

Crisis Point

Is disaster response and recovery a type of project? **Adeline Teoh** asks crisis manager **Ross Campbell**, emergency manager **Carmel Flynn** and change manager **Catherine Smithson** about dealing with disaster

Disasters, emergencies, crises

—call them what you will, but there's no doubt adverse situations need their own special treatment. If you think a disaster situation would be the perfect fit for a project manager looking for the thrill of a high pressure role, perhaps it would be wise to take a look at what disaster management really entails.

There's not much that separates disaster management from project management, at least not in the planning and preparation stage. Essentially, pre-disaster planning is a project in itself, which quells the theory that disaster management is mostly reactive.

"Disaster management, when well done, is a proactive program," says Carmel Flynn, international emergencies manager for the Australian Red Cross (ARC). She says it's important for the project lifecycle to come full circle, for lessons learnt in the recovery process to feed the disaster plans of the next project.

"Within each of the disaster management program areas, we build in disaster risk reduction activities and functions so that we help the community

reduce its vulnerability to future disasters," she explains. "It's about getting enough resources into all stages of disaster management, especially into disaster preparedness."

Ross Campbell agrees. "You can do most of the planning beforehand and that's where the endeavour of project management is very important," says the principal of crisis management consultancy Ross Campbell & Associates. "You can apply the work to managing the crisis much more effectively."

He believes the project begins by identifying the possible threats in advance, "and then building your response capability through the development of a crisis management plan, and a team to manage the crisis".

ALERT, NOT ALARMED

What may be the bulk of the project therefore occurs at the planning stage. The challenge is then raising awareness that the project exists, and is important to the organisation. While the ARC doesn't experience difficulty identifying the importance of a disaster planning project, as this area forms part of their core focus, many corporations treat the threat of disaster as a low priority risk.

"Quite often the managers in charge of disaster management planning find it hard to get engagement and attention from the business. Disaster management is a bit like insurance, we buy it, but we hope we never have to use it," notes Catherine Smithson, managing director of change management training firm Being Human.

Smithson says that like any other project, disaster management planning needs sponsorship: "It needs to be driven by the senior executive; the disaster management professional is the technical expert, but the business needs to lead and drive the change."

In change management terms, disaster management is about finding out who will be affected by various possible scenarios and how they'll be affected, then developing a communications and training plan.

In addition to that, the planning should include identification and measurement of the threat, and guidelines—even a checklist—that will take an organisation through the





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steps to recovery, actions “like informing key stakeholders, and protecting assets where possible,” suggests Campbell.

Perhaps most importantly, disaster management requires the right resources and capability to deal with a situation under pressure.

“A crisis is a decision-making point,” says Campbell. “Crisis management differs from other types of management in that it has to provide an orderly and efficient transition from normal to emergency conditions under unusual circumstances. It’s management under pressure, it’s decision-making under pressure and it’s leadership under pressure.”

Flynn certainly knows the value of the right resources. She says the ARC is very careful about hiring project managers who can deal with that pressure, provide an accurate assessment and analysis of a disaster situation, and get the response underway.

“Because the consequences of disaster management are humanitarian, we engage and deploy the best people we can. We invest in highly qualified project managers because we can’t afford to get it wrong,” she explains. “We can’t underestimate the importance of really good project management.”

WHEN DISASTER STRIKES

“The project is only executed when the crisis occurs, but good project management is all of the work before it,” says Campbell.

It’s what disaster managers call the response phase. While planning is proactive, in most disaster situations there’s rarely any forewarning, says Flynn: “We can do risk mapping, but the reality is the response is the reactive part of disaster management.”

This stage presents the biggest challenges for disaster managers. Not only is the timeframe in the initial response phase condensed, disaster managers may also have to deal with a variety of issues and changing circumstances that could affect their best-laid plans.

Access and logistics could be problematic, and security may be an issue, nominates Flynn. If the disaster-struck area is difficult to access, it may be hard to assess, which

will affect the organisation’s response, including judgements about whether it is safe to enter an area to provide relief, for example in the case of an earthquake where possible aftershock is a consideration.

Then there’s the human element to consider “in terms of acceptance by the country, by the government, by the local community” and keeping an eye on the disaster response of other organisations, says Flynn: “It’s often incredibly challenging to understand who is involved, and what they’re doing, to effectively coordinate [a response] so that you’re adding value in a gap that’s not already being addressed.”

For project managers outside specialised disaster management, Campbell believes it’s important to have practised a response through previous trials. “The only way to deliver it is to have done it and face what could happen. Every risk has an escalation factor you work through in scenario testing,” he says. “There’s no time to scope when a crisis hits. You can do it on the run but it can be more damaging.”

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> The speed of the response will be a key success factor, he adds. "You have to have a standard response in that you have to follow the same pattern: immediate leadership and control of the response, the predetermined actions to take that control, and managing the communication with key stakeholders," Campbell describes. "Lead the response. Time can't be spent on legitimising the work, you have to do it with a sense of purpose and an absence of role conflicts."

Having a sound understanding of the organisation is therefore an advantage, says Smithson. "If disaster strikes, the change manager needs to be fast and have good organisational knowledge. An internal change manager would have a head start on an external manager simply because the timeframes are so condensed you don't have time to say 'how many people, how will this affect them?'"

THE RECOVERY POSITION

It's also important to understand the point at which response becomes recovery, and plan the handover period accordingly. "The other challenge is, and this happens in project management, is when is the disaster over and when does the disaster management role need to wind down?" poses Smithson. "How long the activity runs for is an important decision as well."

In a humanitarian disaster, recovery includes everything from rebuilding communities and providing infrastructure, to implementing disaster risk reduction strategies to prevent repeat impacts. Flynn believes response and recovery definitely overlap, at least in the minds of those affected: "In communities that are affected, they're thinking recovery from day one. People think about the longer term, 'what do we need to move forward?'"

For other types of disaster—say, an IT failure—it could be the point at which the organisation returns to 'business as usual'. The distinction between response and recovery is therefore the point at which the organisation has successfully concluded dealing with the immediate effects of the adverse situation, and has begun the process to return to normal operations.

Disaster recovery is probably more familiar to project managers: scope is more easily defined and more conventional aspects such as a budget and a timeline are set. And it's in the recovery process that project sponsors need to listen to stakeholder voices and assess their needs going forward, notes Flynn.

"We wouldn't do recovery programming without having made an assessment and an analysis of that assessment," she says. "There should be much more beneficiary communication for the recovery phase, where effects are longer term. It's incredibly important to be flexible and agile in choosing what we do and in aligning what beneficiaries want us to do. Communication with beneficiaries is critical."

AFTER DISASTER

Proper debriefing is an extremely important phase following any disaster situation, and this is the area where change management can assist the most, says Smithson: "Project managers can learn from the power of after action reviews, the importance of adult learning and looking back and learning from experience."

The process needs to be as frank and transparent as possible for all parties to benefit and for that benefit to be carried forward, she believes.

"A lot of project managers and disaster managers are skilled at [debriefing], but many change managers have very high quality facilitation skills that enable those kinds of conversations to take place in a blame-free atmosphere," says Smithson.

"There's a real art to creating an environment where everyone takes responsibility but no one's pointing the finger, and facilitating a workshop so that people are really heard, and uncomfortable issues are brought out into the open, talked about and dealt with."

She adds that change managers have a lot to offer disaster managers in the implementation and reinforcement of change, particularly in the after action review where parties seek lessons and identify what they might do differently next time.

This echoes how Flynn describes the cycle of feeding lessons learned into future plans: "If you think of a project lifecycle, we do the same with disaster management: we start with preparedness, response, recovery, and recovery will go into preparedness for the next disaster."

Disaster management is not so different from project management. Stakeholder buy-in, adequate planning and an understanding of risk factors are the top three success factors in a disaster project, and while tight timeframes may affect project execution, experienced and agile project managers are well-equipped to deal with the additional pressure.

The key is the solid foundation of project management skills and methods, according to Campbell, Flynn and Smithson, who all believe that the methods remain constant when dealing with disaster situations. While those situations may have their own unique challenges, don't all projects? ❖

TAKE CONTROL

Crisis consultant Ross Campbell says the speed of communication is important for your organisation to gain control of a disaster situation, particularly in this new age of social media.

"The web has made crises more open and more accountable. We're talking about huge speed in the way things are communicated," he says. "If you don't get your message out quickly, somebody else will, in a way that you might not like."

He says non-traditional media outlets like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have opened up avenues of communication that you need to address in your response plan, or the situation could have further adverse effects on your organisation.

"If you haven't got a response ready, you'll lose the golden hour to a wide range of other stakeholders who are better prepared than you," Campbell warns. "You'll lose control of your own destiny in the way you manage the crisis because somebody else has taken the ground."