

Crisis Management – Selecting the Right Staff

Mission Critical

Helen Shannon, of Crisis Management Consultancy OCTO, presents a guide to preparing people and organisations for crisis

The ability to cope in a crisis, you'll be relieved to know, is not as elusive a quality as managers sometimes fear. As a starting point, it is useful to bear in mind what crisis management skills are not. Although the ability to manage time pressure is an important feature of crisis management, the discipline is not only about working to deadlines. Nor is it purely concerned with the ability to 'spin', or manage reputation. The public face of a company during a crisis is not the only factor. Robust representation is vital, but most be underpinned by substance. Key elements of crisis management, meanwhile, are the ability to identify and master the cardinal issues in a complex, fast-moving situation, to establish clear aims and objectives, to maintain a sense of perspective and objectivity, and to make sound critical decisions as early as possible. Finally, senior management must lead the whole company through the situation.

Typical management selection methods such as psychometric tests and interviews are useful in identifying key management styles and personality features for normal conditions. They can be positively dangerous, however, if interpreted in terms of crisis management potential. As a great statesman once noted of the Cuban Missile Crisis: "The pressure does strange things to a human being, even to brilliant, self-confident, mature, experienced persons. For some it brings out characteristics and strengths that perhaps even they never knew they had, and for others the pressure is too overwhelming." At Octo, our experience of assessing senior managers for crisis scenarios bears out Robert Kennedy's words: crises bring out unexpected features of human behaviour – sometimes for better and sometime for worse.

Though our work with our clients includes conventional assessment methods, by far the most telling in refining and assessing crisis capability are practical exercises – interviews and psychometric testing are useful in identifying essential characteristics of the individual, but cannot predict which of these features are amplified and become predominant in a crisis situation.

For organisations, the actions necessary to design a company that can move along the spectrum of corporate culture from consensus (the norm) to directive (crisis mode) are not complex. They include designing the crisis organisation by building on existing cultural and organisational strengths but ensuring speed and flexibility of action, and implementing a short training programme (typically of one to two days) for senior and middle managers in crisis management techniques. Crisis exercising at a suitable – but not onerous – frequency is also necessary to develop and test the structure. This can help to rehearse the information conduits to the person in charge of the crisis, and establish corporate decision-making mechanisms.

Managers who attend crisis management development programmes report an interesting and very positive side effect of the training: their day-to-day management skills are enhanced considerably. It may be that this new focus will go some way in helping to recognise that a crisis is developing, or achieve the ultimate aim of crisis management – stopping the crisis before it happens.