



Crisis Management Teams – Some Danger Signs

Over the last ten years we have facilitated over 100 exercises for crisis management teams (CMTs) from a wide range of organisations. These have varied in scope from straightforward desktop scenarios to complex simulation exercises. Here I briefly summarise some observations based on these exercises and highlight some danger signs to look out for in the CMTs in your organisation.

Homogeneity

Most CMTs are overwhelmingly male: it is not unusual to have teams composed entirely of men. The age-range of team members is also very narrow: roughly 90% of the delegates who attend our training courses and exercises are aged between 40 and 55. In many cases, teams also share a common professional background having followed similar educational paths and worked in the same (or similar) companies for much of their careers. This homogeneity tends to limit the range of options considered in a crisis situation. More dangerously, it can easily lead to the phenomenon of ‘Groupthink’- the breakdown of critical reasoning at crucial moments in the decision making process.

Overconfidence

There is an unfortunate human tendency to believe that we can accurately predict the future despite all the evidence to the contrary. In exercises this often results in decisions being made based on people’s (explicit or implied) predictions about how the scenario will play out. This tendency to overconfidence becomes even more pronounced where individuals possess expert knowledge; and the rest of the team can easily be swayed by the confidence with which ‘experts’ make predictions. So, paradoxically, experience and knowledge can actually become a drawback in a crisis situation if they are not managed appropriately.

Unrealistic Expectations

The final danger sign is unrealistic expectations of the availability of accurate data: this is most pronounced in teams (and team members) with a strong technical background. People who are accustomed to analysing large volumes of accurate, detailed information – eg scientists or engineers - are often very uncomfortable with the ambiguity and confusion inherent in a crisis situation. This typically manifests itself in a delay in taking important decisions until it is too late – resulting, by default, in a succession of poor decisions.

Conclusion

What is the solution then? I would certainly not advocate appointing people to a CMT who lack the ability to make a useful contribution simply to artificially create diversity or ‘dilute’ expertise. In many cases though there is scope to not simply choose people because of their specific job role: sometimes someone more junior may actually be better suited to managing in a crisis. Most importantly, having put your team together on paper, ensure that they participate regularly in realistic and effective exercises. This will identify which, if any, of the weaknesses identified above are present and progressively develops team members’ awareness of, and ability to manage, the potential negative effects.