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Imagine: scenario-based approaches to crisis management

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IMAGINE

SCENARIO-BASED APPROACHES TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Eelco Dykstra is currently working in The Hague to start the European roll-out of the International Katrina Project. He is well-known for his work at the George Washington University as professor of International Emergency Management. Eelco Dykstra is highly experienced in both the academic and the practical field of crisis management. In this article he discusses eight important elements ('lessons learned') of managing crises.

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Imagine you have the following assignment for a most important exam: prepare a number of questions that can be used to evaluate a major crisis management exercise. The only other information you get is that you have to evaluate the scenario of "A bomb alarm at the central railway station of Den Bosch" for the simulation. Also imagine that you have a broad understanding of all the issues in International Emergency Management and that you have studied Chapter 1 of the book "The Storm" (published by The International Katrina Project, Inc., - see www.stormovereurope.org). You decide to combine everything and, after many hours of hard thinking, you come up with the following list of evaluation questions.

The professor who will assess and grade your assignment is an outspoken advocate of more common sense included in crisis management and is renowned as a real tough questioner during examinations. Therefore, you decide to prepare a few paragraphs to illustrate the importance of each of the questions on your list. You choose a conversational format since the exam itself will be an oral one.

1. 'Did participants give attention – if any – to the periods before and after the actual response phase?
2. 'What balance – if any – did the participants seek between 'policy' and 'practice'?
3. 'How realistic were the participants about what they might be able or unable to do when they were overwhelmed, and how did they communicate this to others?
4. 'To what extent were the participants sensitive to the emotions that beset themselves, the people they rescue, their colleagues and the media?
5. 'To what extent did the participants plan for and maintained critical functions such as energy, communication, transport/evacuation, water, food, shelter and sanitation?
6. 'To what extent did the participants plan for and monitor their supply chain to ensure that the ever-changing demands were met?
7. Ask the participants: "Who's in charge here?"
8. 'How did the participants deal with a need to improvise and to what extent do they accept and encourage volunteer effort?'

This is what you write:

Question 1 - Remember the limits of a response-only approach.

What do most people think about the response to disasters when the entire community knows there has been misinformation, delayed post-impact recovery, malfunctioning of critical infrastructure, painful rehabilitation, inadequate insurance, boisterous advocacy, slow-moving legislation and brutal psychological damage? Not much, is the answer: the opinion is almost always negative. Even when the response – given the circumstances – was in fact adequate, it bears the brunt of criticism, tainted with the bitter taste of the victims' anger or disappointment in the aftermath of the disasters.

As far as the city management of Den Bosch is concerned, you recommend that the planning for future incidents

consist of scenario-based thinking that is a combination of pre-impact risk management, response management, and post-impact consequence management.

Question 2 - The functional distance that exists between policy and practice.

At times it appears that entire oceans divide the policy-makers from the practitioners. It is therefore good to have the teams who participate in exercises consist of participants from both sides. Why? Because it is a good way to increase the number of people who understand both functions; while plenty of people work the policy side and plenty of people the practice side, we always seem to have too few people who can do both. And of those we need many more of: they move, seemingly without effort, back and forth between policy and practice and narrow the divide in-between.

For the leadership in Den Bosch, you formulate the recommendation that all operational and policy agencies need to be represented in scenario-based exercises.

"For ourselves, we have created the unrealistic expectation of a society free of risk and immune to threats, of a population that will live happily forever."

Question 3 - Consider the public perception of what professional emergency managers or government agencies responsible for crisis management do.

In the past, we have not communicated well with the public. First, because we do not understand fully the emotional dimensions of 'risk' and 'crisis', and secondly, we do not understand all that well how the media works. As a result, we do not utilize the media well in communicating with the public. We, as what we might call 'the global rescue community', have done an excellent job of convincing everyone – the citizenry, the media and the politicians – to believe that as long we are provided with money, equipment, staff and respect, we can eliminate all their worries and solve all their disaster-related problems. At the same time we know full well that the best we can hope for is to make a situation "less bad", but that we can never make it "good". For ourselves, we have created the unrealistic expectation of a society that is free of risk and immune to threats, of a population that will live happily forever. We have led people to expect that smarts and science can prevent disasters and that, should one slip through, we can manage it, that chaos and misery can be dealt with! We feed the desire for a world without untimely deaths, without dysfunction, without damage, without destruction and without despair, knowing full well that all these accompany disaster and that disaster is unavoidable. So the ever-confident message we communicate becomes the inevitable foundation for a negative public reaction when disaster strikes.

You decide to recommend to both the policy and operational people in the city government of Den Bosch to communicate with the public and each other with ruthless honesty, also about own ignorance and failures.

Question 4 – A 'business-as-usual' approach does not work during or after a crisis.

Oftentimes, governments and most businesses do not understand this. They have been trained to manage time, but in times of a crisis unfolding this dynamics reverses itself. Instead, the events-in-time will now determine what their management will be. This so-called 'event-driven' management, so different from the traditional management principles taught in MBA programmes, is rarely taught. If public authorities would revert too soon to a 'business-as-usual' approach, they again will come across the powerful force of public emotion. Every disaster is a major disturbance, a huge tsunami of emotion. Too often, the blame game is played and if no one is left to blame, we call it an "act of God". But remember when the public cannot blame anyone, they will blame the government as an outlet for their frustration, fear, or grief. And by not being sensitive to these emotions, by insisting we return to "business as usual" with its bureaucratic rule, standard operating procedures and a fixation on process, people will turn angry.

You decide to recommend that everyone involved in crisis management in Den Bosch should take a course in 'event-driven' management.

Question 5 - This thing called "critical infrastructure"...

A conglomerate of functions that is vital for our every-day society, such as energy, transport and communication. When they break down, our societies break down. And the more highly our societies are developed, the more vulnerable they are to breaking...: an odd paradox, isn't it? We put things in the ground and we expect them to work forever - out of sight, out of mind.

Your advice to Den Bosch would be to include representatives from all categories of the city's Critical Infrastructure in future incident planning, simulations and exercises.

"Logistics is the be-all and end-all of all things in emergency and crisis management"

Question 6 - Logistics!

It sounds so boring, but logistics is the be-all and end-all of all things in emergency and crisis management. Knowing in advance what resources are available for any type of emergency, where they are and whether they can be moved, if so by whom and by what means, by what route, to which location, in how much time, is key to everything. And when we feel overwhelmed, we bring in the military. Civil-military cooperation is a good, even an excellent, thing, but let's not forget that we often bring in the military to compensate for gross inadequacies or even outright incompetence in logistics management on the civilian side.

You recommend that Den Bosch links a 'Resource Inventory Database' with the city's emergency operations centre.

Question 7 - The need for 'Unified Command'

Unified Command is a military term for not having multiple heads on the same body, as one cannot manage a disaster by committee. At the end of the day, one person or authority should make the decisions, be it for the better or the worse. What we see happen in practice however, is often the opposite. Platforms such as local government services, hospitals, officials, fire service, law enforcement and ambulance services often compete for seats at the head-table, even during disasters. Conflicting priorities – whether really in conflict or only perceived to be so – always create chaos. Conflicts based on different perceptions on the roles and responsibilities of, local, provincial, national and even international authorities always create a disaster within a disaster...

You recommend that Den Bosch makes haste with finally delegating executive authority to the Safety Region ('Veiligheidsregio') it belongs to.

Question 8 - Your crisis management plan should have a non-plan component.

We're talking about the ability to improvise, indeed the necessity of improvisation. Overly regulatory approaches by authorities who feel exclusively responsible for emergency preparedness, response and recovery, paralyse civil society and will fail. For some reason professional rescue workers expect that their organisations and the buildings that house them will be miraculously spared

from the fall-out of a disaster. The fact is that many rescue workers, their buildings and their equipment will also be hit; communications may be down; rescue workers may not be able to get to the places where help is most needed, et cetera. One could argue that under those circumstances the expression "first responder" no longer applies to professional rescue staff but to the public-at-large. Neighbours, family, friends and strangers become the true first responders while paid personnel struggle.

This is what you tell Den Bosch: "In the first hours the population could prove to be the most critical part of your entire response plan and it should therefore be made part of it. Realize that people behave more socially during a crisis - and not less, as some media-inspired rumours would have it. So you have massive, massive volunteer capacity within the local community. Use and harness it, as they are all first responders. Sure, they may not have been trained by you, so there will be improvisation. So what? Don't get upset. To the contrary, any disaster preparedness and response plan should be their plan anyway, not only yours!"

On the day of the exam, you become increasingly nervous. You decide to imagine and list what the consequences of both success and failure will be. You then project them back to today so that you have figured out what actions or answers you have available ahead of time.

The examination turned out to be a breeze. The professor had read the same book and commented: 'You are so right in taking this approach; we need not more science but more or better stories!'. You receive the highest grade possible.

You're an A+ and well on your way to becoming a proficient crisis manager - Imagine that. But then, how proficient is 'proficient enough' - Imagine that.

Perhaps food for thought for another article? ■

¹ the one in which Eva Janova, a Czech crisis manager, addresses a conference.

The IKP Inc. is a US-EU-International cooperative program that uses reality-fiction scenarios to describe the events in case a super-storm would paralyze the critical infrastructure in eleven European countries. Based on these scenarios, the IKP will collect, analyze and disseminate conclusions with corresponding recommendations obtained through a system of 'focused feedback' from a network of participating entities.

Van Negen tot Vijf

In de rubriek 'Van Negen tot Vijf' stelt een medewerker van het Instituut Bestuurskunde zich voor en vertelt waar hij of zij allemaal mee bezig is. Deze keer is de beurt aan drs. Jolanda den Heijer. Zij werkt als studieadviseur masterstudenten en coördinator buitenland bij het instituut..

door Lisa Blanken en Anneclaire Hagenaar

Is er nog verschil in hoe intensief je bezig bent met internationale en Nederlandse studenten?

Ja, de mensen die hier de bachelor hebben gedaan weten al hoe het er hier aan toe gaat. Wat dat betreft ben je als internationale of HBO student meer in het nadeel. Ze hebben daarom altijd veel meer vragen.

Wat gebeurt er als studenten vragen stellen?

Dat hangt een beetje van de vraag af. Maar als het gaat om persoonlijke omstandigheden, iedere persoon heeft wel eens tegenslag, of er nou iemand overleden is of dat iemand ziek is geworden, dan neem je daar de tijd voor. Zo kan de persoon zijn verhaal kwijt en kun je proberen om hem of haar weer in de goede richting te duwen. Verder staat er veel informatie op de website, maar kunnen studenten vaak het juiste niet vinden. In dat geval hoeft ik meestal alleen een link door te sturen om de vraag te kunnen beantwoorden.

Merk je dat er een verschil is tussen bachelor- en masterstudenten?

De masterstudenten zijn een heel verschillende groep in vergelijking tot de bachelorstudenten. De master zelf heeft veel verschillende instromen; HBO'ers, internationale studenten, eigen bachelors en mensen die ergens anders hun bachelor hebben gedaan. Dat maakt het een moeilijker groep, maar aan de andere kant is hij ook wat makkelijker omdat ze al een opleiding achter de rug hebben. Hierdoor zijn ze zelfstandiger. Het zijn alle twee leuke groepen, maar de master vind ik stiekem wat leuker.

Wat is je indruk van de Universiteit en het Instituut?

Goede vraag. De universiteit is gewoon een hele leuke plek om te werken. Ik heb wat dat betreft gewoon een hele leuke baan. Af en toe is het wel heel erg druk en je merkt dat alle veranderingen in Den Haag ook zijn weerslag hebben op hoe ik mijn werk moet doen. Dat maakt het soms moeilijk.

Wat vind je het leukste aan je werk?

De studenten zelf. Ik heb een heleboel verschillende studenten met ieder zijn eigen achtergrond. Aangezien ik heel nieuwsgierig ben aangelegd, is dit gewoon een hele leuke functie. Ik mag legaal nieuwsgierig zijn en dingen vragen. ■

**Wat is je achtergrond?**

Ik heb in Leiden pedagogiek gestudeerd. Nadat ik in 2004 afgestudeerd ben heb ik drie jaar gewerkt als onderwijsassistent bij pedagogiek, wat ik erg leuk vond. Daarna heb ik 1 jaar als onderzoeksassistent gewerkt, waarna ik bij bestuurskunde terecht ben gekomen. Ik heb eerst een aantal maanden Daniëlle Ladan vervangen als studieadviseur voor bachelorstudenten. Toen de studieadviseur voor masterstudenten wegging heb ik haar positie overgenomen.

"Het is gevarieerd werk. Ik weet 's morgens nooit waar ik 's middags mee bezig ben."

Wat voor werkzaamheden voer je uit als studieadviseur van de master?

Mijn werkzaamheden zijn heel gevarieerd, ik weet 's morgens nooit waar ik 's middags mee bezig ben. Er zijn veel mensen die bellen en mailen die ik van informatie voorzie. Vaak zijn het internationale studenten die graag willen weten of zij kunnen starten met een master, wat de voorwaarden daarvoor zijn en hoe het er in Leiden aan toe gaat. Maar ook de huidige bachelor studenten stellen vragen die ik beantwoord. Verder doe ik veel aan voorlichtingactiviteiten, met name aan HBO'ers. Dit omdat zij tegenwoordig vaak de overstap maken naar de Universiteit, aangezien dat makkelijker is geworden door het bachelor/master systeem.