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*Emergency management*

**Shortcomings of the Canadian crisis response**

by Ron Kuban

Those of us who are involved in emergency management often talk about ‘emergencies’ or ‘disasters’ as if the terms are easily understood, commonly accepted, or consistent in their application. They are not.

We also assume that our emergency management effort is readily complied with by our operational partners, the public or the media. That, too, is not the case.

These shortcomings trigger reduced efficiencies and failures of the planning or response effort. Part of the problem is the language we use and the assumptions we embrace.

The success of crisis management in Canada is affected by a number of myths. One is the seduction of antiterrorism. While important, we have to realize that humanity has been plagued by acts of terror since earliest recorded times. We must also recognize that *emergency preparedness* in the western world has generally regressed since 9-11, due to the fixation on fighting terrorism.

Another myth relates to our seduction by technology, especially by IT. Technology, which is already tightly coupled and extremely vulnerable, may become less predictable or reliable in a crisis. To assume that current technology will work is a risky presumption.

The myth states that the management of crisis needs to be tightly structured and that bigger is better. We need go no further than the US Department of Homeland Security and the new Federal Emergency Management Agency, which proved to be lumbering behemoths in their response to recent hurricanes.

**Diagnosing the disease**

Emergencies are analogous to diseases, affecting individuals, family units, organizations, and communities. Some diseases (or emergencies) are self-induced; others are caused by age, deterioration, negligence, infection from others, and occasionally even through acts of malice. To one degree or another, diseases are always a concern, depending on their impact or threat. Some are temporary and easily treated; others are infectious and have the potential to ripple through a family, workplace or community. Some are potentially fatal or debilitating.

Emergencies, like diseases, have a spectrum of triggers with a diversity of accompanying consequences. The greater the disease, the greater is the impact on others, and the greater the need for response resource.

What is the likelihood of emergencies in Canada?

In the late 1980s, a study by the United Nations concluded that the cost and frequency of disasters across the globe is increasing exponentially. It identified a number of global trends that place the world’s nations at growing risk. To begin with, there are more of us humans on the planet, which increases the pressure on (and damage to) our environment. The continuing relocation of people from rural to urban setting has increased population density in cities, and raised the occurrence of ‘disease’ of all kind, from health to infrastructure breakdown, and social disorder. Increasing, too, is the rate of the world’s population that is living in high-risk or more vulnerable, isolated areas.

Canada is a big country, with diverse climate, and geography. Our population is relatively small, yet it represents the world's cultures, philosophies, political movements, and religions. Our infrastructure is aging, vulnerable to extreme weather and use, and stretched across tremendous distances. Our life style is open and our populace travels extensively within Canada and across the world. This fact alone illustrates our vulnerability, in that any political turmoil elsewhere in the world could readily spill onto the Canadian scene.

But there is more, and it boils down to our life style. Tom Peters, in his *Crazy Times Call for Crazy Organizations*, noted that our daily life is more complex, and moves faster than ever. Our intertwined global economy, with its escalating competition, forces us to move ahead with products and processes that are not fully tested. Everywhere, the pace of life causes us to have less time, or attention, to deal with the issues or problems we confront.

Change is both constant and rapidly escalating. Additionally, we are pressured to produce more, with less, and to do it faster. More and more, we rely on technology, and with each new wave of technological *advancement* we place ourselves at greater vulnerability. In his classic book, *Normal Accidents*, Charles Perrow observed that developing societies continue to develop systems that are closely coupled and growing in complexity. He noted that no single person or agency is able to fully comprehend, or independently manage, those situations we call crises or disasters.

In short, our world is becoming more hazardous, connected, and at risk. What happens anywhere in the world, could and does rapidly affect us here. Think of SARS, avian influenza, BSE, the Chernobyl accident, Bhopal, or pandemic flu.

### **Crisis triggers**

As late as the 1980s we used to categorize disasters as either natural or manmade. Then, especially after the Bhopal disaster, we added technological disasters to the list. The new flavor of the month is terrorism. My point is that the category of disaster does not tell the whole picture about the event, and the language we use sidetracks us from the real issue: How to manage them.

For example, a flood caused by a deluge of rain, aggravated by deforestation and high human settlement in flood prone areas, could create a host of environmental contamination or damage, which ultimately leads to economic downturn, political unrest and the fall of government. Where does one category end and another start?

I want to switch to another concept – 'crisis', which in my opinion supersedes emergency or disaster. It expands the concepts of physical damage and destruction to include breakdown of confidence, or conflicting perceptions. But before going further on crises, we need to understand what organizations (or communities) are all about.

Organizations are well defined, relatively trusted, and highly protected. All organizations establish elaborate systems to protect their identity. They develop and maintain the organizational culture, language, dress code, space, and resources that are unique to them. Our organization or community – our 'box' – provides predictability, routine, operational efficiency, and a sense of comfort or safety. It is extremely important to us.

Organizations have been described as machines, but I see them more as gearboxes that churn away in some predictable manner to produce a unique set of goods, services, and a cultural code. During so-called 'normal times' contact is made between the gears within the box, but in a relatively controlled and predictable manner.

A crisis disrupts the operations of the gearbox in a distinct, devastating and demanding way. The remedy to this disruption requires more energy or resources than is available within the box. It

forces affected organizations and communities to reach out, connect, share resources, collaborate, and coordinate activities ... or else, fail to stem the crisis.

Crisis management cannot be achieved through the same old predictable paradigm, because the situation is larger than the capacity of any single affected entity, regardless of size.

A crisis may be triggered, not caused, by seemingly unrelated events that were ignored or were poorly managed. Crises respect no boundary, border, jurisdiction, space or time. Thus, a crisis in one organization or community may be the undoing of others. The event creates an environment that cannot be left unattended – it demands extraordinary remedy or it overwhelms its affected organization or community.

Recall that any organization or community in crisis is typically also obliged to continue its day-to-day routines. Its members, customers, or public *expect* the continuation of their daily routines. They seek their routine, with its level of predictability and comfort.

Research into the management of crisis shows that crisis managers need to be extremely adept in three skills: communication, decision making and coordination. Moreover – and it boils down to the context of crisis – management has to be an out-of-the-box process.

The aim of crisis management is to return the affairs of the affected organization to its inside-the-box routines, to predictability, structure, and a sense of comfort. It strives to return to operational equilibrium.

Crisis management is a process of extending the gearbox by linking components of the affected organization to other organizations. It unfolds in a period of high uncertainty, tremendous stress, high consequence of error, and high visibility. Therefore, it requires operational agility, adaptability, and willingness to operate on ill-defined problems without predictability of outcome.

We are living in a world more complex and interconnected than ever. For a variety of circumstances, we are more vulnerable to events that are generally termed as disasters or crises. To overcome them, we need to operate outside-the-box, across a diversity of operational jurisdictions, cultures and languages. We need to develop a crisis management structure that allows us to operate rapidly, creatively, and with almost-immediate adaptability. Only then can we start reversing our vulnerability.

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