



# Significant learning...

**Regina Phelps** presents some lessons learnt from major incidents her consultancy's clients have experienced in the last 30 years, saying we need not repeat the mistakes of the past, we should just pay attention and do something to change our plans and behaviour

**O**VER OUR 30 YEARS OF PRACTICE, many of our clients have experienced major incidents, and I have kept track of the significant learning over that time.

As I reviewed these events and how they were handled, I identified the following ten things that should have happened – but which usually did not. Here is your chance to learn from the mistakes of others.

■ **Declare the disaster and activate as early as possible:** What is it about human nature that wants to wait until it is almost too late? Could it be that if we admit there is a problem it will get worse? Will we be blamed or thought to be not good enough? I am not sure why, but I have observed that companies have a tendency to drag their feet for considerable time before giving in and formally declaring a disaster. A technology group is known for saying: "Give me ten more minutes and we can fix it," which delays getting the real solution in

place in a timely manner. Another example is provided by the *Costa Concordia* disaster. The call to abandon ship came some time after the collision, when her lower decks were already under water and the ship was tilting severely.

The longer you delay making your declaration, the harder it is to get ahead of the situation. Declare! If you discover a few hours later that

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the activation was not needed, then demobilise the team. It is better to be ahead of the game.

■ **Staff to a sufficient level from the start:** It often takes a lot of people to manage an event. This includes not just the managers, but also the key administrative staff necessary for critical

activities such as answering the telephone, logging calls, maintaining status boards, making copies and handling all of the logistical activities.

Do not get caught short-staffed. A pool of personnel who can do many different types of jobs will be incredibly useful. And do not send all your personnel home without carefully thinking about your staffing needs. It is always good to have a few extra people around for the odd job that you have not yet discovered is needed.

■ **Issue clear and consistent instructions to staff:** They need to hear directions and instruction from you, clearly and consistently. Communicate coherently, frequently and tell them what actions are expected from them. They should not have to play guessing games as to what they should be doing.

A well-crafted Incident Action Plan (IAP) is a great communication tool as it details the event status, strategic objectives and



*What is it about human nature that wants to wait until it is almost too late? The author has observed numerous circumstances where individuals or organisations have dragged their feet before formally declaring a disaster, citing the example of the Costa Concordia, where the order to evacuate was not given for some time (see CRJ 8:2)*

Vigili del Fuoco

assignments and the next meeting time.

■ **Delegate authority to those who have been tasked:** If you have allocated a job to someone, you must also give them the authority to complete the task. I sometimes encounter people who have been given a job, but then are told to ask for permission to execute it. This often happens when issuing statements. The communication department is told to develop a statement, but then has to go through a lengthy process of approval. Some approval makes sense – fact-checking and tone of the communication – but once this is done, get out of the way and let people do their job.

■ **Avoid the ‘We’re a really smart group and we’ll figure it when it happens’ syndrome:** One of my favourites. My university clients are known for this attitude, although they are not the only group to succumb to this mindset.

Yes, everyone understands that the team is smart, but disasters can have a major effect on anybody’s ability to function. People struggle with collecting their thoughts, processing information, or simply not knowing what to do next. A plan can help all of that. But even more important is effective training through the use of exercises.

In an incident, there is a tendency to fall back to the level of training. Hopefully, if it happens in your organisation, this would be just a slight fall rather than a nosedive.

■ **Assume and plan for some degradation in personnel and/or systems over time:** Most plans are not built for prolonged activation, and employees cannot be made to work hours or days without any break. Humans are not robots and our ability to perform degrades over time. Decision fatigue can ensue. The more decisions we make, the fewer we want to make. We perform best when we are rested and fed. So do not drive staff into the ground. It is hard enough to manage a disaster without killing off the team.

■ **Closely monitor team and plan effectiveness:** This point is closely tied to the previous one: we need to keep our eyes on how we are doing. Are we meeting our incident objectives? Keep a close eye on your plan and team. One of my clients has its employee assistance programme assign a counsellor to every shift working at its emergency operations centre. These counsellors simply walk through each shift and talk to the staff – in effect, they take the group’s ‘temperature’. They can perform interventions as they see fit and help the team’s function. Remember, if people are not taken care of, soon there will be no people to worry about.

■ **Make decisions – keep moving forward:** Leaders need to take decisions, and in an emergency they often have to make them with little or incomplete information. Often, they can be uncomfortable in making decisions when information is lacking or when under pressure.

However, that is the very nature of decision-making in an emergency. Make a decision. If you find out later it was the wrong decision, then make another and keep moving forward.

We need our leaders to lead.

■ **Make changes when necessary and keep moving:** One vital skill of a great leader is the ability to improvise, change and keep moving the recovery forward. Tied to that is also the ability to be creative and flexible. We cannot be stiff and inflexible or we will break in the wind of the event.

We need to bend, bow and adjust as necessary. I always picture a tall palm tree in a hurricane – it bends and stretches, but it remains intact and whole.

■ **Communicate, communicate, and communicate some more:** Communication may be the single biggest lesson of all and, in many ways, might be the easiest to fix. I have never heard anybody complain that: “My company communicated with me too much.”

It is critical to communicate frequently. Your employees and the public demand clear, crisp communication. They expect and want you to be transparent and forthcoming. If you are not telling them what is going on, most people will turn to other sources to get their information, which, in today’s world, includes the internet, news outlets, and the mother of all ‘research’, Google.

This information world is very different from a few years ago. Everyone with a smartphone is now a reporter. Anyone can snap photos, shoot video, and then upload it all to YouTube, Facebook or Twitter – and suddenly, it’s ‘news’.

## Follow the hashtags

Whenever an emergency happens, I encourage you to go to the Twitter website immediately and watch the tweets roll by. The incident will appear shortly – and keep an eye on the hashtags. Not all of the information may be accurate, but much of it is and you can find out quickly what is going on right from the horse’s mouth.

Remember, if you are not out there telling your story, it is likely that someone else is doing it for you and, the chances are, you might not like their take on it.

In conclusion, why bother learning from our historical mistakes?

Put simply, we know that history has a tendency to repeat itself.

Whenever you have an incident at your company, always conduct a debriefing and write an after-action report with recommendations and an action plan to address making improvements.

I would encourage you to remember the words often attributed to Albert Einstein: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

We all know the way to get different results is to do something differently.

CRJ

## Author

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