

# THE MOUSE IN THE ROOM: “WHERE’S THE PLANNING FOR PEOPLE?”

BY KATHRYN MCKEE



A perusal of NFPA 1600 (2007), the ASIS Guidelines and the DRII Best Practices draft indicate a critical and necessary detailed technical planning process, attention to selection of teams and identification of roles and responsibilities, and plans for drills, exercises and debriefings. But from a Human Resources perspective, there is a lack of focus on advance planning for HR issues.

HR, on the other hand, much of the time does not understand that it has a role to play in preparedness, and often says, “It’s not part of my job”. This article will explain the importance of considering what can be gained from HR’s close involvement through real life experiences of the author.

Organizations may test their plans by having employees practice fire drills, building evacuations, or sheltering in place. The bell rings, people go to their assigned stations, practice their roles, or, go stand in the parking lot. Floor

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wardens or supervisors count the staff to ensure all are accounted for, the whistle blows, and back to work they go. But, what happens to behavior when it is the real deal?

Why are contingent HR policies and programs important you may ask? In the guidelines mentioned above, the emphasis is on notification systems, evacuations, identification of backup payroll systems, notifications of next of kin and crisis counseling. There is no mention of developing training programs for supervisors and managers so they know how to deal with traumatized employees who may be temporarily incapable of working. Rarely is there advance planning for dealing with deaths and working with victims' families who may be looking to their loved one's employer for solace as well as financial help.

When asking audiences attending business continuity or human resource management conferences if they have ever experienced a real disaster, about 20% of the attendees raise their hands. When asked how many have considered contingent Human Resources/Personnel policies as part of their planning, few hands go up at all.

By not having experienced a real emergency, it is difficult to grasp the enormity of employee reaction, and as a result, valuable time is spent on figuring out what to do instead of being able to quickly activate plans for caring for employees immediately so they can get back to productive work as soon as possible.

Several years ago, an electrical short on the 12th floor of the 62 story First Interstate Headquarters building in Los Angeles caused a computer to burst into flame. Within minutes, the floor was ablaze with fire which spread upward to the 16th floor where it was finally extinguished. Floors below the 12th floor were water damaged; floors above 16 were smoke damaged. The first few days were spent finding office space and equipment for 3,000 displaced employees, and on the following Monday, they reported to work in scattered locations in the downtown area, without their computers, calendars, phones or even a desk to call their own. For the first day

or two, it was chaotic, but host employees were friendly, and sympathetic. By the third day, host employees were grouchy, and the "guest" employees were angry, sad, confused, depressed or in shock or disbelief. Many felt betrayed or violated and felt the building would forever be unsafe.

The HR staff spent an enormous amount of time trying to figure out what to do about pay, absenteeism, and behavioral issues. Additional time was spent designing internal communications so that we could quickly knock down rumors. Since the bank used trauma counselors regularly in the branch offices when employees had to face bank robbers, we adapted the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to encompass all affected employees. We re-vamped our progressive discipline policy to encompass a mandatory visit to EAP for employees whose behavior changed dramatically during this time of crisis. We developed a special training program for supervisors and managers to help them identify and understand how behavior can change due to trauma, and coached them on how to conduct a counseling interview as a first step instead of the traditional warning.

### Planning Works!

The time spent putting these programs in place paid off when, in the following year, northern California was jolted by a 7.1 earthquake, and the HR and Communications plans crafted earlier were activated overnight. The following year, the Los Angeles Basin experienced simultaneous riots in several areas, and frightened employees had to drive home through them, or lived in the areas under siege. And, the year after that, the 6.7 Northridge earthquake occurred. In both cases, the HR staff swung into action in what seemed like nanoseconds.

Business Continuity planners can take away from this example ideas on steps to discuss with their HR colleagues asking these questions: "Just how prepared are we to deal with the human side of an emergency? Do we have contingent policies in place? Have we thought about preparing management for employee behavior that is different

from how they normally act?" They can also examine their practice drills or table-tops to include stress-induced aberrant behaviors on the part of management and employees, and how to deal with them.

### Leadership

Questions about behavior lead to leadership issues. How are Incident Commanders or EOC Managers selected? What behavioral competencies are important in making those selection decisions? What role has HR played in making those selection decisions? How will these leaders act when faced with an emergency, large or small? How do they fare under intense pressure? In the author's own experience, a senior executive lost his self control during a crisis. A 5.9 earthquake struck one morning while she was in a breakfast meeting on the 6th floor of the building mentioned above. The epicenter was very close to the downtown area, and as a result, the building not only jerked, but then began to twist. It was very scary; the leader panicked and wanted to flee the building, which we ultimately did. It was absolutely the wrong thing to do and set a very poor example for others who were panicking and running downstairs.

The HR staff can be helpful in working with business continuity planners to develop a competency model for selecting team leaders and others assigned to lead sub-teams or functions that come into play if an incident occurs. A competency is an observable skill, knowledge, attribute or behavior. Dr Wayne Brockbank, a consultant in the field of competency assessment, when asked what competencies one should have to prepare for a disaster answered, "Strategic decision-making; the ability to lead strategic planning efforts; manage change, determine when and how to change direction, and, be able to make quick decisions".

But what about when disaster strikes? Richard Boyatzis, co-author of "Resonant Leadership" suggests the following competencies are needed: "Mindfulness, i.e., being aware of one's own emotions, empathy and a keen sense of one's surroundings". He also indicated that "because others may be looking to you



for leadership, possessing self-awareness and self control can help you to think quickly, remain somewhat dispassionate, and instill hope in others through your verbal and non-verbal communication”.

Dr. Steven Schoonover identified a competency he calls “containment,” which enables one to set boundaries for behaviors and actions by modeling the way; calm people through a soothing voice and establish control by being firm. He also mentions being dispassionate and empathetic, yet maintaining a degree of psychological distance so you are not overcome with the emotion of the moment.

How can you determine if your leaders and managers have these qualities? First, ask the senior team to provide insight into their direct reports’ abilities to perform under pressure. How well do they maintain composure, and act and think quickly under fire? Then, develop a role-play simulation where the situation changes dramatically, the unexpected happens, and stressors are built into the action. Have observers watch not only the players’ reactions and decision-making, but assign some observers to concentrate on the behaviors of those in key roles as well as those in subordinate positions. HR staff should be given these observer roles, and then give detailed feedback on what leadership and decision-making styles worked and what didn’t. This could be an opportunity for leadership development.

The Managing Committee at First Interstate Bank, Ltd had exactly that experience. We were called together one afternoon to participate in a table-top exercise built around a kidnapping of

an expatriate staff member in a country known for kidnapping expatriate employees and then demanding huge ransom payments. The facilitator moved us along at a very fast pace making us analyze quickly and make fast decisions. It was uncomfortable for us as we normally worked in an environment where decision-making was deliberate and not always speedy. We were forced out of our comfort zone, and we pushed back against the facilitator who remained relentless. We got through the exercise, debriefed our behavior and received good and not so good feedback.

Several months following that exercise, when we were deep into divesting parts of First Interstate Bank Ltd to Standard Chartered Bank, the unthinkable happened. Our head of the Asia-Pacific Region had flown to Korea to explain the divestiture to the employees in the Seoul office, when he suddenly found himself being held hostage by all the branch employees who had donned black headbands, pulled up chairs and blocked the door to the glass-walled conference room.

The Managing Committee in Los Angeles quickly assembled in our conference room, and we began teleconferencing with the Seoul office to learn firsthand from the region head and country manager what the issues were. It was *déjà vu* all over again. We were able to call on our learnings from the table-top exercise, think quickly and make the best decisions possible under the real-life stress we were under in order to give our executive an action plan. He told the employees what could and could not happen, and after much discussion, they freed him so he could

come back to California and implement the agreed-upon plan. We never would have been able to perform effectively and efficiently had we not had the intensive training in the table-top exercise.

Returning to the HR function, ask, “Where should they be in all this?” HR people themselves need to take the initiative to become educated on the intricacies of the disaster preparedness, response and recovery planning elements so they can be impactful members of the organization’s BCP efforts. Is HR a member of the Core Team? If not, invite them. If they are not on the planning or response teams, involve them. If they are not thinking about the people issues mentioned above, ask them to start putting plans and programs together.

### Action Steps

Here are five actions business continuity planners can take:

1. If HR is not a part of the BCP team, invite them.
2. Ask HR to develop an assessment of your planning and response leaders to ensure they have or can develop skills in crisis situations.
3. Develop table-top exercises or simulations with stressors to test leadership skills in pressure situations.
4. Ensure HR develops contingent HR policies and programs.
5. Ensure managers understand and can identify behaviors caused by stressful situations.

Without a business continuity plan, the odds are an organization may not survive. But without people, an organization cannot survive. A strong partnership between BCP and HR can help ensure the organization can get back on its feet more quickly and return faster to productivity.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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