



Are we Training Effectively?

Are tight resources for training and exercising being mis-spent or poorly allocated? Are we focussing too much on the wrong tier of training? This article suggests that the current focus on strategic training can reduce the efficacy of a business continuity programme, and actually reduce the output of a business during a response to an incident.

I will refer to the Gold, Silver, Bronze terminology adopted by the UK emergency services, and subsequently by many civilian organisations for their business continuity arrangements.

Executive Training – Practical Difficulties

From my own experiences of organising Executive-level training, there are common problems:

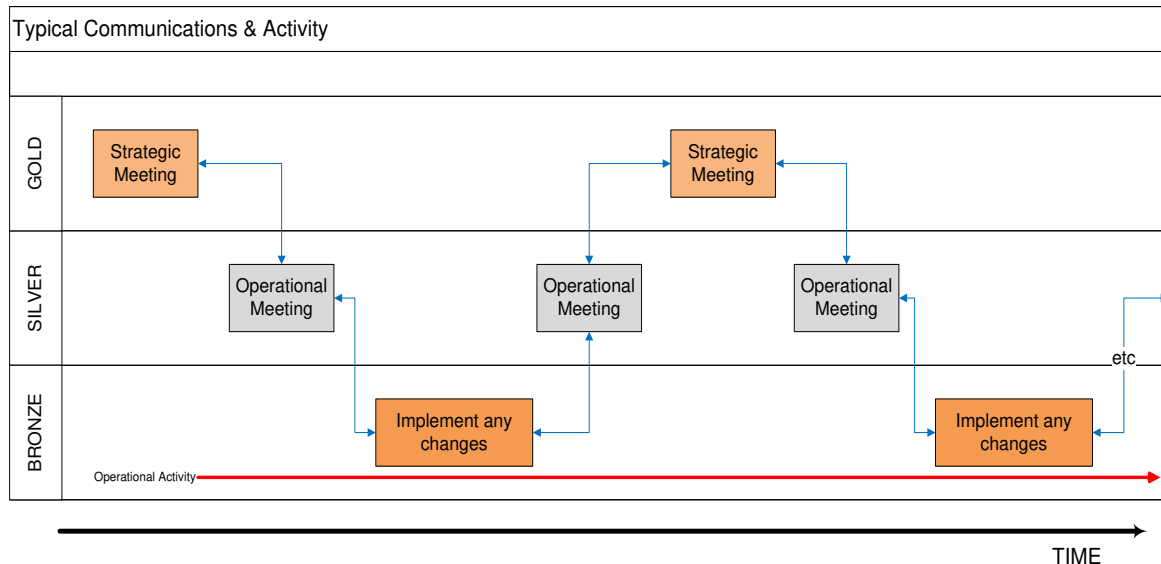
- An inability to coordinate the training session due to the unavailability of the key players, or lack of willingness to be available;
- A need to condense any training or exercises into short slots, typically no more than 2 hours, due both to the cost in terms of staff time and the limited availability of busy people;
- A tendency of the senior management invited to delegate to their staff, usually with no warning to the exercise/training coordinator;
- The need to develop exercises with complex and busy scenarios which will keep all exercises players involved and engaged; and
- A belief that the key players 'already know it'.

Executive Training – Scenario Design

In designing an Executive level exercise, one has to consider what a Gold team actually does. Consider an incident that I experienced with a previous employer. Following a critical systems failure, the impact of which had been compounded by other problems, the Crisis Leadership Team met, and subsequently effectively managed their response to the incident. This involved meeting every 2 or 3 hours, using a conference phone for those members who were not in the main office. Each meeting had an update on the situation, discussed future direction, and then communicated this back out to the Silver-level teams who were managing each geographical response. In between these meetings, unless there were particular issues that required a follow-up, each of the Gold team members were able to continue with their normal jobs, which limited the impact of the incident on other areas of the business.



The communications can be demonstrated as follows:



Time has to be allowed for the passage of information, for instructions to be implemented, and feedback before further decisions can be made. Thus, as demonstrated in the above rough sketch, it would seem apparent that the Gold Team would not need to be in place continually, and exercises should be devised accordingly.

However, contrast this to current strategic level exercises whereby, in order to provide and interesting and stimulating event, much time and effort is spent on developing exercise injects that will result in a complex and challenging scenario, and a steady stream of information throughout the duration of the exercise. I have organised, watched and participated in such exercises which have all involved a busy team that have been on the go throughout the exercise, with exercise serials at frequent intervals. It should be noted that many of the exercise injects have not referred strategic level issues.

Furthermore, a frequent complaint following real incidents and exercises alike is that strategic and gold teams have 'not been strategic enough', and have become too involved with the minutiae of the scenario. By running exercises and training that imply constant activity, this is teaching bad practice, further ingraining an expectation of being constantly busy and surrounded with such information, and a lack of, for want of a better word, 'strategic-ness'



Middle Management

I would suggest that many of the issues mentioned above could be resolved by an alternative focus. Consider now the training requirements for Silver teams, who are in an unenviable position. They need to be able to coordinate the activities of the Bronze teams whilst maintaining good communications with the Gold, ensuring that the Gold strategy is being implemented, and all this whilst often being expected to continue to fulfil their own jobs. I would suggest that, due to this complexity of communication and change in oversight requirements, team members will often have roles that are beyond their usual day-to-day activities which are made even more complex by complex matrix organisations, particularly for large global organisations, where there maybe geographical, managerial and even building communications layers that need to be considered. Furthermore, it is these teams that are more likely to have the requirement to meet on a more regular basis or to be in operation throughout the response to an incident. However, I would suggest that this is the area currently least tackled in training and exercising despite being critical for the effective management of an incident.

There would be distinct benefits gained by targeting training and exercising at the Silver level, such as:

- Ease of coordination as the teams will often consist of middle management, whose diaries are not quite as immovable as those more senior;
- Greater availability, enabling longer training and exercises which will challenge individuals and tests plans and procedures;
- Greater motivation to attend, with less ability to delegate;
- Development for the future leaders of the company, helping to develop generic leadership and management skills; and
- It may be feasible to slot a more realistic Gold exercise with more limited time requirements onto the back of a Silver exercise, forcing the Gold team to focus on strategic issues.

Furthermore, given the critical and complex role of Silver Teams, busy exercises with frequent injects would provide a more realistic training opportunity, enabling stimulating and interesting exercises that are not going to encourage bad practice.

Conclusion & Recommendations

There is a clear role for a strategic team within a business continuity response. However, possibly contentious, but I would suggest that if an effective strategy is in place, then there will not be the immediacy for the Gold team to manage the incident, but more to overview and to provide support, including interactions with the media. Longer term, a Gold team could have obvious roles in determining a way forward, such as following the loss of premises where they would have a vital role in tasks including leading rebuilding and authorising resource allocation. However, this would still not require a 24/7 presence.



I suggest that businesses need to devote at least as much attention and resource to Silver training as to Gold. Whilst Gold training and exercising is an essential part of a business continuity management system, current activities lead to an expectation of continual activity, possibly to the detriment of normal business activities. By switching some of this focus to the equally critical Silver training and exercising, better targeted exercises could be developed that would actually help a business respond effectively to an incident, whilst still continuing to deliver their usual services. Obviously, this begs the question as to whether the same argument applies in some way when considering the requirements of Silver and Bronze teams, but that is not the purpose of this article and I would further suggest that a large element of the Bronze response is an extension of normal staff roles, so the training requirements are different.