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Khoi Swee Giam, Cyrus Chung, and Ng Song Lim review the Singapore Civil Defence Force’s successful peer support system to improve wellbeing

Insarag Guidelines – fit for purpose

The International Search and Rescue Advisory Group has reviewed its guidance for dealing with sudden events involving large scale structural collapses. Anwar Abdullah outlines the group’s strategy

Creative crisis problem solving

Desiree Matei-Anderson says that innovation is not just for dealing with crises in normal times. In particular, recurring extreme events, especially when looking to the future, as shown in a deadly tornado incident in Alabama, USA

Connecting the dots with drone mapping

Collaboration is the key to staying ahead of the curve in the rapidly evolving landscape of drone technology. This is where CRJ Key Network Partner PHD’s software comes in

Pioneering public safety drones in Croatia

Charles Howitt and Veena Rajasekaran examine the provide a sobering reminder of what has happened when online crime, terror and vigilantism spill over into the real world (p64). This is backed up by the heightened vulnerability highlights identified by authors in our cyber feature (p40). CRJ is not for tearing down systems that work, nor does it advocate the indiscriminate ripping up of assumptions. But failure to ask questions and debate the more difficult subjects that have been skirted around for many years, can only lead to crippling atrophy.

Teetering on the brink

The more difficult subjects that have been skirted around for many years, can only lead to crippling atrophy.

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Leaders, crisis management and the Covid-19 crisis

Arnold M Howitt, Ikon Images

By comparison with the more familiar realm of routine emergencies, leaders confronting Covid-19 need to adopt a more agile, highly adaptive, yet deliberate decision-making method that can move expeditiously to action. Yet, because initial decisions could cause unintended consequences or may not yield desired results, they must retain the capacity to re-examine tactics iteratively in light of the effects of their decisions. The right path may require successive policy trials, assessments of preliminary results and adaptive course corrections. Under novel conditions, when no single person or organisation has the comprehensive expertise or previous experience to chart a way forward, this can help the team take account of the multiple dimensions of the Covid-19 crisis and cope as well as possible with swiftly changing conditions. Covid-19 is much more than an epidemiological and medical phenomenon. It is also a deeply frightening and potentially traumatizing psychological event, a profound economic disruption and a complex logistical challenge, among other dimensions. Leaders must embrace all of the elements together to lead through the overarching, integrated and complex tangle of issues and dilemmas.

In routine emergencies—types of events that have regularly occurred before—the issues are familiar, key questions are evident, consensus on priorities has developed, decisions are framed and informed by prior experience and necessary tasks flow from best practices.

Substantial uncertainty

Responders are clear what actions are needed and are likely to have the means at hand to execute them. None of those conditions are present in the Covid-19 crisis. Instead, circumstances are dynamic, evolving, changing frequently. Our comprehension is in continuous flux, which feels deeply unsettling. Issues are not immediately clear or well-defined. We face competing priorities, with no clear precedents about how to balance them. New questions emerge frequently, changing as conditions evolve. Decisions arise continuously in real time as we grasp of the situation changes, and tasks that develop may not be immediately feasible, given the limits of existing skills, processes and resources.

Such crises present threats for which we lack sufficient economic disruption and a complex logistical challenge, among other dimensions. Leaders must embrace all of the elements together to lead through the overarching, integrated and complex tangle of issues and dilemmas.

Crises demand the attention of multiple organisations that often are not all part of a single hierarchy with a clear, authoritative decision-maker. Such a situation feels chaotic and frightening— even for people with prior emergency experience—because no one has ever experienced anything quite like it.

In a word, the situation contains significant novelty and there is no playbook from which to derive guidance. Leaders must engage in real-time problem solving.

Effective leadership in a true crisis situation can thus be characterized by rapid innovation, under stress, embedded in fear. This is a leadership challenge profoundly different from operating in an emergency seen many times before. A true crisis thus presents us with a humbling and troubling question: What do we do when no one knows what to do?

Substantial uncertainty

When the novel circumstances of a crisis create substantial uncertainty about the future, especially in a crisis likely to last a long time, leaders should resist being put in the position of precipitously providing answers. Instead, in an extended duration crisis, we should place confidence in the operation of a process that will generate the best available results.

Organise the response through a critical incident management team process: Although there are many names for the teams and structures that oversee the response for large-scale, complex events for example, united command, emergency operations centre, command centre, steering group, incident management team; nomenclature doesn’t matter. What is crucial is assembling people from relevant organisations who have the necessary authority to commit each organisation and its resources to doing its part of the work to resolve the crisis. Sub-teams may be assigned to work on specific elements of the situation, but there needs to be a core team responsible for overseeing the event as a whole, encompassing all important elements of the situation. If such a group is not formed, it is far too common for important issues to be missed.

Bring the right people together to seek understanding and deliberate in the critical incident oversight process about what actions to take: This should include people who understand the key priorities, agencies, values and goals of the organisations involved. Decisions may require confronting previously unexpected tensions among these factors and determining painless but necessary trade-offs. Also critical are people who understand the stakeholders, markets and political environments of these organisations and thus can make informed estimates about the effects of different courses of action. People who can provide different types of expertise and experience that bear on major elements of the crisis are also needed.

In assembling this team, diversity is a valuable asset. When the solution is unknown, people from different backgrounds, generations, genders, or with different perspectives, skills, expertise and experiences will generally have a better chance of finding a more creative and better approach. They will have access to a broader set of perspectives and possibilities and may prove more creative in developing a broader range of options.

Engage iteratively in agile, creative problem solving with continuous updating: Again, although many names are given to this kind of process, including design thinking, agile process, generalised problem solving, and incident action planning, the basic steps of the process are similar, as seen in Table 1 overleaf.

The process begins with step (0), determining the “key values at risk”: In an unprecedented situation, not all of these may be immediately obvious. This first logical step shapes all other decisions. It may have to be revisited as the situation significantly changes, or new facts reveal different perspectives on what key values are threatened. Even if key values are not reassessed, once a plan is implemented in (3) it is important to revert to (1) to judge what impact it has had on the situation. The novelty of a crisis means that actions taken are in some sense an experiment that must be evaluated for effectiveness. If intended results are not achieved, new steps may be
Leaders, crisis management and the Covid-19 crisis

Gary Waters | Arnold M Howitt, Herman B ‘Dutch’ Leonard, David W Giles

The Covid-19 crisis is much more than an epidemiological and medical phenomenon. It is also a deeply frightening and potentially traumatising psychological event, a profound economic disruption and a complex logistical challenge, among other dimensions. Leaders must embrace all of the elements together to lead through the overarching, integrated and complex tangle of issues and dilemmas.

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Covid-19 presents threats for which we lack sufficient necessary resources, where there is no known or complete solution and where there is no assurance of a successful or even adequate response. Covid-19 frequently demands the attention of multiple organisations, which may come from different levels of government, jurisdictions or professions; they may be public, private, or non-profit organisations; and often they are not all part of a single hierarchy with a clear, authoritative decision-maker.

In a word, the situation contains significant novelty and there is no playbook from which to derive guidance. Leaders must engage in real-time problem solving.

Effective leadership in a true crisis situation can thus be characterised by rapid innovation, under stress, embedded in fear.

This is a leadership challenge profoundly different from operating in an emergency over many times before. A true crisis thus presents us with a humbling and troubling question: What do we do when no one knows what to do?

Substantial uncertainty

When the novel circumstances of a crisis create substantial uncertainty about the future, especially in a crisis likely to last a long time, leaders should resist being put in the position of precipitously providing answers. Instead, in an extended duration crisis, we should place confidence in the operation of a process that will generate the best available results.

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In assembling this team, diversity is a valuable asset. When the solution is unknown, people from different backgrounds, generations, genders, or with different perspectives, skills, expertise and experiences will generally have a better chance of finding a more creative and better approach. They will have access to a broader set of perspectives and possibilities and may prove more creative in developing a broader range of options.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>Organise the response through a critical incident management team process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>Bring the right people together to seek understanding and deliberate in the critical incident oversight process about what actions to take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03</td>
<td>Engage iteratively in agile, creative problem solving with continuous updating</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The process begins with step (01), determining the “key values at risk.” In an unprecedented situation, not all of these may be immediately obvious. This first logical step shapes all other decisions. It may have to be revisited as the situation significantly changes, or new facts reveal different perspectives on what key values are threatened. Even if key values are not reassessed, once a plan is implemented in (03) it is important to revert to (01) to judge what impact it has had on the situation. The novelty of a crisis means that actions taken are in some sense an experiment that must be evaluated for effectiveness. If intended results are not achieved, new steps may be needed to address the new insights gained.

**Crisis demand the attention of multiple organisations that often are not all part of a single hierarchy with a clear, authoritative decision-maker**

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Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem-solving step</th>
<th>Associated form of thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(0) Establish goals, priorities, and values</td>
<td>Moral reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Understand the key elements of the situation</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Develop options</td>
<td>Creative thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Predict outcomes from each option</td>
<td>Analytical reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Choose the best option based on (3) and (0)</td>
<td>Executive decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Execute</td>
<td>Administrative tasking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then ... REPEAT, REPEAT, REPEAT

required, or previous actions modified or replaced.

Each of the steps requires a different form of intellectual activity. It is important to separate them, or they will become muddled or biased. For example, it is not helpful to have the description of the current situation coloured by the describer’s preferred choice of option, or for the selection of options to be shaped by the option-generator’s guess as to which option the decision-maker(s) will eventually choose.

Arrange for a facilitated discussion and decision process to determine what actions flow from the problem-solving process: In setting up this iterative problem-solving process, it is often helpful to have a facilitator lead it. When the ultimate decision-maker – who will have to decide among options or approve a recommendation from the process – leads the discussion, deliberations often converge prematurely to what the ‘boss seems to want. People may hesitate to raise uncomfortable questions or express dissent; they may not want to seem uncooperative, baffle with influential colleagues or slow decision-making down. In a stressful setting, dissent can often be misinterpreted or implicitly discouraged at precisely the time when it may be most valuable.

Facilitated process

When more than one organisation or jurisdiction is involved, a facilitated process helps to dispel the impression that one group or another is operating, again and again and again, a process for learning from, and hence adapting to, the situation. In this setting, people don’t have rank – ideas are welcome from everyone. This type of atmosphere is undermined by excessive advocacy behaviour, such as arguing for one’s point of view and hiding its weaknesses while pointing out those of others. By contrast, inquiry behaviour forms part of a joint process to find the best solution. It involves building on the suggestions of others, seeking synthesis and integration that combine ideas into a better suggestion, and revealing weaknesses of one’s own suggestion in the hope that others might find a way to ameliorate them. Generally, this means behaving as if ‘we all win if we get the best possible answer’, rather than ‘I win if the answer we choose is mine’. Avoiding a descent into advocacy takes skilful group facilitation, especially when more than one organisation sits at the table.

Consider activating a secondary Special Advisory Group that is not actively involved in overseeing or managing the response, to serve as a sounding board and creative resource: Those who are involved directly in responding to the event may not have time or perspective to get a bigger picture view. The advisory group may provide help to the operational group by spotting additional issues, seeing ideas elsewhere, and generally adding to the creative bandwidth of the incident management team.

Execute the actions that have been decided upon, but treat decisions and associated actions as tentative and experimental. Learn your way forward: Remind the incident management team, the larger set of organisations involved and outside stakeholders that you are in unprecedented circumstances; so your current best answer may need to be revised, based on the results of your initial actions and how the situation evolves.

Set and maintain reasonable expectations: A true crisis is unprecedented and profoundly different from routine emergencies. In the face of myriad challenges, extraordinary issues and competing priorities, perfection is highly unlikely, especially in the earliest stages. Participants in the decision-making process and those executing actions may well miscalculate mistakes. A reasonable expectation is for best efforts to maintain focus on and protect the things we value most – and learn as quickly as possible how to do better.

The best way to meet that expectation is to build and operate, again and again and again, a process for learning our way forward across dark and uncharted waters.

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