



The Need for a Crisis Culture

A newly released book from crisis communications expert Richard Levick, *The Communicators: Leadership in the Age of Crisis*, looks at how corporations respond to emergencies.

The book features a forward by Steve Forbes and interviews and commentary from some of the world's leading experts in crisis communication and response. In section three, "The Need for a Crisis Culture," Levick interviews Global Rescue CEO Dan Richards on the topic:

As the chief executive of Global Rescue, Daniel Richards is never surprised when he hears from a company that needs help rescuing employees stuck in a foreign battle zone. As his company name makes clear, helping people out of serious, often life-threatening jams is what they do best.

What does surprise Richards, time after time, is how many companies face perilous situations totally unprepared even though they're the ones who sent the employees into a troubled area to begin with.

"Those are the 2 a.m. phone calls that come into our operations center from a company with 10 people in Lebanon as the Hezbollah-Israeli conflict is starting, and they've got no idea what to do. We've actually had that happen," Richards says. Chaos and panic are two of the expected results of such unpreparedness. Even more insidious is when different departments in a company form silos to protect their own interests. "When it comes time to actually mobilize a response, different departments in the company can even act in an obstructionist way, interfering with people trying to solve the crisis," Richards says.

Such obstructionism is extremely destructive under any circumstance and all the more tragic when lives are at risk. The bottom line is that you cannot assume that your teams will do the right thing (even when they are well-meaning), especially when the right thing calls for change. Crisis response is not about self-preservation, but about team preservation. It requires a coordinated effort to save the most critical things first, regardless of territory. If people fight turf wars when lives are in jeopardy, imagine how much more fiercely self-interested their behavior in non-life-threatening crises will be.

"We had a Fortune 25 company call us and retain us to go get their people. The way they approached retaining us, from the beginning, was not dissimilar from the way they'd approach retaining a company that supplied nuts and bolts.

Purchasing was involved, and procurement, and legal, and everybody wanted something," he says. "Finally...a C-level individual had to assert himself in order to get through all of the crippling bureaucracy that was going to prevent us from doing the things that needed to be done. We've seen that over and over. Sometimes these organizations get out of their own way and let the problem be solved, and sometimes they don't."

While not all situations are so life-critical, more commonplace crises can be just as debilitating. As Richards says, "All you have to do is pick up the paper to see that a lot of companies aren't prepared for financial crises either."

Too often, companies go through elaborate motions by preparing an exhaustively detailed crisis preparation plan, only to file the plan away and return to business as usual.

"There's a very big market today for crisis consultants, disaster preparedness, redundancy of systems, and other things," Richards says. The real test comes in putting the plan to use during an actual event. If only one or two people in your company remember the contents of the plan, that's as good as having no plan at all.

To make the plan viable, you'll need an ongoing crisis team that actively and regularly trains for a variety of emergency situations. "The saying is that generals are always fighting the last war," Richards says. "Well, people are always preparing for what they have experience with, and that typically is the last crisis they faced. The problem is that, as the nature of the future crisis changes or the frequency or magnitude changes, you may not be prepared."