Living in the “new normal”

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INTRODUCTION

Today’s world is an uncertain one—no one knows what will happen, or when. This is the “new normal.” In the new normal, there are events you cannot control, regardless of what you do. These events impact the operations and workforce of companies and threaten their bottom line. Viability, stability, and future success depend on how organizations prepare for events and respond to them, and how they manage the long-term impact on their particular organizations. Crisis and disaster do not have to mean disruption and chaos for organizations.

Although other countries have had to deal with an uncertain environment for many years, until Pearl Harbor, many people believed that the United States was impervious to attacks of any sort. However, this has changed since the Oklahoma City bombing, the events of 9/11, and the Virginia sniper shootings. These acts of terror have taken away the sense of security of many American citizens.

Solutions for living in the new normal must limit risk and maximize the ability to respond to a crisis. This requires a subtle shift from full dependence on government protection to increased local responsibility. National, regional, state, and local agencies are reassessing the needs of their populations and creating action plans to help protect their constituencies, despite limited resources. People and agencies are now required to share their responses to the new normal in order to ensure safety and security for themselves and the country.

One solution is for organizations to create conditions for collaboration and cooperation between agencies and with the public. This includes defining roles of responsibility and leadership and assigning responsibility for resource management and deployment. Other collaborative efforts include:

- addressing the concerns of the workforce for the safety of factories and the management and security of sensitive material;
- creating an environment of governmental accountability with regard to population safety; and
- assigning responsibility for the response to the population affected by the event.

From readiness to recovery in the new normal

The author has developed a five-step process to take organizations from readiness to recovery. While dealing with the ordinary requirements of emergency response, the process focuses on the human element and on the organization’s ability to anticipate emergencies and respond efficiently in a crisis.

Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs discusses individual motivation. According to Maslow, all mentally healthy adults (and organizations) are driven by five basic levels of need (or motives). As each level is met, the next higher level becomes the prime motivating factor. For example, if the work environment is physically uncomfortable, being accepted by our work group is not a motivation. Once we are comfortable in the environment, the need for stability becomes the next goal, and so on. Table 1 provides general definitions of the needs and how they affect the workforce.

During a crisis, people tend to become immobile—sometimes freezing, panicking, or withdrawing. The goal of first responders is to understand what people need in order to mobilize and motivate. Maslow’s hierarchy provides insight into what people need to stay motivated, especially during a crisis. This information, along with preventive interventions and
organizational development theory, led to the creation of the process discussed here. Figure 1 illustrates the steps in the process and provides the key question each step addresses.

**FACILITY READINESS**

The first step in the incident mitigation process parallels the basic physiological needs in Maslow’s schema. Management needs to commit to creating a safe and secure environment for its employees. Superficial measures will not provide the required long-term feeling of safety in the work environment.

Once an organization recognizes the need for facility readiness, cost becomes an issue. The evaluation phase requires the involvement of key organizational players, such as the head of security, the human resources director, and the vice president of operations. This readiness evaluation includes facility threat assessments, facility security assessments, employee background investigations, review of current technical security apparatus, and review of personnel policy and procedures.

Once all the preliminary assessments, reviews, and investigations are complete, security recommendations are made. A report is presented to management, with an emphasis on creating a safe and secure environment as rapidly as possible. Some organizations adopt these measures quickly and completely; others prioritize the individual measures of facility readiness and accomplish them over a longer period of time.

The initial plan for this phase often includes security training and coaching. This phase ensures that the appropriate employees understand the basics of security and can make effective changes within their spheres of influence. Coaching is offered to assist personnel in establishing strategies and plans to ensure the creation of a crisis-ready facility.

**PAPER READINESS**

As the organization readies its facility, it often simultaneously plans for the protection of its human, physical, intellectual, and financial assets. Written documentation of formal or informal “work and recovery systems” is critical to understand the workings of the organization. This documentation must be easy to access and easy to understand. In a crisis, workers must know what is supposed to happen to ensure their own safety, the safety of their fellow workers, and the safety of the wider community. Additionally, they need to understand their own roles and the roles of others in the event of a crisis.
The paper readiness step focuses on such things as:

- evaluation of the plan and facility;
- plan continuity;
- hazard analysis;
- protective actions;
- crisis response planning;
- emergency action plan training and implementation; and
- plan management for key officials.

Events such as the Oklahoma bombings and the 9/11 attacks illustrated how our cities planned for and responded to a mass disaster. During the paper readiness phase, the organization develops plans to keep the environment safe and secure during a crisis, and determines how to protect itself if it is penetrated.

**PEOPLE READINESS**

This phase is often neglected. Although many organizations invest in hard security such as walls, watchtowers, and closed circuit television and plan for the efficient layout of such items, they do not bring people into their planning and implementation process. This step builds a true capability to execute paper readiness through the alignment of the organization’s people, processes, and tools. The success of any organization requires cultural and environmental integration in the planning process. This is especially true in preparing for emergency readiness.

In this assessment phase, the organization’s culture and crisis response are evaluated. Organizations that ignore this “soft” aspect of their work in readiness preparation pay a price in terms of:

- loss of personnel;
- loss of work effectiveness and efficiency;
- losses through significant worker compensation claims;
- losses through health claims; and
- ultimately, loss of the business.

This phase prepares organizations through knowledge building and skill training. It helps them...
prepare cognitively, emotionally, and physically for actions that may be required in a disaster. Leaders and teams need coaching to understand how to create an environment that is safe and secure, while at the same time creating a sense of belonging and community. Community building is critical to any recovery after a crisis. “People-ready” employers take the time to create community environments in which employees give back to the organization and assist in its recovery.

Three key factors must be addressed to ensure optimization of the human aspects of the organization: 1) the culture (social factors); 2) the people (psychological factors); and 3) the level of commitment. Commitment must be seen in terms of the organization and membership, both internal and external.

Each organization has its own unique culture. It is comprised of a set of social factors and rules that help create the organization. No two organizations are the same. Even within an organization, differences can exist between substructures and local offices. An organization is held together by its social factors. When management wants to change the organization to meet the requirements of the new normal, it must look at its culture to determine the probable success. Success will depend on the organization’s ability to adopt, rather than adapt to, the requirements of the new normal. Many cultures cannot support the required changes. Efforts are initiated and then dropped for other priorities, or undermined through unconscious cultural factors. In other words, culture may determine an organization’s success in the new normal.

The human aspects of organizations are critical. Each organization has a hiring profile; it hires individuals based on its values, requisite skills, and sometimes even the predilections of the interviewer. Hiring represents a closed system in which an organization tends to hire people which characteristics similar to the organization itself. For example, if an organization’s culture is “macho” (with key elements of patriarchy and command-and-control), its members would, for the most part, conform to this cultural type. Consequently, the organization would not deal well with the “emotional” or softer side of crisis preparation and recovery. These macho individuals tend to “slug” their way through an experience and can end up with higher than usual worker compensation claims and more severe medical disorders, such as strokes and heart attacks.

Our goal is to create commitment at multiple levels and in various ways. This commitment involves creating an organizational impetus that supports the human aspects of intervention, as well as individual efforts, internally and externally. The commitment from the organization requires creating an environment for its employees and investors to protect the organization’s assets and to perform recovery efforts when they are required. All who interact with the organization, both internally (employees) and externally (suppliers, local government, and people living in the community) benefit from a physically secure and safe environment. In other words, the membership is enlarged to include even those who are outside the organization itself.

Our collaborative process helps unleash the potential of people to formulate innovative business strategies. This process, “Agree, Analyze, Design, Develop, Do, and Digest” (A²D²), focuses on the human aspect of the entire intervention process. It also benefits the people readiness of an organization, not merely in the realm of strategic functions (for which it was developed), but especially in people’s sense of belonging during crisis management.

**VALIDATION**

This step measures the crisis readiness of an organization. It implements the three steps already described and helps the organization to assess its own readiness. This phase helps build organizational esteem and contributes to the self-actualization of the organization’s members. Employees gain a fuller understanding of their roles and responsibilities and the impact this self-consciousness has on the readiness and recovery of the organization.

Validation involves implementing and testing, evaluation, recommendations, and corrective actions. This phase is continuous and it prepares the organization for the recovery phase that follows.

**RECOVERY**

Recovery is the real test when a crisis occurs. Organizations that have followed our procedure and tested their processes and learned from them are ready to operate in
the new normal. If the organization is committed, it assigns resources to accomplish such tasks as:

- ongoing assessment of the company and employees (from director to shop floor);
- revalidation of processes;
- monitoring employee behavior;
- continuous improvement;
- contingency planning;
- business continuity plans;
- business resumption plans; and
- succession plans.

Recovery is ongoing; a major evaluation should be performed annually to ensure that the assumptions underlying the strategies and tactics remain sound and that all employees have a chance to renew their familiarity with the procedures.

**BUSINESS BENEFITS**

In today’s tight markets, organizations are worried about competitiveness, quality, costs, market share, and other “critical” aspects of management that are required to keep an organization fiscally alive. These concerns take priority over assigning revenues and resources to the challenges of living in the new normal.

Personnel responsible for emergency response (e.g., operational, human resource, and security leaders) are looking for avenues to provide them with a competitive edge. Prioritizing the goal of living in the new normal requires building a business case that shows a return on investment for the training of key organizational personnel. The individuals responsible for designing and implementing emergency response systems within their organization suggest:

- There is more to preparedness than the response to emergencies; there are cultural and psychological factors that must be considered to ensure adequate response and long-term asset protection.

- As organizations wrestle with the implementation of an emergency response system, they simultaneously and fortuitously develop new knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behavior. This transformation fosters team building, develops discipline, enhances communication, and creates a new environment. This new environment encourages collaboration, cooperation, and conflict resolution, and self-assertiveness within a community.

- The emergency response system must be integrated into the organization’s vision, mission, and values. This integration enhances the employee’s appreciation and respect for the organization, and creates a renewed focus on what it takes to live and compete in the new normal.

Following is a summary of some of the concurrent business benefits that go beyond crisis preparedness:

**Facility readiness**

Facility readiness includes visible security that creates an environment of reduced stress and allows employees to:

- direct focus toward achieving objectives; and

- increase potential capacity and productivity with positive impacts on profit and earnings.

**Paper readiness**

Benefits of paper readiness include alignment of thought processes through written procedures that carry over into other organizational factors beyond the regulatory (i.e., quality, productivity, and human resources), such as:

- compliance processes outside of emergency management;
compliance strategy to meet or exceed compliance regulations; and
alignment of processes and procedures.

People readiness
People readiness makes processes and procedures culturally compatible with the organization. This results in improved competencies, fact-based decision-making, teamwork, strategic and tactical thinking, safety, research skills, communication skills, and people management skills, resulting in:

- improved capacities—rapid and effective responses lead to better efficiencies; and
- wider capabilities—all types of events can be managed.

Validation
Validation helps people analyze and look beyond the obvious, and to:

- present an analytical process that encourages the questioning of assumptions;
- detect hidden and undetected benefits or flaws; and
- focus on continual improvement.

Recovery
A visionary recovery plan considers aspects of business continuity through:

- operational contingencies;
- succession planning; and
- improved communication processes.

OVERALL ADVANTAGES
In introducing an emergency response system to the organization, leaders must present a business case that pays off in the following ways:

- improved return on investment—the ability to get something beneficial from the investment made to the organization around emergency response;
- improved employee development—employees building skill sets that “pay off”;
- increased cultural integration—a system that works within the culture because it is created by the employees; and
- rapid integration of processes resulting from personal ownership and commitment—creation of a sustainable response system that is maintained by the employees, who enhance and improve “their own” system.

CONCLUSION
In today’s uncertain environment, no one knows what will happen, or when. Viability, stability, and future success depend on how organizations prepare for and respond to events, and how they manage the long-term impact on their organizations. We have labeled the effects of the recent mass disaster events as “living in the new normal.” Although this is a new phenomenon for the United States, many other countries around the globe have already been experiencing it.

Living in the new normal limits risk and maximizes the ability of organizations to respond to a crisis. There is a subtle and realistic shift from full dependence on government protection to a realization of the need for ownership of crisis response and local responsibility. People and agencies must share their knowledge to ensure safety and security for themselves and their country. Our approach creates conditions for collaboration and cooperation within agencies and with the public, and it increases the probability of a “profitable” environment. It also supports the premise that crisis and disaster do not have to mean chaos and disruption for any organization.