

Developing incident management skills in the water industry

For water companies, incident management is a way of life; the industry is well-prepared, well-trained and well-practised.

By Helen Shannon, Director OCTO

Nonetheless, the bar is high. Deregulation and wider public scrutiny brings a commercial focus to the capability to respond to and recover from incidents. Customers rightly take reliable, clean and safe water provision for granted, and similarly, their waste water removal. This is a measure of the success of the industry. Our ability effectively to deal with disruptions to service is now a differentiating feature in the market. As a Category 2 responder, the water industry is expected also to play a professional role alongside other responding agencies to resolve local and regional incidents.

Preparing for emergencies is less about preparing for the known challenges, as being prepared to deal with the unexpected. Arguably, responding to water leaks or sewage plant flooding, presents few surprises to an experienced response team. However, because water is quite literally everywhere, there is a wide range of incidents in which the water industry could play a major or supporting role.

In OCTO, we have worked with the utilities sector for over 15 years, and have prepared dozens if not hundreds of training exercises covering a wide range of scenarios: cyber-attacks; sabotage; extortion; water contamination; aircraft crashes; mass shooting; chemical incidents; earthquakes; dam breach; pandemic; flooding; power failure; fire and explosion; severe weather; business continuity; and many more. Although the scenarios are diverse, there are common lessons across the water industry.

Water companies are geographically spread. Response teams are thus the face of the company in the community. Their awareness of reputational issues and their ability to feed relevant and timely information, beyond just



the technical details, is vital to supporting the communications response. Reputation Awareness training is helpful here.

The social media revolution has enhanced the quality of service that the industry can offer clients, and conversely opened up new vehicles for reputational attack, particularly and rapidly manifest during incidents. Communications management is a vital component of incident management. Realistic simulation of social media interaction during an incident or crisis is an important enhancement for effective communications exercising.

Call centres are a vital source of information in a major incident. Of course there will be capacity issues and the industry knows how to manage these. Key to effective incident management is to

integrate customer management into the incident management team.

Risk management is fundamental to corporate governance. The water industry has a unique blend of risks: technology; health safety and environment; reputational and commercial; and the risk landscape is steadily changing. Cyber risks are one of the most recent challenges. Incident Management Teams comprise specialists from many branches of the industry, but it is important that all are able to appreciate the risk profile of the company and their role in mitigating these risks during an incident.

Incident Management Teams do not always enjoy the luxury of being co-located in an incident management centre. In larger water companies, servicing a wide geographic footprint, they need



to work efficiently in 'virtual' teams, with a small core team to provide essential co-ordination. Areas such as situation awareness, information management and focussed decision-making are especially challenging. These are real-time skills which need specialist training. It is vital to integrate command and control techniques with command centre design and preferred IT media.

Crisis and incident management procedures are only as good as the people who use them. Through real incidents, but most commonly through training and exercising, people develop a 'muscle memory' of how to think and act in an incident. It is critical that the Incident Management Team has tools and techniques to manage resource and time-line management. Once again, these are well-understood principles in the water industry. We find that important lessons are learned when resource and time-line

management are simulated accurately in response to decisions and deployments made by the team. This allows the team to explore for themselves the challenges of using their skills in the more intensive dynamic of a major incident. Simulation models, for instance for contamination spread, distribution of alternative water supplies, deployment of maintenance and repair resources, together provide accurate ground-truth to keep exercises on track and avoid the pitfalls of building false lessons from unjustified assumptions.

Management of corporate crisis is undertaken by the senior management of a company. The corporate perspective must maintain an objective separation from the incident management, whilst enjoying regular, focused and purposeful briefing. It is vital to test these skills realistically. Even a well-trained team can be rapidly overwhelmed

by the sheer volume of information that besets an organisation in crisis. Attention from a wide range of influential stakeholders needs clear strategic focus, and again time is a resource that must be optimised. Realistic crisis exercising which simulate the range, volume, depth and complexity of crisis communications are needed to help an organisation appreciate fully the undoubted strengths and also the weaknesses in crisis arrangements.

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