

Advisor

The Newsletter of Effective Communication

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The Unreal Real World

Crisis Simulation and the Real Value of Practice



In mid May, TV viewers who were "just tuning in" would have been forgiven for thinking the U.S. was again under terrorist attack, for on that day the Homeland Security crisis drill took place in Chicago and Seattle. The simulation involved 8,500 personnel and cost taxpayers about 16 million dollars. Some criticized the drill as not useful, saying it was far too scripted and lacked the terrorist's main weapon - surprise. They complain that responders had enough time and detail to pre-arrange everything, from their media sound bites to mileage expense reports on attack day. The question many ask is, are crisis simulations worth the time, effort and money?

THE OVERVIEW

There are several types of crises; first is the life threatening shock. Think shooting, plant explosion, earthquake. The second is the evolving life threat that unfolds over time, like defective products or environmental damage. The third is the reputation killer. No lives are directly lost, but livelihoods, careers and whole organizations may be badly damaged, sometimes beyond repair. Think Enron, WorldCom, President Clinton. (Of course the first and second types of crisis will become the third if not handled properly, but that is a topic for another time.)

Industrial organizations, like chemical and energy producers, have long participated in emergency drills, which are often required by their respective licensing entities. Most American workers though, are now engaged in offering services. It is most often these companies that think they need no emergency preparedness because there is nothing in their world of cubicles and laptops that would be considered an emergency. Others believe that, because a plan is on paper, CYA has been accomplished and testing of the plan is unneeded. The "it can't happen

Quick Bite

Lying is Forbidden in Iraq

From government functionary to PR as performance art, the outrageous lies of Iraqi information minister, Muhammad Said al-Sahaf, added comic relief to the war coverage. His astonishing quotes have been gathered at many websites and on products where his words and likeness abound. Check out the "You are too far from reality" lunch box, the "There are no American infidels in Baghdad" mouse pad or, for a truly tasteless souvenir, don't miss the "God will Roast their Stomachs in Hell" barbecue apron. These silly sites are plentiful - here are a few:

www.iraqicard.com
www.welovetheiraqiinformationminister.com
www.brainyquote.com/info/minister.html
www.tshirtstudio.com

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here" mentality is a denial of reality. Any organization that does not fully prepare to protect all of its assets, including its reputation and credibility, is playing a dangerous game.

THE REAL TEST

It is critical that emergency plans be tested and challenged. Personnel need to rehearse their roles and leaders need to audition the players to ensure that the people best suited for the jobs have their assignments. We have seen many a crisis team get bogged down in trying to set priorities, defer to seniority instead of expertise and a host of other speed bumps and blunders while the clock ticks and irreparable damage occurs. Testing the people to make sure of their ability to come together, analyze the best data and make timely, supportable decisions is a necessity. This applies to all organizations: family-owned businesses, huge corporations, schools, hospitals, and governments of all sizes.

As to the criticism that a well-scripted and unsurprising crisis simulation offers less value, we are sympathetic. When we work with organizations to stage a "crisis," we recommend that participants not be given details in advance. Furthermore, the Ammerman role-playing team is well versed in shifting scenarios; impromptu wrenches can be thrown into the works when needed to test specific capabilities. Ammerman simulations are framed, but not scripted; the scenarios are flexible and the role players unflappable.

IN THE END

Having said that, we do not criticize the Homeland Security Drill. Its usefulness cannot be measured by an outsider. Furthermore, the drill isn't over, for the value of a simulation happens in the weeks and months that follow. The debrief must be brutally honest and lessons learned must be incorporated into future procedures. Without a frank and thorough post-drill, no drill is worth the effort. And without a realistic test of a plan, there is no plan at all; only a binder labeled "Emergency Plan" that might just as well be blank.

The Real World

Observers Shocked and Awed at Media Savvy

There is a long history of military antipathy toward the press, but perhaps the most succinct and telling comment on the attitude toward reporters came from WWII era, Admiral Ernest J. King, who said, "Don't tell them anything. When it's over, tell them who won." As recently as the first Gulf War, reporters were complaining of limited access and non-informational briefings.

Quick Bite **Virtually Fearless**

It's been said that the most common fear is the fear of public speaking. Conventional wisdom holds that the best way to overcome fears is to face them, but if people could do that, it wouldn't be a problem, right? Dealing with these life-impinging issues has taken a new twist, thanks to virtual reality. A company called Virtually Better combines traditional therapy with technology to help people overcome their public speaking fears. One can get the experience of addressing an audience when no one is in the room. Fearful fliers can soar while earthbound and traumatized veterans can return to 'Nam without a passport, thanks to virtual reality. Check it out at www.virtuallybetter.com. For an interview with the CEO, check our [website](#).

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Have times ever changed! From frequent, lengthy briefings to the much discussed embedded reporters, the brass at America's fighting forces has suddenly made a warp speed jump, meeting or surpassing the best communicators in the private sector. The idea that stonewalling and evasion will work to keep one's name unsullied is a completely archaic notion and yet, still clung to by many. Over the past 30 years, The Ammerman Experience has asked literally tens of thousands of seminar participants their views of the press. What we have found is an overwhelming dislike and mistrust of the press, and much misunderstanding of how news media works.

If, among your colleagues, there are those who are still living in the "Stonewall Ages," you might point to America's military as role models. For example:

- They were forthcoming with information, but would not speculate. "I don't know" was said frequently and unapologetically.
- They avoided using jargon - a major accomplishment for the military. Instead, they spoke in terms anyone could understand.
- They treated reporters with respect. Repetitive and sometimes foolish questions from reporters were fielded gracefully.
- They expressed concern and compassion for soldiers, their families, civilians, and at times even Iraqi troops.
- They exercised control. They made it clear what subjects they wouldn't discuss, and decided when to end the briefing.
- They seemed genuinely comfortable with the media. They spoke in a conversational tone and had solid, sustained eye contact with reporters.

This is not your Father's Army. It is obvious that media training has become a part of the battle plan. When the press comes looking for your troops, may they perform just as brilliantly. If you have doubts, of course, give us a call.

The Tool Kit

The Tools of Engagement

When giving a speech or presentation, one of the worst, and most unnerving things that can happen is noticing listener drift - people who stare into space, check their messages, even nod off. To have a few such audience members is normal. More than a few indicates the speaker may need to make adjustments. The simple technique of call and response can help keep the audience engaged and aid in their retention of information. You already know the technique because:

- Your kindergarten teacher used it. "What sound does the D make?"
- In church the preacher asks, "Can I get an Amen?"
- What folksinger hasn't said, "Everybody join in on the chorus."
- And what about commercials that ask, "Are you paying too much for auto insurance?"

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And now for something completely different

Three out of four Americans under 30 watch the news with their remote control in hand, as did 54% of those over 50. It is estimated that, in an average hour of TV watching, the channel changes between 36 and 107 times.

From Television and the Remote Control: Grazing on a Vast Wasteland, by Robert Bellamy and James Walker.

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How To Do It Yourself

Ask a real and direct question and then pause for a response. It will often be a silent response, such as a nod, a smile or a shrug. This is a great way to help you learn whether you and the audiences are on the same page.

Ask rhetorical questions and then answer them yourself. These questions anticipate what's happening in a listener's head, such as, "Why is this important?" or "What happens next?" This is also a great way to move into the next "chapter" of your talk.

Tell them what's worth noting. Say, "You might want to jot this down." We do that for the vital info, like, "The four absolutes for dealing with the media are ..." and "Our 24-hour crisis line number is ..."

Get Physical. Have participants do something, such as stand, give a show of hands or the always popular in church, greet your neighbors. Caution, though; some people hate this type of participation, so be sure you know your audience first.

As with any speaker's technique, timing is critical and overuse will ruin the effectiveness, so have a plan and ask a trusted associate for an honest critique. Now, can you think of an example of call and response?

2003

Ammerman Open Training Dates

Effective Media Communications

July 15
August 19
September 16
October 21
November 11
December 9

Effective Presentations

September 17

Advanced Media Skills for Communications Professionals

August 21 & 22
November 13 & 14

Effective Media Communications for Marketing Professionals

November 12

Effective Media Communications – Refresher Course

September 18

The Ammerman Experience open workshops are scheduled on a first-come, first-served basis, and are available to limited numbers of attendees to ensure maximum personalized attention. To register for a course, contact our office at 1-800-

Our firm is a pioneer in understanding the link between effective communication and professional success. What we've learned and what we teach can improve your performance . . . and that of others in your organization.

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