

Crisis Management Planning in Zoological Institutions.

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Introduction.

Disasters and crisis events impact upon the lives of many thousands of people each year. Within minutes, a disaster can rip apart a community or place of work and change the lives of the people it affects forever. Those who understand disasters and know what to do before and after a disaster hits can significantly reduce the impact of the event. These guidelines have been written as a result of first hand experiences gained at Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve (Canberra, Australia). In addition, I convened a workshop on Disaster and Emergency Planning at the 1st International Congress of Zookeeping held from the 4th to the 7th October 2003 at Avifauna in the Netherlands. The results of this workshop have also contributed to the writing of this document.

On the 18th January 2003, a wildfire driven by winds exceeding 160 km/hour swept through the 5,500 hectares that make up the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, incinerating all that lay in its path. The fires then continued on to the suburbs of Canberra, destroying more than 500 homes and other buildings and blackening the landscape. In the aftermath of this disaster the scene that confronted me within the Reserve can be best described by comparing it to the images of the effects of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during the Second World War. More than 75% of the Reserves' captive wildlife and around 90% of the free-range wildlife had been killed or critically injured and almost all of the facilities we relied upon on a daily basis to service the Reserve and its wildlife had been burnt to the ground and associated equipment totally destroyed – not even my own home had been spared.



The fires consumed everything in its path – blackened tree trunks were all that stood around our destroyed Animal House facility.

Downloaded from <http://www.australasianzookeeping.org/>

Recent years have seen a number of major natural and man made disasters and emergencies occur in various parts of the world. Wildfires, earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, landslides and other natural events along with utility breakdowns, environmental spills, engineering failures and acts of violence have all impacted upon people going about their normal daily lives. The one common factor with all of these events is that the timing and extent of the devastation wrought by these tragedies are unpredictable: no one knows when or where the next disaster will occur. So how do you prepare yourself for the unknown, and ensure that the actions you take in the aftermath of a disastrous event are carried out in a safe, effective and constructive manner? You plan for it!

The writing of a comprehensive “Crisis Management Plan” will not prevent a catastrophic event. However, the forward planning process and the identification of key operations, functions and the backup processes you put into place will assist in ensuring the safety of staff and visitors, reduce the impact of the emergency upon the operation of your facility, help ensure the welfare and minimise the emotional effects it will have upon your colleagues and ultimately ensure the best possible care for your captive collection during the aftermath of the emergency. In many regions the production of a crisis management plan is a regulatory requirement, however even if such a plan is not required by law, every institution should have a comprehensive crisis management plan in effect, and all staff working in the institution should be familiar with it. It has often been said that “disasters only occur when hazards meet vulnerability”.

Finally, always remember the principle of Murphy’s Law: “If something can possibly go wrong then it will, and at the worst possible time”. And also remember that if for some reason Murphy's Law fails to operate, then it’s probably building up for something really big!



The Koala Enclosure the day after the fire - dead animals lay on the path.

The Basics.

There are three basic components to any crisis management plan:

- Readiness
- Response
- Recovery

In the development of a crisis management plan you must go through a process whereby you:

- Evaluate your institutions specific risks and vulnerabilities
- Identify the personnel and resources required for an effective response
- Create an effective communications and warning system including a clearly designated chain of command
- Test your plan through responding to a simulated crisis event
- Have in place the actions to be taken during the recovery phase of the crisis.

A comprehensive crisis management plan will provide the basis for a planned response that will ensure that staff reacts to an emergency situation in a manner that will ensure the safety and well being of;

- Staff
- Captive wildlife
- Visitors
- Auxiliary staff (e.g.: contractors)
- The environment
- Surrounding communities
- Facilities and property

The support of senior management and the involvement of all employees at your institution in the development of your crisis management plan will be critical to the success of the plan, and the use of professional services in reviewing your plan and identifying any weaknesses should also be utilised.

Readiness: What should be included in the Plan?

Crisis events.

One of the difficulties in writing a “Crisis Management Plan” is that you are basically developing guidelines which will be used to deal with an event for which you cannot predict the extent or nature of, and which will occur at some unknown point in time in the future. Whilst some institutions will be able to prioritise the likelihood of specific events occurring as a result of their geographic location or through other means, many institutions will have to plan for a complete range of possible events. All zoological institutions will have a common set of possible events that they should plan for though.

These include (but are not limited to):

- Animal escape
- Zoonotic diseases and epidemics
- Hazardous biological agents
- Lost persons
- Death or injury
- Infrastructure fire or flooding
- Robbery/hold-ups
- Animal attack
- Power and other utility outages (e.g. water, gas, phone etc.)
- Engineering failure
- Storm damage
- Individuals being threatened/safety (assault/hostage etc.)
- Vandalism
- Vehicular &/or machinery accident
- Entrapment
- Lightning strike
- Medical conditions (staff or visitors)
- Dangerous chemicals &/or residues
- Bomb or other explosive threat
- Firearm discharge/threat
- Gas &/or toxic fumes
- Bolide impact event
- Poisonings
- Tree fall

Whilst you may think that the above list is a long one, I should point out that during the past 27 years that I have worked in the industry, I have personally encountered almost all of them at one time or another. Some institutions will also have to consider the following scenarios, based upon their geographic location and other factors:

- Wildfires
- Avalanches, land or mud slides
- Earthquakes
- Cyclones, hurricanes, tornadoes or other climatic events
- Ice, snow
- Subsidence and sink holes
- Flood
- Temperature extremes (severe heat or cold)
- Tsunami, storm surge and other tidal events
- Volcanic eruptions, lahars and other associated events
- Radioactive leakage

Hazard Surveys.

As your crisis management plan needs to address any and all emergencies that can be reasonably expected to occur at your institution, you will need to perform a “hazard survey” or “risk assessment analysis” to identify your exposure to the various risks. This process should not be confined to the risks contained within your institution, but also recognize the hazards that nearby facilities and other external factors may pose, as well as the hazards that may be posed should a utility or other service provider cease to function.

Based on your hazard survey and assessment, your crisis management plan should then be written for the various emergency scenarios that you might experience.

Minimisation measures.

Minimisation measures should be developed as a result of your hazard survey to reduce your risk or exposure to possible emergency situations.

Minimisation measures include:

- Well structured emergency/crisis management plan: as previously stated, the writing of a comprehensive plan will not prevent a catastrophic event, however the forward planning process you undertake will assist in ensuring the safety and well being of those affected.
- Adherence to, and training of staff in, safe working practices: this is one of the few measures you can take that will actually reduce the chances of your facility actually experiencing some types of crisis events. Unfortunately too many crisis events occur in zoological facilities as a result of poor working practices, and the need to ensure safe working practices are adopted and adhered to cannot be stressed enough.
- Pre-assessment of your facility by fire, police and other external departments: again, this is one of the few measures you can take that will actually reduce the chances of your facility actually experiencing some types of crisis events. Most people employed in zoological facilities are not trained emergency service workers or experienced in this field, and the used of trained specialists can highlight potential concerns that may otherwise be overlooked by internal staff.
- Familiarisation of police, fire and other departments inexperienced with zoos & wild animals: this process will ensure that your local emergency services are not only familiar with the layout of your facility, but help them to understand specific issues and needs that would be faced in a crisis situation as a result of the unique nature of a captive wildlife facility.
- Weather, fire and other warnings: ensure that you have a reliable system for receiving these alerts and a process in place for determining at what point your facility should prepare for closure &/or evacuation and other protective measures.
- Sound maintenance program: a well scheduled maintenance program which regularly inspects facilities and equipment and ensures a rapid repair or replacement of faulty infrastructure will also contribute to reducing the chance of your facility actually experiencing a crisis event as a result of an engineering failure.

How will your captive animals be managed?

As part of the readiness process, the procedures for managing your captive animals should be clearly articulated in the plan and understood by all staff. Whilst the primary concern in this assessment will be for the welfare of the animals, other factors such as the safety of staff, visitors, external agency personnel and surrounding communities will also have to be considered. The management of your animals throughout a crisis situation will be dependant upon factors such as the size and nature of your facility, local regulatory requirements and your institutions fundamental philosophical approach.

One of the questions we had to deal with at Tidbinbilla was whether the captive animals should be maintained in their enclosures throughout the crisis, or released from them. In this instance it should be pointed out that as we primarily displayed native Australian wildlife from the local region, we did not have to generally consider issues such as the establishment of wild populations that were not native to the area (post emergency), nor were any of the species under consideration of a type which would be considered dangerous to persons in the area. As most of our enclosures were an “open range” type of display ranging from a couple of hectares to over 30 hectares in size, capture of individual animals was unfeasible given the time we had available before the disaster struck. Given the nature of the enclosures and the risk to any animals released through disorientation and a lack of familiarisation with areas outside of their captive environments, the approach we took was to maintain animals within their enclosures and defend these areas from the fires. Post fire surveys revealed that whilst only approximately 25% of our captive wildlife survived the fires, this percentage was considerably greater than the number of free-range animals that remained alive after the fires, and so vindicated our decision to maintain them within their enclosures.

You should also clearly identify which species will be given the highest priority for protection, as you may find that you will not have the time to protect all of the animals within your collection. Therefore the plan will need to serve as a template for making decisions about which ones will be afforded the highest level of protection, and which ones may have to take their chances through an emergency situation. Strategies may be implemented for improving the survivability of those animals that are deemed to be of a lower priority (such as the provision of sprinkler systems in the event of a fire) or through confinement to night quarters and the like, however this will vary with the type of crisis you face and the amount of warning you have before the disaster strikes. The process of assessing and prioritising the protection of animals will be a traumatic process to all those that are responsible for the day to day care and welfare of these animals, however this process will be much easier to achieve when done through the crisis management planning process rather than once an emergency situation has struck your facility. Unfortunately in the disaster that struck Tidbinbilla, all of the “high priority” specimens that we were able to capture and relocate to a “safe facility” prior to the fires were lost when this “safe haven” was also burnt to the ground! The lesson to be learnt here is that during crisis events that are broader scale in nature, it would be wise to ensure that any specimens are relocated to a facility that is unlikely to be affected by the same emergency.

As explained in more detail below, you should also consider what options you have if enclosures are severely damaged and unable to house surviving animals, remembering that on site holding facilities may also have been destroyed or damaged.

Finally the plan should address the issue of triage and euthanasia of animals that are critically injured. At Tidbinbilla this process was complicated by the fact that we lost our veterinary facility and associated equipment during the fires, and so alternative arrangements for treatment at another facility had to be implemented. The availability of our veterinary staff was also compromised by the fact that they were called upon to oversee assessment and euthanasia of stock from surrounding properties as part of their broader rural community responsibilities.

Don't assume.

Don't assume that the utilities, facilities, resources and equipment that are currently available to you will still be available during and after an emergency, e.g.;

- Power
- Water
- Gas
- Phones (land lines or mobiles)
- Radio &/or pager contact
- Fuel
- Vets and/or veterinary supplies
- Capture and restraint facilities and equipment
- Animal holding and treatment areas
- Food storage facilities
- Food supplies
- Other essential equipment and supplies
- Key members of staff

You need back-ups!

In the aftermath of the 2003 bushfires, it was several weeks before power supply was restored at Tidbinbilla, and as a result we had no water supply or phone communication facilities. Don't simply rely on back-up plans such as generators for power or the use of mobile phones for communication, as in widespread emergencies such as the 2003 fires the surrounding community was in the same situation as we found ourselves, resulting in generators becoming almost impossible to hire and the mobile phone network (which was also partially damaged by the fires) becoming overloaded. Luckily in our situation we were able to use the vehicle based radio communication network for communication, however if your institution does not have such a system you may find it almost impossible to communicate and coordinate response and recovery efforts. In such a situation the basis on which your crisis management plan is established would fail, throwing response and recovery efforts into complete turmoil.

Consider also that enclosures may be severely damaged and unable to house surviving animals – where are you going to hold them? At Tidbinbilla it was surprising what animals did survive, some were unscathed even though they were in a holding enclosure adjoining a building that burnt to the ground! Again, don't assume that you will have holding areas on site, and you may have to have a plan in place for shipping injured and surviving animals to another institution. You should also consider what you would do if you have no capture or restraint equipment. Whilst we had some traps in a storage area that survived the fires, all of our nets, microchip scanners and other equipment were lost

to the fires. We were fortunate enough to quickly arrange the use of equipment from other captive facilities from interstate, however the equipment did not arrive on the scheduled flight due to it carrying priority equipment and supplies for emergency agencies that were assisting in the aftermath of the disaster!

Finally think about backup plans in the situation where key members of staff may be unavailable. Whilst the 2003 fires thankfully did not result in the death or injury of any of our staff, some were so traumatised by the event that they were unable to attend work, whilst others lost their homes and were faced with personal losses that precluded them from attending work. We also had several key staff that were reassigned to other duties as part of the broader recovery efforts of the organisation and surrounding communities.

Response: Delegation, Communication and Training.

The crisis management plan must clearly articulate the names or positions of those who will be responsible for assessing the degree of risk and response to each crisis event, and what external agencies need to be notified for various types of emergencies. Whilst communication is often seen as an area in which many organisations have room for improvement during the course of normal business operations, this aspect is critical in any effective crisis management plan, due to the fact that an emergency event brings with it a range of emotional and other stressful factors to bear upon those involved. It is critical that you get this part of the plan right before an emergency situation occurs. The plan must also clearly identify what training of staff is needed and the equipment that will be required to respond to emergency situations, and outline how these objectives will be achieved.

The priorities in any response situation should always be:

- Ensure personal safety
- Identify threat situation
- Notification of incident
- Initiate response

Often in a crisis situation individuals may ignore their own personal safety in an effort to respond to the event and there have been many cases where this has resulted in the death or injury of the “rescuer”, which obviously is of little use to those that require assistance (nor to the “rescuer”). Check to ensure that the area is safe for you to enter before rendering any assistance. Also ensure that you have correctly identified the threat situation – again, there have been many instances where the threat was incorrectly identified resulting in the death or injury of “rescue personnel”.

Designate a leader.

During a disaster or crisis, individuals may panic or otherwise overreact, although it will not be obvious in advance as to how individuals will react to a crisis event. When faced with a traumatic event, each person will react differently and the situation can bring out the best and worst in individuals. In the absence of leadership training, problems will inevitably occur, and the chances for personal injury, loss of animals and significant

damage to property, equipment and facilities compound quickly. So your first step in preparing for disasters or emergencies should be to have a designated “emergency response coordinator” who is trained to assess the degree of the emergency and to determine the appropriate action. Backup coordinators should also be identified as your identified coordinator may be unavailable due to an inability to get to your facility, or as a result of being injured, killed or otherwise unavailable because of the crisis.

The “emergency response coordinator” will be responsible for overseeing all emergency activities, including the planning process and the selection and training of response team members. In an actual emergency, the coordinator's duties would include:

- Determining whether a situation requires emergency procedures.
- Directing the orderly shutdown of specific operations when necessary.
- Evacuating visitors and staff when necessary.
- Ensuring that outside emergency services are notified and involved as needed.
- Notifying senior management of the emergency and the response taken.
- Coordinate response activities (or liaise with external agencies in command).
- Coordinate the recovery process (or liaise with external agencies in command).

The emergency response coordinator should be based in a designated “command centre” which also serves as the communications hub. During major emergency utilities such as electricity, water and telephone may become nonexistent and so an alternate area needs to be designated where employees can report to or that serves as a focal point for incoming and outgoing communications. In addition, the coordinator should make this area an alternate “command centre” where he or she can be easily reached. Emergency communications equipment such as amateur radio systems, portable public address systems, cellular phones and portable radio units should be available to facilitate communication and response coordination with staff and local authorities.

The incident command structure below the “emergency response coordinator” will be dependant upon the size and nature of your facility, but it must be well defined and capable of responding to all of the possible events identified in your hazard survey, from a small scale, localised emergency right through to a major broad scale incident. It is also imperative that the incident command structure is clearly understood by everyone that works at your facility well in advance of any emergency situation occurring.

Communication.

How are you going to ensure that:

- Your disaster/emergency plan is familiar to all of the current staff and external agencies that will need to know what to do in a disaster situation?
- New staff and external agency members are familiar with correct procedures?
- That everybody is kept up to date with any changes?
- Media management is undertaken?

All staff must understand how to respond to any potential emergencies and what role they will play in any response and recovery process. The crisis management plan should be reviewed with all employees when it is initially developed, when employees'

responsibilities outlined in the plan change, and when the plan itself changes. The latest version of the plan must be available to all staff in easily accessible locations and a copy of the plan should also be given to each employee during training and new-employee orientations.

The process for reporting emergencies should be included in your plan and clearly explained to all employees. Ensuring that the designated coordinator has been notified of the incident will ensure that the crisis management plan procedures are implemented, that additional assistance and resources are brought to bear if required, and that the safety of all involved in the incident is protected. Remember to include backup systems so that if your phone network or radio system fails, you have a secondary method of communicating and coordinating response and recovery efforts. Whilst it will be necessary to identify external agencies that will need to be worked with in various emergency situations and to list key contacts within the plan, the last thing that you need is for people to have to read through the document to find these details. Emergency telephone numbers, radio call signs, pager details and other emergency contact information should be posted on all communications equipment, bulletin boards and other conspicuous locations. It may also be necessary to notify other essential team members during off-duty hours, so an up-to-date list of essential personnel in order of priority should be available.

Specific instructions for closing down specialised equipment and facilities and ceasing normal business activities should be incorporated into the plan, and specific evacuation procedures including means of accounting for staff and visitors after an evacuation need to be documented. Designated meeting points, command centers and staging areas should also be identified and clearly marked on maps of your facility along with emergency escape routes and “safe areas”.

Following an evacuation, the emergency response coordinator will need to know when all personnel have been accounted for. This can be difficult during shift changes or if contractors are on site. A designated person or position in an area such as the human resources department, security centre, etc. should be responsible for accounting for all personnel and to inform the coordinator of any persons believed missing. The task of accounting for the safe evacuation of all of your visitors will be more difficult, and will be dependant upon the size and nature of your facility.

Finally, media management is a consideration that should be addressed in your plan. Whilst at Tidbinbilla we had the “good fortune” not to have to deal with the media in the weeks following the fires (they were preoccupied with the results of the disaster in the urban areas of Canberra), eventually they did start to understand the tremendous losses that had occurred in the rural and Reserve areas, and it became an issue which we had to deal with along with all of the other recovery responsibilities we had at the time. Many events that surround the death or injury of captive animals in zoological facilities can generate an enormous amount of media scrutiny, and the plan should identify who will act as the media spokesperson and provide a strategy for ensuring that the presence of the media does not detract from response and recovery efforts being undertaken.

Training and equipment.

Specific training and equipment may be required for employees who are responsible for rescue operations, first aid response and other specific crisis response situations as part of an emergency response team.

Emergency response teams are the first lines of defence in an emergency. Before assigning team members though, consider whether the staff members are physically capable of performing any assigned tasks. Depending on the size and nature of your institution and its specific requirements and exposure to certain risks, several specialised teams may need to be trained, each of which should fully understand the potential emergencies they may be called upon to respond to and their containment. “Refresher” sessions must be regularly held to ensure that teams continue to remain familiar with response procedures, and to ensure that they are aware of any changes required to be made to the plan. Team leaders need to have the ability to give calm direction and personal leadership. They must know what to do, what their own responsibilities are, and who is in charge.

Specialised equipment may need to be used by emergency response teams, and all those involved should not only be thoroughly familiar in the use of the equipment, but trained to operate it in a manner which ensures not only their own safety but also the safety of those around them (the use of weapons is an obvious example here). The location of, and access to, specialised equipment needs to be considered – have duplicate sets stored in different locations to ensure that if one storage facility is lost in the emergency, you still have the required equipment in a separate location. Also ensure that regular maintenance and testing of the equipment is carried out so that you are not left facing a crisis situation with equipment that fails to operate.

As mentioned previously, consideration should be given to the purchase of key pieces of specialised equipment (such as generators or battery powered communication devices) to have on site in an emergency event, as the hiring of such equipment may be almost impossible to achieve if the disaster is more widespread than just your institution.

Finally, all staff in your institution need to be regularly trained in the procedures they should follow during a crisis event. In addition to providing formal sessions where people are “walked through” the plan and any areas of concern or confusion are explained to them, one of the best methods of ensuring that staff are aware of their roles is to perform regular drills and scenario exercises. The process of undertaking drills and scenario exercises not only confirms in peoples minds the mechanics and logistics of various situations that they may be faced in a crisis event, but these exercises are also crucial in identifying any weaknesses or inadequacies of your crisis management plan. After each drill or scenario exercise is completed, there should be a formal debriefing of all persons involved in the exercise where the feedback provided on any concerns or issues is then used to strengthen the plan.

A “desktop review” of the plan should also be undertaken on a regular basis (at least annually) and any changes or updates made and communicated to staff when required. Whilst details such as ensuring that all changed escape routes, contact details and other matters should be updated as soon as these details change, the review of the plan on a regular basis will ensure that none of these items have been overlooked or omitted.

Putting your plan in writing or updating your existing plan and implementing actions outlined in the plan through regular reviews, drills and scenario exercises will ultimately reap benefits for your organisation when a real disaster occurs. Remember also to invite your local emergency response organisations to tour your facility on a regular basis in order for them to become familiar with your facility and the plans that you have in place.

Recovery: A strategy for returning to “normality”.

As people who live in communities that have been devastated by a crisis event will often say, there is no such thing as a complete recovery - disasters can forever change our ways of living. However there are ways in which your plan can outline strategies for minimising the trauma and emotional upheaval that will no doubt affect those that have been involved. Post-incident measures include:

- Look after staff and others involved – ensure support for them
- Counseling – how soon?
- Debriefing – even in a minor crisis
- Prepare for industrial accident investigation
- Prepare for coronial or other legislative investigations
- Review procedural measures and refine if required

One of the things that occur during a disaster situation is that many people find that their everyday reference points disappear or become obsolete given the changed circumstances and events that surround a crisis. Whilst some people have an innate ability to adapt and quickly adjust to these changes, many will find it so unsettling that the security and confidence that they normally base their everyday life upon disappears, and so their ability to function and undertake normal tasks may be severely impaired. Until an individual faces a crisis situation, it is difficult to predict who will have the ability to rapidly adjust and cope with the changes, and for whom these changes will be much more difficult. Individuals have not only a varied response to crisis situations, but also have developed during the course of their lives different methods of coping physically and emotionally with the aftermath of a disaster. The main point here is to not treat all individuals that have been affected by a disaster in the same way, but to continue to treat them as the individuals that they are.

One of the unfortunate decisions taken by senior management in the aftermath of the fires at Tidbinbilla was an attempt to exclude the wildlife care staff in the rescue and recovery phase of the emergency, as it was believed that it would be too traumatic for these individuals. However it was soon made apparent to management that the wildlife care staff did indeed want to be involved as they were the people that were most familiar with the individual animals, their location within the various exhibits and their individual welfare requirements. Whilst it was certainly not a pleasant experience for anybody involved when dealing with the removal of dead and critically injured wildlife, the utter sense of loss was tempered by the fact that they were doing something constructive rather than remaining at home, and that with every discovery of animals that had survived the fires their sense of hope for the future grew. More animals would have been lost in the

post fire emergency if the wildlife care staff had not been involved in the recovery process. In the aftermath of a disaster individuals may feel a sense of helplessness and a complete loss of control over the events in their lives, and for some individuals the need to return to work as soon as possible gives them some level of control in a situation where everything else seems to be out of control, and allows them to work through the events that have occurred. Again, rather than basing your decisions on the grounds that everyone will react to a disaster in the same way, treat them as individuals and allow them to have an input into decisions about how they want to be involved in recovery efforts.

One of the remarkable things that often occur during and after a disaster situation is that many of the rivalries and competition between individuals which may normally occur on an everyday basis becomes suppressed or completely disappears, and (for a short time at least) everyone involved works in a spirit of teamwork, cooperation and support for their fellow workmates. Many different emotions will surface in the aftermath of a disaster, however my experience has been that fellow colleagues will be the first to offer support and assistance to those that need it. Management can assist this process by understanding the physical and emotional changes that will occur during a disaster, and providing a supportive and caring environment for staff and others affected in its aftermath.

One process that can be used to facilitate and support the recovery of those involved in a disaster is through the provision of counseling to all those affected. By including everyone in the counseling session, individuals do not feel “singled out” or less adequate in attending the counseling session, however during the course of counseling they may decide to seek additional counseling on an individual basis – again, this must be their own decision. When and how counseling will be made available to those affected will depend upon the type of disaster experienced, its severity and how quickly the emergency situation is stabilised.

At some point the recovery process will reach a stage where the threats from the disaster have been addressed, the response to it begins to wind down and there is some degree of a return to normality. At this point in time is when you should start planning for your next disaster! Debriefing of everyone involved (including external emergency response agencies) will be crucial to the future evaluation of your plan and what improvements and changes may need to be made to strengthen your plan. Debriefing should also occur no matter whether the crisis event you have experienced has happened on a major or minor scale. The longer the period between the disaster and when debriefing is undertaken, the more that people will forget as many people try to shut the trauma of the event out of their lives and return to the security and comfort of a normal life. Debriefing must be done in an open and honest atmosphere, and all comments and criticisms must remain within the debriefing forum – failure to commit to these principles will mean that important information will remain “bottled up” within individuals and the opportunity for any improvements to the plan will have been lost. The debriefing process in itself should be looked at in the light of allowing people to “get things off their chest” and whilst through this process some anger and other emotions may surface, it will be important for the recovery of individuals that their views are allowed to be expressed.

Later in the recovery phase you may be faced with an industrial accident investigation, coronial inquiry or other legislative investigation into the cause of the crisis and/or your response as an organisation to the emergency. It will be imperative that any internal

investigations undertaken look at the organisational response to the disaster, and does not become a “witch hunt” that simply seeks to find someone to blame.

Finally, having learnt from the experience, having received feedback from all those involved in the emergency and having received the findings of any external investigations and the like, it is time to review your crisis management plan and modify or refine those sections that are required, and communicate any changes to your staff and relevant external agencies. However, you should not wait until a disaster strikes before you review your plan, as for it to remain effective this process should be done on a regular basis. Some of the most common weaknesses found in crisis management plans are:

- No systematic collection of planning information. This includes such aspects as hazard analysis, organizational information, regulatory guidance, company policy procedures and location specific data.
- No systematic dissemination of planning information. You've assembled all the relevant information and have not shared it with the effected people - those who's responsibility it is to implement the plan!
- Failure to identify and establish a designated emergency response coordinator and a suitable incident command structure below this position. This is a common pitfall as many facilities try to fit their plan into a standard incident command system not designed around their particular needs.
- No, or minimal, coordination with effected entities. A lack of an effective communication process to alert staff, poor communications with the community, neighboring industries and external agencies (fire, police, hospitals, etc.) can lead to confusion and chaos during an emergency. A simple issue such as who is the primary contact for offsite agencies during an emergency can cause major disruption during an incident.
- Lack of (or poorly defined) organisational responsibilities. Failure to provide clear, concise procedures defining a person's functions, duties and tasks upon assuming their emergency organisation position.
- Once developed, the program is not (or is at best poorly) maintained and there is no provision for continued evaluation and periodic update of the material. Frequently, changed material, such as telephone numbers are buried in various paragraphs throughout the plan.
- The material you developed is not user-friendly. Your plan contains information - lots of it. Unfortunately, the user has to be a brain surgeon to figure out their role in its implementation. You did not provide simple, easy-to-use supplemental materials that can be used as a quick reference guide during an emergency. Worse yet, you didn't train anyone on the plan and their role in its implementation.
- You did not disseminate the plan to the proper authorities. Failure to include appropriate parties on the distribution list most often leads to failure on their part to respond in the manner you had hoped for.

- No senior management support or a lack of staff “buy-in”. Unless everyone involved is seriously committed to the crisis management planning process, then your plan will sit on a shelf gathering dust, and will be useless when a crisis situation is faced.
- Lack of training and practice. A lack of familiarity and experience with the processes and operations that come into effect when an emergency situation is faced will only result in confusion and the discovery that critical equipment or other resources fail to operate.

The development of a crisis management plan will help to reduce the impact of a disaster upon your institution should you ever have to face such a situation. The plan should be based on the premise that you will anticipate the worst but plan and prepare for the best possible results. If you believe that your facility will never face a disaster, then you are basically playing “Russian roulette” with all of the chambers loaded! Finally, I pray that you never have to use your crisis management plan!



Two years after the fires, young Emus wander amongst vegetation which stills shows the blackened scars of the fires.

Footnote:

For advice or assistance in developing your crisis management plan, please feel free to contact me and I will be happy to assist.

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