



Crisis Management Exercises as a Training Tool

Introduction

Crisis Management exercises can be used for a wide variety of purposes including: plan development, improving plan awareness, reassuring stakeholders and demonstrating compliance. In this article I should like to focus purely on how to run exercises to train and develop individuals and teams.

Fundamentally, crisis management involves taking decisions under conditions of considerable uncertainty. Information is usually very scarce, and the data that is available is generally ambiguous, confusing or downright contradictory. It is sometimes assumed that by simply getting people to make a few decisions during an exercise, they will automatically learn to make better decisions in the future; but experience suggests that this is not necessarily so.

Reinforcing Bad Judgement

The conventional process of exercise followed by debrief is reasonably effective at teaching good decision-making **processes**. Typically one sees a marked improvement in delegates' ability to apply appropriate decision-making tools over the course of a programme of exercises. However, lacking any context against which to assess their decision-making **performance** (ie would outcomes have been more favourable if they had taken different decisions), delegates will generally attribute positive outcomes to their own skill whilst any negative outcomes are blamed on bad luck (or the unreality of the scenario!) Potentially the genuine improvements brought about by applying more robust decision-making processes are cancelled out by this unjustified increase in confidence.

Research into the work of professional judgement-makers, such as Judges and Doctors, confirms the danger of reinforcing bad judgement. Evidence from these professions, whose daily work involves making difficult judgements based on incomplete facts, indicates that experience almost always leads to increasing confidence in the validity of one's judgements; but sadly not increasing accuracy in these judgements.

Combating Overconfidence

In order to tackle the problem of (over)confidence, we have pioneered some new approaches to the delivery of exercises that attempt to relate decisions to outcomes. The first initiative was the delivery of the same exercise scenario sequentially to different teams within the same organisation: in our most ambitious programme to date this involved delivering the same exercise to 25 different teams over a 6-month period. The effectiveness of the post-exercise debriefs could be seen to steadily improve throughout the course of the programme, as we were able to present delegates with the outcomes from previous exercises and they could assess the quality of their decisions against those of their peers.



Based on the positive experience of this approach, we have also experimented with running exercises where we deliver the same scenario simultaneously to different teams within the same organisation, followed by a joint debrief. Sometimes these teams already exist as separate entities (eg multiple Silver teams) but, more frequently, this is achieved by artificially splitting a team up for the purposes of the exercise. Without exception, where this has been tried so far, the teams have come up with different (sometimes radically different) solutions to the problems they face; and the contrasting outcomes from these different approaches has resulted in much more critical reflection in the debrief phase.

Summary

Running Crisis Management Exercises is an expensive activity, not just in terms of cash costs but, more importantly the indirect costs of taking key people out of the organisation for a significant period of time. It is therefore essential to ensure that the purpose of the exercise is clearly defined and that the design of the exercise supports these objectives. Crucially, in order to be an effective training tool, the feedback process between decision and outcome must be carefully managed.