

Human Impact Preparedness: It's about the people!

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Hurricane Katrina caused tens of billions of dollars in damage, and in addition shattered several communities. For some the physical devastation was paramount, for others the disintegration of the social infrastructure was most salient. Five days after the storm made landfall at least 500 police officers in New Orleans, Louisiana were missing. While condemnation was rampant, this situation should not be surprising. If people have to choose between their own welfare or that of their families, and their job they almost always choose the former. This situation demonstrated the failure to account for "people needs" in the disaster response planning process. To add emphasis to this point, the recent benchmarking study conducted by Continuity Insights Magazine and KPMG, revealed that 35% of respondents indicated that the "weakest link" in their continuity plans and strategy was "people risks". Only 19% cited technology risks and 27% cited "process risk". Another recent poll was published by the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce in Boston, Massachusetts. According to that poll, more than 80% of businesses in the Boston area reported not being prepared for an outbreak of pandemic flu. While these levels are extremely concerning in developed economies, they could be devastating to developing economies with limited resilience.

The purpose of Crisis Management Programs is to enhance organizational or community resilience so that the organization or community is better prepared to function during and after crises and disasters.

Typical business continuity and disaster recovery programs address four main areas: emergency response, business continuity, crisis communication, and security needs. While these elements are *necessary* components in a comprehensive preparedness plan, they are not always *sufficient* for effective recovery and continued sustainability of many businesses. In fact Fireman's Fund Insurance Company estimated that more than 25 percent of businesses that close after a disaster never re-open, and 40 percent go out of business within five years.

The fifth element of crisis management is the *Human Impact Preparedness* Program. The "Human Impact" of disasters includes any and all aspects of daily life that are impacted by a disaster: from basic survival needs through more complex effects on people trying to resuscitate an affected business community. Recent experiences with companies in the gulf coast of the US following Hurricane Katrina demonstrated how senior management was no less vulnerable than production line staff.

To appreciate the complexity of Human Impact preparedness, one has to appreciate the complexity of humans. Recovery from disaster and crisis is not linear. Initially things seem very positive but only later, after a few weeks, the realization sets in that life has forever been changed. A robust model of Human Impact Preparedness needs to combine knowledge about people, organizations, communities, and disasters.

The process of "Human Impact Preparedness" includes three components: Organizational Assessment; Human Impact Planning; and, Exercises and Trainings.

Organizational Assessment

The process of assessment is a comprehensive one and can encompass any and all levels of an organization or community. The purpose is to review the organization or community through the lens of “people” and “crisis” rather than having them separated. The assessment process often begins with a review of existing plans, policies, and procedures with respect to the “human factors” aspects of crisis and disaster. Existing resources will become an important part of the recovery process and need to be evaluated as to their capacity limits and scope of assistance. A crucial component, often overlooked in the planning process, is the pattern of information flow and communication channels with respect to the “human” element.

Finally, we must assess whether the culture of the organization or community will support the plan goals during a crisis or a disaster.

Human Impact Planning

It is not enough just to formulate a plan, the process of formulation itself is crucial. During the process many lessons are learned and problems identified. The planning process has to include members of the organization or community though experts in the field of disaster planning should be also used but only in an advisory capacity.

Human Impact Planning is a strategic planning process used to prepare for the inevitable consequences of disasters. Many of the aspects of a Human Impact Plan might already exist within an organization or community, but they are typically scattered across departments or NGO's with procedures, roles, and responsibilities poorly defined.

The development of a Human Impact Plan structures, organizes, and centralizes these policies and procedures. It also coordinates them with all other crisis preparedness programs. This process covers a variety of different areas which will ultimately ensure that the organization can continue functioning in the wake of a disaster. This process augments existing plans through ensuring that the “people needs” are incorporated into the overall Crisis Preparedness Program. It necessitates a thorough understanding of human reaction to stress and disasters, as well as accounting for the *entire* life cycle of a disaster. The process is collaborative in nature and is implemented in organizations of all types and sizes.

Exercises and training

This final component of Human Impact Preparedness addresses issues of maintaining awareness of the plans and a level of personal preparedness. This component has three major parts:

1. **Simulations and Table-Top exercises:** These need to be conducted periodically at all levels of the organization.
2. **Training on Psychological Responses to Crisis and Disaster:** This type of training has been carried out in different regions of the world (e.g. USA, Sri-Lanka, Pakistan) and has proved invaluable in providing stakeholders with information about psychological reactions to disasters.
3. **Periodic Reviews and Refresher courses**

Towards Comprehensive Preparedness

Just as the events of September 11, 2001 were a watershed event in the field of business continuity, Hurricane Katrina and the other disasters of 2005 highlighted the need for Human Impact Preparedness. International organizations such as the ISO have begun the process of incorporating standards for human impact preparedness into their recommendations. We believe these recommendations and preparedness programs will strengthen businesses individually and the economy as a whole.

We can make businesses more resilient. To do so we must **plan for people!**