WATER & RESILIENCE
CAN TECHNOLOGY DELAY A GLOBAL WATER CRISIS?

NOVICHOK POISONING | CBRN & MEDICAL STOCKPILES | DIGITAL SECURITY | MANAGING SPORTING VENUE RISK MANAGEMENT | CAR CYBERSECURITY | DATA PROTECTION | PLANE CRASH IN AUSTRALIA | REPUTATION CRISIS MANAGEMENT | CHINA EARTHQUAKE PREPAREDNESS | HUMANITARIAN SEXUAL ABUSE | ROLLERCOASTER RESCUE IN UK
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comment

Our water feature this issue highlights how this most precious resource, which is the most vital element to any aspect of human survival, is treated casually by so many people around the world. Most people and businesses in developed countries take it for granted that if we need water, it will be there – clean, abundant and in the quantities we need. And let's not forget that almost one billion people have no access to clean water at all.

Water supplies are under threat – population growth, climate change, over-abstraction, agriculture and infrastructure all play their role. Even worse, plastic in oceans and its effects on marine life and the dangers of plastics entering human food chains, along with toxic elements and poisons being discovered in water, are all occurring today. Worse still, water can be used as a political or military tool by state and non state actors, as well presenting an attractive target to terrorists.

Given the above, it is clear to see why water is classified as such a vital element of critical national infrastructure – it is not only essential to our survival, but also to our security, wellbeing, health, businesses and livelihoods.

One only has to turn to recent events in Cape Town to gain an understanding of how catastrophic it would be if a city simply runs out of water. All aspects of life would be affected, raising the spectres of disease and threats to security.

Thankfully, Cape Town's Day Zero has been postponed to 2019, thanks to extreme water conservation and other measures, but other cities around the world face similar threats. See p34 for an article on how the Brazilian city of São Paulo coped with its own water crisis, and what measures need to be undertaken to conserve its future supplies and the viability of the city itself.

There are always solutions, but they can be extreme. Communities, businesses and individuals – including all those involved in emergency management, preparedness and response – must all recognise the contribution they can make towards ensuring water supplies are sustainable, and remain so. Technology can also play its part. Both Laurie Reynolds (p38) and Matt Minshall (42) discuss how artificial intelligence, machine learning, sophisticated digital technology and geospatial information – among others – can help secure, protect, monitor and conserve supplies.

It is time to afford this vital resource the respect and attention it needs.

Katisa | 123rf

Crisis Response Journal 13:3 | May 2018
Reputational crisis:

In February 2018, news broke that Oxfam aid workers had been involved with prostitutes while working for the charity after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. The charity was accused of trying to hide the unsavoury incident to avoid tarnishing its reputation. Richard Pendry examines the consequences.

A fortnight after the story broke, there came a fumbled apology and more damning accusations that the charity had acted inappropriately, not only in the aftermath of the incident, but also in the lead up to it. The negativity surrounding the case resulted in an unprecedented backlash that saw 7,000 public benefactors’ subscriptions cancelled, the organisation barred from bidding on any further government funding, and several of its global ambassadors resigning from their posts. What the charity had tried to avoid so ineffectively in 2011 had come back to haunt it on an unimaginable scale. Oxfam’s reputation was in tatters.

This article looks at the crisis through the lens of 21st Century crisis management in an effort to ensure other organisations can learn from the expensive mistakes made. In response to allegations of misconduct among staff members involved in delivering humanitarian relief in Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, Oxfam launched an internal enquiry in 2011. The subsequent investigation discovered that the allegations had substance, the accusations of alleged sexual exploitation in the form of...
using prostitutes at the villa rented by Oxfam had sufficient credence to allow disciplinary action to take place. Four members of staff were dismissed and a further three, including the director of operations Roland Van Hauwermeiren, were allowed to resign. Hauwermeiren was given the opportunity to work out a month’s notice. The subsequent report drafted by Oxfam was given to the UK Charities Commission and the Department of International Development (DfID) with the incident marked as staff misconduct. To all intents and purposes, the matter was closed.

**Sexual exploitation**

On February 9, 2018, *The Times* newspaper broke the story with the heading ‘Top Oxfam staff paid Haiti survivors for sex,’ alleging that Oxfam covered up claims that senior staff working in Haiti had used prostitutes. The article went on to accuse the charity that of having deliberately downplayed the incident to avoid reputational damage.

Over the next few days there were allegations including:

- Hauwermeiren was involved in a similar incident while working for Oxfam in Chad;
- Bullying had taken place against one of the witnesses;
- Some of the women involved were under age;
- The men sacked by Oxfam were able to go on working among vulnerable people because Oxfam failed to warn aid agencies about their misconduct;
- Hauwermeiren went on to take a senior role with Action Against Hunger in Bangladesh; and
- Despite knowing of concerns about the conduct of two men prior to the Haiti scandal, Oxfam appointed them to senior humanitarian roles.

The accusations immediately took traction among the media amid an unquenchable appetite for stories involving female exploitation. The recent allegations of manipulation within the film industry of actors associated with Harvey Weinstein, had created fertile ground for any case involved with female sexual exploitation. This atmosphere, in conjunction with the call for a reduction of the UK’s Aid and Development budget among many Conservative MPs, ensured that the Haiti incident had all the ingredients for a perfect storm.

If Oxfam had an indicator for showing the level of emergency it was experiencing, the needle would have
been showing ‘major incident’, but it needed more to push it into crisis mode, all of which would be provided by the organisation itself.

It was obvious that Oxfam senior management was ill-prepared for the unfolding drama; the response by the charity’s CEO, Mark Goldring in subsequent interviews had the opposite effect of placating its critics. Goldring’s remarks, which likened the intensity of interest into the charity’s behaviour to the charity having: “murdered babies in their cots,” only served to increase the hostility that was growing daily.

In surviving the initial tidal wave that is the hallmark of every crisis, the crisis management team will always be under an incredible amount of pressure. The stressful atmosphere created by an extreme workload, lack of sleep and having to deal with a constant demand for information and instructions, can take a heavy price on any individual. Goldring was no doubt under a great deal of pressure when he made his gaffes to the press, but he certainly is not the first and won’t be the last.

**Infamous comment**

In 2010, after the Deep Water Horizon fire in the Gulf of Mexico, the CEO of BP, Tony Hayward, was also not as media savvy as he should have been. After the explosion and the loss of 11 crew members on the oil rig, he claimed that the oil pumping into the Gulf was “relatively tiny”, with the environmental impact being “very, very modest”. He later changed his appraisal of the situation as being an “environmental catastrophe”. However, his most infamous comment was: “There’s no one who wants this thing over more than I do, I’d like my life back.” This remark was condemned internationally for its insensitivity and is generally considered by any crisis manager as a masterclass in how not to handle crisis communication.

As a consequence of Hayward’s handling of the incident, BP lost 55 per cent of its share value, the price dropping from $55 to $27 per share – a loss of somewhere in the region of $7 billion.

But with all the resources available to them, why do organisations still go on to make these fundamental errors?

A good friend of mine is in the field of kidnap and ransom, or conduct after capture, as he prefers the discipline to be called. Part of his role is to interview the victim as part of his or her repatriation process. One of the common characteristics that he finds with the victims is that they all thought it would never happen to them. This sentiment is only too common in the field of risk and crisis management, but the fact is that, for every day your organisation goes without crisis, it is a day closer to actually having one. So in order to counter this pessimism, organisations need plan and prepare. The often painful requests for funding, should be assuaged by the premise that every £1 spent on preparation is equivalent to £7 spent on bringing the crisis under control; this basic threat and risk management can be encapsulated by asking – and answering – the following questions:

- **Threat identified:** Reputational damage;
- **Is the organisation vulnerable:** Absolutely;
- **Likelihood of the occurrence:** Depending on the activities undertaken, anywhere from highly unlikely to very likely; and
- **Possible impact:** Catastrophic.

In the light of the above, there is no excuse for not coming up with contingency planning for crisis, including well-rehearsed and scripted replies to the media and other stakeholders. This cannot be done off the cuff at a time when the organisation is trying to survive the tsunami that a crisis presents when it breaks. The reaction to a crisis needs to be choreographed in advance and structured in a way that communicates competency; takes control of the situation; and instils confidence with all the stakeholders including the press.

Unfortunately for Oxfam, all of these elements were absent as a beleaguered Goldring and the rest of senior management struggled to make sense of what was happening around them.

But other than the poor communications, is the criticism of Oxfam overstated? After all, this incident happened seven years ago, it took place on the other side of the world, and had been put into deep filing. Not even the most insightful of risk managers at the time would have calculated the likelihood of this occurrence as being possible; it is probable they would have been totally unaware of the injurious atmosphere in 2011 into which the story would break.

The reality however, is that most organisations have skeletons in the closet, things brushed under the carpet that have been left to fester. These are smouldering crises. If an incident is not dealt with conclusively, the cause can often be attributed to weak or ineffective management. This paradigm fits well with Oxfam. The full facts of the incident in 2011 that were reported to the regulatory bodies, were
The media frenzy soon became a witch-hunt that narrative and, as more damning allegations broke, allowed the media to take charge and dictate the stance could be best described as passive. The trigger in this case a trigger event occurs. The trigger in this case was The Times headline that left the reputation of an organisation, which had done so much for vulnerable communities over the years, hanging by a thread. It was at this instance the Oxfam crisis management team should have taken control and launched its crisis management plan.

Communicate well: It is quite clear that Goldring and the rest of the Oxfam senior management team did not understand the media culture that has become prevalent with the Internet – stories shared around the globe in an instant – the more damning the headline, the bigger the views. But why should they? Their area of expertise is running a humanitarian aid organisation. But the fact is that all senior management have to understand the powerful, instantaneous and ubiquitous phenomenon that news has become. Therefore, every senior management team should have a designated media representative who is an expert, or at least has had media training. This person’s toolbox should contain a variety of messages that have been designed to respond to the contingency incidents identified in the risk assessment. These messages should also be pre-authorised by the legal team, as it is often the legal department that tends to slow the response (CRJ 12:3).

Go way beyond what is necessary: Oxfam does not sell anything. Its revenue derives from public and commercial donations and government funds that are a part of the overall foreign aid budget. It is therefore essential that its brand answers to the highest principles that donors identify with. Unfortunately, the actions of the staff in Haiti fell well short, and all the valuable work the charity has done since its inception in 1942 has been washed away by the actions of the miscreants. It therefore needs to rebuild the trust and integrity. To do this it has to be critical of its existing processes, drilling down to analyse whether they are fit for purpose and sufficient to mitigate identified and emergent risks. If not, then changes need to happen quickly. The organisation also needs to ensure that bywords that encapsulate its whole ethos – words such as integrity and transparency – are used as benchmarks for all its actions. Only by showing and admitting that mistakes were made, can Oxfam start to rebuild the trust of the benefactors without whom it is unable to survive.

The crux of the Oxfam crisis is the way that the senior management team handled the incident. Every organisation will make mistakes, that’s a given – and normally the bigger the organisation, the bigger the mistake. We cannot prevent the crisis, but we can to mitigate its impact, manage consequences and control response – while being aware of how poor, unrehearsed, off-the-cuff remarks by people who should know better will make a bad situation even worse.

Train hard, fight easy.

Author

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