

Crisis Management: The missing piece in effective Disaster Recovery

When you consider your current disaster recovery plan, your IT systems, applications, infrastructure, and networks probably come to mind. You may feel quite confident about your ability to recover your technology. That's fine, as far as it goes – but does it go far enough? Have you considered what happens at time of disaster? Usually, the answer is: a desperate scramble for incident data, hesitation when there should be action, and often overall confusion.

As traditional disaster recovery makes the move into today's rapidly changing world of "Always On, Always Available," it is critical to be proactive and adaptive in managing events that pose threats to your organization. An effective Crisis Management Program is driven by the sound principles of situational awareness, effective communications, and constant testing exercises.

Crisis Management: Keeping the Focus on the Business

Disaster Recovery (DR) is very IT-focused. IT is usually in charge and, in a crisis, IT personnel zero in on making sure the technology is up and running to support the business.

But there are other considerations during a crisis – considerations that may fall outside of IT's purview. For instance:

- Where are the company's employees? Are they safe? Can they carry out their DR functions?
- Are there other stakeholders, vendors, and suppliers who have been affected by the incident? If so, how will this impact business operations?
- Is there a public relations aspect to the crisis? Does someone need to interface with news agencies or post an update about the company to reassure customers and investors?

There are also IT-related aspects that IT might be unaware of in the moment, such as:

- Whether key IT personnel are available to perform their recovery tasks.
- How certain systems being down might deliver a larger impact across the business.
- What the priorities are for the business as a whole (which may be different than IT's laser-focused priorities).

Organizational resiliency requires a holistic business focus, and a holistic business focus demands the centralization of incident data and communications at time of disaster. There has to be a place where the team of decision-makers – which will *include* IT personnel but which is not *limited* to IT personnel – can review the big picture and manage the crisis for the good of the entire business. That is the function of a Crisis Management Program.

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Three Principles of Crisis Management

There are three key principles that undergird every **Crisis Management Program**: situational awareness, effective communications, and simulation exercises. These three principles enable a Crisis Management team to make decisions rapidly and accurately at time of disaster for the good of the business.

Situational Awareness

One of the challenges of being in an incident is that there is a vast amount of information available today. The real-time data sources we have access to now versus ten years ago due to the explosion of social media, the Internet, and mobile devices is mind-boggling.

So *getting* data is not necessarily the problem. The problem is *evaluating* the data to achieve situational awareness and develop an impact analysis. Such an evaluation must include:

- **Is this data reliable?** For example, the National Weather Service's report about a coming hurricane is going to be much more trustworthy than what Twitter trends might be saying.
- **Is this data "TMI"?** There is such a thing as "too much information," or "TMI," even during a crisis. During an incident, you want all the information necessary to make good decisions, but not more than that. Too much data, and you can become paralyzed by information overload.
- **Is this data actionable?** Ultimately, you want data that can help you assess the business impact of the crisis, monitor situational risk, track the status of your recovery, and make informed decisions that will support your business resiliency.

A Crisis Management Program addresses these questions by setting protocols ahead of time with regard to data – whether that data is generated

from external sources such as the Internet, or from internal sources such as company dashboards and monitoring systems. In the planning stage, reliable, appropriate, actionable data sources are identified and pre-validated. This prevents the Crisis Management Team from making decisions based on questionable or poor data sources at time of disaster.

Also included in the planning stage are factors such as: Who will be responsible for gathering the data? Who will direct the data to the appropriate parties? Who are the decision-makers for various types of information? A Crisis Management Program provides a structured framework to gather, assess, and act upon data, delivering true situational awareness.

Effective Communications

Information is useless unless the decisions it leads to can be communicated swiftly, accurately, and securely to the people involved. This includes employees, vendors, and stakeholders.

For Crisis Management, two types of outgoing communication are needed:

- **Pre-defined messages.** You don't want to waste time during a crisis event deciding what to say in an email, text, or voice message when you could pre-define your messages in the planning stage. A good Crisis Management Program will permit you to identify scenarios, develop messages, define groups, and select channels of communication so that you can instantly communicate key information at time of disaster.
- **Ad-hoc messages.** A crisis, by its very nature, is going to be unique. You therefore need the capability to quickly send event-specific messages to key individuals or groups.



Communication, of course, works two-ways. A solid Crisis Management communications plan will enable you to receive safety confirmations, critical information, status updates, and requests for assistance from your employees. You can then review the incoming communications and respond to them rapidly.

Simulation Exercises

Simulation exercises are crucial for a healthy Crisis Management Program. Regular, ongoing simulation exercises serve to:

- Create awareness and buy-in by engaging senior level executives
- Educate and train crisis teams, employees, and vendors
- Uncover opportunities and gaps in your program
- Document lessons learned
- Implement improvements in your program

When you perform simulation exercises, one important aspect to include is “the unexpected.” It can be tempting to only set up exercises that you know people can handle, i.e., where the simulated crisis goes “according to plan.” But crises don’t go according to plan. They always contain elements that are new and unanticipated. Therefore, work those types of elements into a simulation exercise. That could be as simple as scheduling a test the day before a holiday, when you know that a significant portion of your staff will be out of the office on vacation.

Ultimately, simulation exercises give Crisis Management team members practice in decision-making. Decision-making is a skill and, like any other skill, it needs to be practiced to achieve proficiency. It is during simulation exercises that team members will learn how to quickly review, assess, and act upon information. It is here that they will become familiar with sending and receiving communications in a way that keeps recovery moving forward. Without simulation exercises, the best data and communication capabilities in the world are useless.

Additional reading



[Crisis Management Program](#)

Putting the Final Piece in Place

When you add Crisis Management to disaster recovery, the effect is powerful. The business view becomes married to the IT perspective so that both work in concert to ensure overall resiliency. Decisions can be made based upon relevant, real-time data and communicated effectively to keep the impact of the event minimal, and the recovery time optimal. And the

Crisis Management team can feel equal to any task, since they have gone through rigorous simulation exercises to build their skills.

The next crisis is coming. With Crisis Management adding its dynamic power to your disaster recovery plans, you will be prepared.

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