



I. LIVE FROM THE FIRING LINE:  
THE PRACTICE OF MANAGEMENT

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## Effectively Managing Major Disasters

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Colleges and universities are faced with disasters and crises from many causes. Careful and thorough advance planning strongly affects how quickly institutions respond and recover from them. This article provides an overview of key steps in preparing for and responding to disasters and crises.

It is a Sunday night in September. You are checking a weather Web site, comparing computer models that show a Category-4 hurricane meandering through the Gulf of Mexico. Data indicate that the storm is strengthening, and computer models show possible landfall over an area of several hundred miles. Your organization is in the landfall zone in some models but not others. The storm is projected to hit in about 72 hr. You are a leader in your organization. What do you do?

Although this sounds like a case simulation, it is not. It is the situation that confronted me in September 2004 just before Hurricane Ivan devastated Pensacola and inflicted damage on the University of West Florida that remains the worst ever in Florida history. However, this is not an isolated incident from a leadership perspective. Similar situations confront organizational leaders more often than you might think. Although hurricanes have dominated the headlines for the past several months, disasters and crises of many types affect organizations: tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, fires, blizzards, ice storms, chemical spills, armed intruders, employee violence, student problems, and various other types of events. It is not a matter of *whether* a disaster or emergency scenario will confront an organization, but *when*.

The purpose of this article is to share some lessons learned by an experienced executive leadership team. While holding senior leadership positions at the University of Delaware, the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, and the University of West Florida (UWF), I experienced six major hurricanes and several other situations involving, among other things, individuals claiming to be armed, employee-on-employee violence, students blocking the entrances to the administration building, and violent behavioral outbursts by students in classrooms. On the recent weather front, between September 2004 and September 2005, UWF experienced Hurricanes Ivan, Dennis, and Katrina, as well as tropical storms Arlene and Cindy.

Consequently, I have confronted numerous emergency situations requiring rapid decisions. I have overseen several campus evacuations and extended closures that threatened the institution's academic program and ability to continue operating. In Hurricane Ivan alone, on UWF's main campus, 95% of all buildings and 110 of 114 classrooms had to be partially or completely rebuilt, while the campus and community infrastructure—water, electricity, sewage, and communications—was completely lost for extended periods. Amazingly, and with nothing short of Herculean efforts by staff and contractors, the university was back in operation in 3 weeks; just barely able to salvage the fall 2004 semester. Dealing with the long-term trauma people faced was a humbling and daunting experience that continues well over 1 year after the storm.

What does it take to successfully lead an organization during a crisis? If your best response to the opening scenario was to ask whether there was a disaster plan, it is unlikely that you would be successful. Based on my experience, I believe that to be successful, your organization and its leaders must demonstrate four elements:

1. *Planning* that is comprehensive and fully integrated.
2. *Decisiveness* through a willingness to make tough choices.
3. *Execution* based on extensive knowledge of the plan.
4. *Personal touch* in remembering that people and their safety are primary.

Each of these elements is essential, whether one is dealing with a situation that has an advance warning at the time of occurrence (such as a hurricane and other weather-related events) or not (such as a violent act, earthquake, terrorist attack, etc.). The following represents steps that leaders and those who educate them can take to maximize the likelihood of successfully dealing with the crisis.

## PLANNING

Without question, planning is the most important ingredient to dealing with a crisis. It starts by asking some basic questions: Does the organization have a

comprehensive disaster plan, emergency operations plan, and continuity of operations plan? Do the key personnel know where these plans are located? Have they ever read them? When was the last time these plans were discussed, revised, and tested?

Sounds simple, right? However, in my experience, few key leaders effectively deal with these questions. Instead of taking personal responsibility, they tend to assume that someone in the organization will handle it. How can this change? As organizational leaders and the people who educate them, we should check for the following key elements that maximize the likelihood for a successful plan and address those that need attention.

### An Experienced Leadership Team is in Place

Who among the leadership team or other key personnel has been through a major disaster or crisis? What experience or lessons can they offer that will strengthen the plans? UWF has key personnel experienced with disasters and other crises, which creates a culture of responsibility, accountability, and seamless implementation of the various plans.

### The Plans Envision a Situation Worse Than the Worst Conceivable Outcome

What would you do if your organization had no water, sewer, electrical, phone (land or mobile), postal and courier, and e-mail services for an extended period or if a deadly substance made it inaccessible? Too few organizations plan for extended outages of *all* infrastructures and communications. Imagine it. That is exactly what can happen after a major weather disaster or other attack. To address this possibility and build effective and appropriate responses into our plans, we consulted with former military commanders of logistical operations. This made UWF's plans much better, and we were ready when the worse-than-imagined disaster struck following Hurricane Ivan. In short, "unpredictable is not an option." It will not be if you seek advice from a broad range of experts and discuss possible scenarios across a wide variety of potential disaster types. Planning what to do when your organization is completely shut down will enable you to effectively respond when it is.

### Essential Personnel Are Clearly Identified and Informed of Their Designation

If senior leaders fail to communicate the information to the people who need to know, it will not help. The midst of a crisis is not the time to be asking whether Joe or Anne are considered essential personnel. Instead, Joe and Anne need to

be certain of this so that when a crisis occurs they head straight for their assigned locations. Responses need to be automatic given the high levels of stress during the crisis.

### A Comprehensive Organizational and Community Communication Strategy is in Place Before (if Possible), During, and After the Crisis

Hurricanes, floods, and blizzards usually provide at least some time for preparations. Use the available time to clearly and concisely communicate the steps people should or must take. By providing people with time to take care of their personal situations before having them prepare the organization, they will be in a better position to focus on their job responsibilities.

During and after the event, two steps are key. First, carefully analyze what information needs to be shared at what point in time. Weather-related crises usually require more information sharing than violence-related events, especially while the crisis is unfolding. Second, in the case of a major disaster, provide people with a link to the organization, which may be the only constant left in their lives. In the case of the extensive damage and extended closure of UWF following Hurricane Ivan, students, faculty, and staff needed to get basic information about the campus. At UWF, senior officials realized the need for people to keep in touch with one another, so we developed a Web site for that purpose.

Finally, organizational leaders must be in touch with the local county emergency management team. Information exchange between them can be critical, particularly in coordinating evacuation, response, and recovery operations. Strong cooperative relations between your organization and local officials pays major dividends, especially if one or the other has lost its ability to communicate with the public.

### There Are Clear Criteria Concerning Campus or Organization Closure and Evacuation

In a case of a single-site campus, the criterion may be as simple as a certain weather forecast, a declaration by the local county emergency management office, or other specific trigger. For organizations with multiple locations, the process may be more complex, especially when significant distances and multiple county emergency management offices are involved. In either case, consistency in the decision triggers is the key; Employees, students, and the public can learn these decision triggers and plan and behave accordingly. Clearly communicating them in advance so that this learning can occur is important. Equally key is announcing the trigger when a crisis occurs so that people can respond accordingly.

## The Evacuation Plan Ensures the Safety of All

When to evacuate your organization's facility is a difficult decision, and the evacuation itself can be complex and stressful. When the crisis permits advance planning, then evacuation plans need to cover several contingencies. Does your organization's plan merely suggest that individuals evacuate voluntarily unless directly ordered to do so, evacuate only when directly ordered, or use a specific set of criteria for different levels of evacuation? Are there specific places to which they should evacuate, or are they free to go wherever they choose? In the case of a college or university, these issues become even more complex with respect to students who live on campus, particularly international students. In such cases, the evacuation plan must be quite specific and may include a formal process of matching students with local host families whose contact information is passed on to the student's family. In addition, if the evacuation is in anticipation of a major weather-related crisis, does your organization provide an on-site shelter for those who cannot evacuate because of distance to home or the lack of financial means? What about for the families of critical personnel who must remain on site? If so, how will long-term needs be met if they cannot return to their homes?

If the evacuation is in response to an unanticipated event, then communicating a clear, unambiguous decision is critical. Especially when there are unsafe locations and the situation is both dangerous and evolving, it is essential to keep people informed about what they must do. An important contingency in this case is to ensure there are backup communication means in case the primary ones are inoperative.

## A Backup for Key Business Operations is in Place and Can be Operated Remotely

Essential information such as employee or student records and payroll data not only must be backed up, but copies must be stored at sites sufficiently distant from the organization's location so that the backups are unlikely to be simultaneously destroyed with the primary copies. These backup copies must be accessible in such a way as to serve as the primary data if needed to continue operations. This issue has been one of the primary difficulties organizations have faced following destruction due to major disasters.

## Full Recovery of Expenses is Highly Unlikely, So Have a Cash Cushion

Insurance and federal funds will not provide full reimbursement of expenses or lost revenue. The impact on cash flow must be considered.

### Contracts for Repair, Debris Removal, Fuel, and Related Needs Are in Place

In the wake of a major disaster, the need for these services and key supplies is acute and they are often unavailable to those without prior commitments.

### A Regular Review and Revision Cycle and Practice Sessions Are Set

Disaster and emergency recovery plans must be considered dynamic documents that require discussion, review, and revision on a regular basis. Including this as part of the ongoing planning process is one way to ensure this outcome.

## DECISIVENESS

Having a comprehensive plan is one thing; implementing it requires clear and decisive decision making. In times of crisis, leadership skills are tested under high levels of stress. Providing clear, decisive decisions can mean the difference between success and failure. Several key issues are important.

### People's Safety Comes First

All decisions must be based on this principle. Never take risks with people's safety.

### Repeated Clear, Concise, and Consistent Communication

In a crisis, people may not be at their best because they are preoccupied with their own safety. This means that communications need to be simple, unambiguous, to the point, and reliable; and, say it again and again and again.

### Make the Tough Decisions

Demonstrate leadership. As an organizational leader or educator, be willing to defend logical and necessary decisions. For example, be willing to defend closing your organization in the face of a disaster even if the disaster does not happen. Remember the first principle of decisiveness.

### Be There

The senior leadership must be present and appropriately visible during the crisis. This equally applies to the chief executive officer as well as first-level supervisors.

Demonstrating decisive leadership at every level helps employees and the public have a sense that the crisis is being addressed.

## EXECUTION

No one really knows how good a plan is until it is actually set in motion. Here is how you can maximize the likelihood that the plans will work successfully.

### Clearly and Unambiguously Invoke the Plan

When a disaster or crisis hits, no one should wonder whether the emergency plans have been triggered. Do not assume that people know there is a crisis. Say so. Also, if certain business processes are temporarily waived, make certain this is unambiguous.

### Be Flexible, but Establish Appropriate Management Oversight

Each emergency or crisis response team has a specific function; let them do it without micromanagement. Additional flexibility may be required—spending limits on credit or debit cards may need to be temporarily raised, for example—but with appropriate accountability mechanisms. The key point here is that although the various plans may lay out specific processes, the reality of the situation and good judgment must prevail. If the plans are done well, the need for such flexibility will be incorporated into them.

### Restrict Access to Unsafe Areas of the Facility

Following a natural disaster, consider extensively damaged parts of the facility as you would a crime scene. Investigating authorities, insurance agencies, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency require careful documentation of the damage and evidence, and it is far easier to obtain the documentation and protect the evidence if access is restricted to essential personnel. Restricted access also will make response, repair, and recovery efforts much easier and safer to accomplish.

### Engage Key Constituents in Academic and Service Recovery Efforts

When the time comes to make decisions about providing necessary services, changing business schedules, or restructuring the academic calendar, including

the employees in the process will improve these decisions. For example, UWF staff suggested creating a single account for all hurricane-related expenses (rather than charging them to the existing accounts) to make tracking and verifying them easier.

## PERSONAL TOUCH

Nothing matters more before, during, and after a crisis than people. All of us remember well those leaders who demonstrated both decisive leadership and caring about people. Here are some suggestions about how to achieve the latter.

### Meet Basic Needs

After a major disaster, food, clothing, shelter, and money for the families of essential personnel become critical needs. Providing these essentials will ease minds and enable employees to focus on the job at hand. Many corporations, as well as colleges and universities (and their foundations), help through various internal relief efforts and by establishing grant and loan programs. After Hurricane Ivan, the UWF Foundation provided more than \$50,000 in grants to students and \$22,000 in no-interest loans to faculty and staff.

### Encourage People to Tell Their Stories

When people survive a major disaster or crisis, they have a high need to share their experiences with others. Encourage them to do so. Hold an event that helps people reconnect. UWF held an all-employee convocation on the first day back after Hurricane Ivan and encouraged staff and faculty to do the same during the first few days back in class. These opportunities provided a way for people to realize that everyone was deeply affected by the storm and provided a common bond for the campus community. Such crises often become marker events in people's lives; they need to be honored as such.

### Accept That Posttraumatic Stress Disorder is Likely

Many months (and even years) after experiencing a highly stressful event, people will still feel the emotional effects. Be sensitive to this by reminding everyone of these long-term consequences and by providing the necessary counseling services.

## LEADERSHIP LESSONS LEARNED

The recommendations in this article are among those implemented at UWF largely in response to hurricanes. Regardless of the type of disaster an organization faces, applying these suggestions will set the stage for success in preparing for and recovering from emergency or catastrophic situations.

UWF has successfully overcome two tropical storms and three major hurricanes in a single year. When we created our plans in 2003 and 2004, we had not experienced a major disaster since our founding in 1963. Our decision to create comprehensive plans, with the assistance of consultants, and continue to monitor and update these plans has proved to be one of the best uses of our time and resources. With decisive leadership and superb implementation by a great team, our experiences may serve as a national model.

Wherever they are, on the Gulf Coast or a fault line in Asia, organizations everywhere can plan for and recover from major disasters. Psychologists involved in management can help by providing support for the development of the plans, asking tough questions, and showing visible support for the leadership team when it becomes necessary to implement them.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

This article was invited in recognition of the major disasters that have recently occurred at home and abroad, and the need for managers to incorporate disaster preparedness into the organization's strategic planning.