

Terrorist Risk & Complacency

When smokers queue for a lottery ticket they accept that the chance of developing lung cancer at 40:1 is low but the chance of winning the lottery at 40,000,000:1 is high. This practical logic seems to run through Business continuity & Disaster recovery industry. It's not sexy to plan for something that won't happen to me and if it does I have the common sense approach and will to overcome.

Equally as a developing industry the majority of it's professionals have the task of convincing the non believers of it's importance and display various statistics about business failure and recovery together with standards often written by industry peers. Unfortunately many industry guidelines are conceived as standards with BC & DR plans usually written around them, this invariably leads to failure on real invocation.

This can be quite a surprise especially for those that test plans but to quote the immortal words of general Eisenhower " All plans fail at first contact with the enemy". This may surprise some but from working in the industry for 15 years visiting on average of 3 disasters a week, I have seen few plans work, many tests turn into disasters and even some catastrophic losses turned into publicity triumphs for contingency planners.

Terrorism is a case in point. It won't happen to me! You may argue this point and extrapolate the various contingency plans in place for CBR terrorist event. Plans may be written procedures established and confidence high but will they work and on what was the hypothesis drawn?

Terrorist have released a chemical device two miles downwind from a major city and central business district. It is believed to be a truck full of chemicals en route to a swimming pool. It is a cold cloudy day with little breeze.

Invoke the contingency plans!

I wager the different responses would be equal to the fatalities. This typical scenario should be in all contingency plans but how confident are you that your conclusion would result in safety of employees? Most plans revolve around the BCI 10 point plan, the business, the reputation, the continuity etc, but what of survival?

Two white powder letters entered the Brentwood facility in the USA, as a mail handling centre they were not opened just passed through in transit. How much to decontaminate the building? If you guessed less than \$100 million you were wrong. It also took two years, planned for white powder? Insurance, the last bastion of BC & DR plans, unfortunately it doesn't cover cbr terrorism. Is your building worth decontaminating, can you wait 2 years? Got the cash?

The forgoing terrorist event would result in a variety of responses, some advising, stay put or evacuate, it's safe because the release was downwind, Afraid not, the low wind speed and barometric conditions would make the release extremely unstable, and very likely to follow turbulent air pattern dispersal upwind too.

The people caught out in the open may take refuge in your building, great, they just bought in contamination! Some occupants unaware of the expertise available would take their chances and try to get home, faced with a Police and military armed response they would not be allowed to leave the "Hot Zone" until they have been decontaminated. The UK new, "Civil Contingencies Bill" removes "Human Rights legislation and replaces them with "emergency powers" this will have quite an effect on people used to arguing with authority, (armed authority).With the emergency services possibly facing hundreds of thousands of potentially contaminated persons the best decontamination time line expected is several days, prepared? What of the returning evacuees, let them in?

While the example of TIC, *toxic industrial chemical* was used the reality is that terrorists plan for engineered maximum fatalities, whereas emergency responders plan for environmental accidents, these are usually confined to single source based chemicals as rigorous legislation prevents the transport or storage of conflicting or non compatible chemicals, obviously terrorists would read what not to do or store and reverse the advice. Secondary devices or events must also be considered.

Hot sites are my favourite failure point. We have off site mirror facilities, we have a contract! Yes of course! Read the small print and recognise that in all probability the site will be within the contamination plume, that you won't be able to get to it, that due to the wide area of event the facility may be overrun or confiscated.

From the forgoing the ranting I may appear to condemn all plans or hope but to the contrary I believe simple planning based on a proactive approach can safeguard employees and the business. The first priority is to get away from the established BC philosophy of planning for effect and recovery and plan for defence and resilience.

Free planning & contingency information can be found on:
disasteradvice.com
cbr-response.com

About the author

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