the ability to manage crises. There is truth in the logic that your neighbor's history can be your future. Research based knowledge should be used to provide the real-life dilemmas and facts that is the nuts and bolts of a good scenario. It also serves the purpose of making educational and training experiences engaging by being realistic and credible. Naturally scenarios should include a sprinkle of imagination, as future crises will most likely contain unthought-of components and consequences.

4. Planning tool: activities can be used as a planning tool for a crisis plan. However, it should be stressed that it is not possible to plan for every aspect of a crisis, or contingency, as they by definition avoid an easy label. A too detailed plan can be deceptive as it can give a false sense of security. Plans rarely meet the demands of the real world. To quote Dwight D. Eisenhower, “In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable”.⁷ Decision-makers who need to be creative and flexible in a crisis may risk becoming static by following a detailed plan. However, by having crafted a generic plan including some guidelines it will ease the process of initiating crisis management activities and should help avoiding simplistic mistakes. The absolute key point is having a continuous planning process, as it will keep information fresh in the plan and in the heads of the decision-makers.

Having a plan but not practicing it on a regular basis will be deceptive. Discouraging statistics can be found in the AMA (American Management Association) 2004 survey on crisis management issues in that 61 % of its membership companies have a crisis plan, which is rather low figure, but only 44 % of them have conducted crisis drills or simulations.⁸ Another major survey from of 240 executives in companies all over the globe displayed that more than a third of the companies did not have a business continuity plan and few of the companies that had plans did actually practice their plans at any regular interval, which shows that there is room for improvement.⁹

5. Network Building: It has been shown that actors who normally have contact are those who work together in crises as well. Depending on the type of crisis, however, it may be necessary to expand the involved actors. Training occasions is one way to gather actors from across the spectrum to discuss generic crisis situations and touch upon vital questions such as who is responsible and who is in charge. Future crisis will demand other constellations of actors than today. An example of such a situation is in a bio-terrorism scenario, which demands involvement from the public health, law enforcement and the military communities. There is a need to facilitate an understanding of other communities’ cultures as well as their legislative reality, available resources, norms and working traditions to be able to

work effectively. Perhaps most importantly, *trust* between the involved decision-makers and their organizations should be in place before a crisis in real life.

It should be remembered that the underlying motive for performing training programs is to transfer and increase knowledge, to improve individual and organizational capacity by creating awareness of strengths and weaknesses. This is made possible by having clear learning objectives with education and training sessions, carefully crafting a realistic and credible scenario for exercises and having a carefully prepared de-briefing session. All stages are important but the de-briefing process is especially important. A skilled de-briefer can facilitate reflection among the participants on their experiences and draw lessons for the future. It is an excellent opportunity to drill deep into the decision-process; what happened, why, how can a better decision-process be structured, what changes need to be done to a structure, a plan or which skills are lacking or need to be improved. Such an exchange of lessons learned and the way forward can be enhanced by having seasoned practitioners, subject matter experts as well as academics to observe and offer their outside view of what to bring from a training experience.¹⁰

Mandatory training for enhanced crisis management performance

The crises of the future are likely to have consequences that spill over functional, jurisdictional and geographical borders. Vulnerabilities are amplified by globalization, interconnected technological systems, and an ever faster pace of innovation and evolution of science and technology. In essence what is happening is a merger of the domestic and the international arenas.

To prepare, stronger ties should be built prior to crises between relevant stakeholders, e.g. between the government and corporate, the civil and military, and the national and international divide. To be able to accomplish a coordinated inter-agency approach steps need to be taken to achieve a higher degree of interoperability in the mental, legal, organizational, and technical spheres. Training for coping with the unexpected and the consequential is obligatory for advancements in the military sphere, why not for leaders in public service and industry executives?

Training should not be compartmentalized to one sector or nation; cross-sectoral and international training should become more common than it is. There is a growing dependency between the public-private sectors; in the US it is estimated that the private sector owns or runs 85% of what is defined as critical infrastructure. The public and private domains need to realize that their decisions in each organization or company can have consequences in society. To be able to understand each other's opportunities and constraints it is important to engage in shared activities that can build and sustain necessary trust.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, coupled with the devastating collapse of the levees in New Orleans, displayed difficulties to offer and receive assistance between international partners. Most European Union countries quickly offered assistance to the U.S. to ease the plight of the people in the region, but the lack of experience of receiving assistance meant that there were no plans in place. Sweden had similar difficulties in 2005 when asking for international help after being hit by a devastating wind-storm.

Individual and organizational preparedness cannot be created in a day, but should instead be viewed as part of a continuous learning process. The various training tools utilized—lectures, seminars, case teaching, simulations and computer tools—can together create the kind of environment necessary for long-term learning. Hopefully then, the next crisis that arises will not only be managed differently, if need be, but better.

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