

PAS 200:2011

Crisis management – Guidance and good practice



CabinetOffice

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ISBN 978 0 580 76478 3

ICS 03.100.01

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Publication history

First edition September 2011

Contents

Foreword	
Introduction	1
1 Scope	4
2 Terms and definitions	5
3 Understanding crises	6
3.1 What is a crisis?	6
3.2 The relationship between incidents and crises: structure and complexity	6
3.3 The general characteristics of crises	6
3.4 Understanding the potential origins of crises	8
3.5 "Sudden" and "smouldering" crises	8
3.6 How organizations can become vulnerable to crises	9
3.7 How crises incubate within organizations	9
3.8 Achieving higher levels of resilience	9
3.9 Possible barriers to success	10
4 Developing a crisis management capability	12
4.1 A framework	12
4.2 Capability	12
4.3 Setting the organization's policy and direction	13
4.4 Identifying roles and responsibilities	13
4.5 Creating structures and processes	14
4.6 Information management	14
4.7 Situational awareness	14
4.8 The common recognized information picture	16
4.9 Supporting the decision-makers	17
4.10 Dealing with dilemmas	17
4.11 Conclusions	20
5 Planning and preparing for crisis response and recovery	21
5.1 General	21
5.2 The crisis management plan	21
5.3 Key elements of the plan	21
5.4 Logistical factors	22
5.5 The activities of the crisis management team	22
5.6 Leadership	23
5.7 Decisions in crises – key features	24
5.8 Dealing with people	25
5.9 Transition to recovery	25



6 Communicating in a crisis 26

6.1 General 26

6.2 Communications strategy 26

6.3 Formal and informal communications structures 28

6.4 Planning to communicate 29

6.5 Communication methods 29

6.6 Barriers to effective communication 30

7 Evaluating crisis management capability 31

7.1 General 31

7.2 Training 31

7.3 Exercise design considerations 31

7.4 The “crisis-aware” organization 34

Annex A (normative) – Summary of recommendations 35

Bibliography 38



Foreword

This Publicly Available Specification (PAS) was sponsored by the Cabinet Office, and its development was facilitated by the British Standards Institution (BSI).

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Other acknowledgements

The Steering Group wishes to thank Helen Sweet, who acted as the PAS's Technical Author until July 2009, and Ken Lawson, who acted as the Project Sponsor's Representative until April 2010.

Comments from many other interested parties, including BSI committee BCM/1, Business continuity management, were invited by BSI in the formal

consultation process. Their input is gratefully acknowledged.

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Any user claiming compliance with this PAS is expected to be able to justify any course of action that deviates from its recommendations.

It has been assumed in the preparation of this PAS that the execution of its provisions will be entrusted to appropriately qualified and experienced people, for whose use it has been produced.

Presentational conventions

The word "should" is used to express the recommendations of this standard, given in clearly labelled "Recommendations" boxes throughout the text (and conveniently summarized in Annex A). The "Recommendations" boxes (and Annex A) constitute the normative elements of this PAS.

All other elements of this standard are normative. Non-boxed elements text give the background to and justification for the recommendations, with "Information Boxes" used to contain particular arguments or points of detail.

The word "may" is used in the text to express permissibility (e.g. as an alternative to a primary recommendation). The word "can" is used to express possibility (e.g. a consequence of an action or an event).

Contractual and legal considerations

This publication does not purport to include all the necessary provisions of a contract. Users are responsible for its correct application.

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Introduction

This PAS is aimed primarily at top managers with strategic responsibilities who have a role in shaping, directing and developing the crisis management capability of their organization. It will give them the means to:

- identify and understand the issues and challenges of crisis management from a strategic perspective;
- evaluate their implications for their organization;
- take practical steps to improve their organization's crisis management capability.

However, the PAS will also be useful to those whose roles are more concerned with the implementation, maintenance and testing of the procedures associated with that capability, who operate under the direction of, and within policy guidelines decided by, top managers.

It is the basic tenet of this PAS that organizations can be made:

- a) more aware of the potential for, and the general nature of, crises;
- b) better able to withstand their effects;
- c) better able to recover from those effects;
- d) better able to identify useful lessons and learn from them.

This PAS is a practical document, and references are made to theoretical models and research literature only when they add underpinning value and provide explanation or examples. It reflects the view that distinctions should be made between crisis management and other management disciplines, even though there will be overlaps, similarities and some differences that may only be questions of temporary emphasis, priority or urgency. These relationships are examined, to give readers an overview of the way crisis management activities relate to other management activities and processes.

Terminology matters because it is the means by which we express and develop concepts. Readers will find the terms "incident" and "crisis" defined to mean different things in different contexts, and that reflects different underlying contexts, ideas and worldviews held by their authors. Consequently, some readers may feel this PAS is at odds with the implicit or explicit positions set out in other documents. Progress necessarily introduces

friction and departure from previous approaches, but where this is the case the intent is to progress the thinking and practice relating to crisis management, and to clarify its relationships, both practical and conceptual, with other significant management and resilience disciplines, perhaps most notably that of business continuity.

The definition of a crisis as an inherently abnormal, unstable and complex situation that represents a threat to the strategic objectives, reputation or existence of an organization is fundamental to all that follows in this document. Crises present organizations with complex and difficult challenges that may have profound and far-reaching consequences, sometimes irrespective of how successfully they are seen to be managed. These consequences can be very damaging, especially where it is perceived that the organization failed to prepare for, manage or recover from a crisis. There is a risk of significant damage to reputation, and possibly of the collapse of the business and its operations. In short, crises are of potentially existential significance to an organization.

BS 25999 defines an incident as follows: "[a] situation that might be, or could lead to, a business disruption, loss, emergency or crisis." This is entirely coherent with this PAS: crises may emerge from strategic shocks such as the catastrophic loss of a production facility involving severe loss of life; equally, they can arise from an initially operational-scale incident that cascades and escalates into an event of profound strategic significance for the organization, a crisis.

Crises may emerge as a result of inadequately managed incidents that are allowed to escalate in scale, duration and impact. They may also be the product of multiple incidents that present new types and compound levels of risk. For all of these, crisis management is essentially and primarily a strategic function.

Business continuity is a critical management function in mitigating such cascading impacts, potentially preventing their escalation into crises. Business continuity does not subsume crisis management, nor is it subordinate to crisis management; they are complementary activities when considered in the broader corporate context. Business continuity management cannot guarantee that all potential crises are intercepted, and a crisis management capability in

an organization that had failed to sufficiently invest and give strategic leadership to its business continuity arrangements would be incoherent and leave the organization vulnerable to crises emerging from weakly managed breaks in the continuity of operations.

So, situations may require both types of response (incident and crisis management) to run in parallel, looking after their respective concerns but with very close coordination to ensure that information and understanding are shared, aims and objectives are in harmony, decisions are strategically coherent and the overall response is seamless and integrated. Although the management of crises is seen as an inherently strategic challenge, it should also be remembered that some of the actions it requires will be carried out by staff at other managerial and operational levels.

Crises may also start without a recognizable incident. These are sometimes called “smouldering”, “long-wave” or “rising tide” crises. They are discussed in Information Box 1 in Clause 3.

In sum, crises are not synonymous with incidents, and it is argued that their management presents special challenges that require different approaches. The

relationship between incident and crisis management is further discussed in Clause 3.

An organization’s crisis management capability needs to be developed within the unique context of that organization and will be sensitively dependent on it. The requirements of a crisis management capability are discussed in Information Box 3 in Clause 4. It should be developed and maintained alongside all the other capabilities the organization needs to meet its objectives.

The capability to manage crises should not be seen as something that can simply be developed as and when needed. It requires a systematic approach that creates structures and processes, trains people to work within them and is evaluated and developed in a continuous, purposeful and rigorous way. In developing the capability there will be many opportunities for synergy with ordinary business management processes and business continuity arrangements. The development of a crisis management capability should be viewed as a mainstream activity and one that is proportionate to an organization’s size and capacity. Information Box 2 in Clause 3 identifies ways in which it adds value to an organization.



However, any solution should be adopted only after careful consideration of the extent to which it is appropriate to the size, environment, culture, objectives and existing structures of the organization. With that in mind, this PAS provides general recommendations that are accepted as having widespread validity and that constitute good practice, with guidance as to how to implement them in organizations.

The document is structured as follows (see below).

Each clause discusses key themes consistent with the scope of this PAS. Information boxes are used when it is helpful to expand or develop a point or a concept. Recommendations are given in separate boxes at appropriate points in the text and are summarized in a single list in Annex A.



Clause	Description
Clause 3	Describes the general and observable nature of crises, their origin and their potential impacts. Identifies how organizations may develop systemic vulnerabilities. Makes recommendations as to how to develop greater resilience. Identifies the general benefits that should accrue from developing a crisis management capability.
Clause 4	Discusses the nature of capability in general terms. Gives practical advice on how to develop it. Describes the structures and processes that are needed. Identifies how information management systems may support decision-makers.
Clause 5	Gives summary information about crisis management plans. Suggests treating plans as evolving documents that are subject to continuous evaluation and review. Addresses the key issues of competences in crisis management, leadership and decision-making.
Clause 6	Discusses internal and stakeholder communications, but also includes outline guidance on preparing to communicate with the media and the general public.
Clause 7	Describes techniques and processes for evaluating the organization's preparedness and capability.

1 Scope

This PAS is written for a strategic audience and is a general guide to established good practice. It provides guidance on crisis management that will help top managers in an organization to implement and develop a crisis management capability. It will be of benefit to any organization regardless of location, size, type, industry or sector.



2 Terms and definitions

For the purposes of this PAS, the following terms and definitions apply.

2.1 business continuity

capability of the organization to plan for and respond to incidents and business disruptions, in order to continue business operations at an acceptable predefined level

[BS 25999-1:2006, *Business continuity management – Code of practice*, and BS 25999-2:2007, *Business continuity management – Specification*]

2.2 business continuity management (BCM)

holistic management process that identifies potential threats to an organization and the impacts those threats, when realized, might cause, and which provides a framework for building organizational resilience with the capability for safeguarding the interests of its key stakeholders, reputation, brand and value-creating activities

[BS 25999-1:2006, *Business continuity management – Code of practice*, and BS 25999-2:2007, *Business continuity management – Specification*]

2.3 common recognized information picture (CRIP)

statement of shared situational awareness and understanding, which is briefed to crisis decision-makers and used as the accepted basis for auditable and defensible decisions

2.4 context

environment (in the broadest sense of the word) within which the organization seeks to achieve its objectives

[BS 31100:2008, *Risk management – Code of practice (modified)*]

2.5 crisis

inherently abnormal, unstable and complex situation that represents a threat to the strategic objectives, reputation or existence of an organization

2.6 crisis-aware organization

forward-thinking organization that has procedures and processes designed to identify emerging crises and

deal with them as early as possible, whilst continuously assessing its resilience and vulnerabilities

2.7 exercise

planned rehearsal of a possible incident designed to evaluate an organization's capability to manage that incident and to provide an opportunity to improve the organization's future responses and enhance the relevant competences of those involved

[HM Government. *Emergency response and recovery*. 3rd ed. 2010]

2.8 horizon scanning

systematic examination of potential threats, opportunities and future developments, which may have the potential to create new risks or change the character of risks already identified

2.9 incident

situation that might be, or could lead to, a business disruption, loss, emergency or crisis

2.10 invocation

act of declaring that an organization's response plans and/or capabilities (whether crisis management, incident management, business continuity management, emergency management or other, or a combination of any of these) are to be put into effect

2.11 issues management

anticipation and assessment of trends and potential changes in an organization's business environment, which entail forward planning to address opportunities and threats, and responding rapidly to issues that might threaten its reputation or relationships with stakeholders

2.12 situational awareness

process of perceiving, comprehending, interpreting and evaluating what is happening in a crisis, combined with the ability to identify and model foreseeable future developments

2.13 top management

person or group of people directing and controlling an organization at the highest level

3 Understanding crises

3.1 What is a crisis?

For the purposes of this PAS, a crisis is defined as: an inherently abnormal, unstable and complex situation that represents a threat to the strategic objectives, reputation or existence of an organization.

Clearly, this captures a number of very important elements of crises, including the abnormal, the extreme and the extraordinary. It serves to distinguish a crisis from an incident by scale, suggesting that crises are more difficult to manage, their consequences more profound and the required responses potentially extraordinary.

This is generally true, but it is possible to achieve a more refined understanding by introducing two dimensions. These are:

- a) the degree of “structure” involved;
- b) the degree of complexity involved.

3.2 The relationship between incidents and crises: structure and complexity

Incidents are said to have “structure” because they are produced by identifiable and assessable risks and present themselves in fairly predictable ways.

As with the majority of risks that concern business continuity management (BCM) planning, even the most challenging and serious incidents generally lend themselves to pre-prepared responses. In these cases, the role of strategic management is most likely to be one of ensuring that the BCM plan is working, that it is properly resourced and that it continues to support the organization’s objectives, which may have changed since the onset of the incident.

Crises, on the other hand, are often produced by risks that had not been identified, or at least not identified with the scale and intensity they presented.

Crises may also be the product of an unforeseen combination of interdependent risks. They develop in unpredictable ways, and the response usually requires genuinely creative, as opposed to pre-prepared, solutions.

Indeed, it is argued that pre-prepared solutions (of the sort designed to deal with more predictable and structured incidents) are unlikely to work in complex

and ill-structured crises. They may, in fact, be counterproductive. As such, crisis management needs to be able to deal with issues that may not be manageable within BCM procedures, however well developed these may be.

The roles of strategic management are amplified during a crisis. They are likely to include direct intervention and decisive strategic leadership along lines that cannot be preconceived. They may even include strategic repositioning of the organization as a whole, and for that reason crisis management is the domain of top management.

Essentially, top managers champion, endorse and support BCM, but they tend to implement, lead and direct crisis management.

Recommendations regarding 3.1 and 3.2

1. The essential distinctions between BCM and crisis management, as described in this PAS, should be recognized.
2. Plans, protocols and procedures drawn up under the auspices of BCM and crisis management should reflect these distinctions and allow for responses of the right sort(s) to be invoked.
3. The development and maintenance of crisis management capability should be included in the organization’s governance and strategy review processes.
4. Procedures developed should allow for crisis management and BCM responses to be operating at the same time in a coherent, integrated and complementary way.

3.3 The general characteristics of crises

Crises are associated with highly complex problems, the full implications and nature of which may be unclear at the time. Each possible solution may have severe consequences of one form or another.

Managers may have to choose the “least bad” solution and may have to resolve (or at least recognize and accept) fundamental strategic dilemmas. These might mean that every choice comes with a penalty of some sort and there is no ideal solution.

Crises may create situations that threaten the fundamental norms, self-image or values of an organization. In such cases, leadership is an important force in stabilizing the situation for the organization's staff, its customers and its reputation.

Crises place exceptional demands on managers and their support teams, at a time when they may already be under pressure of time and intense scrutiny. Managers should ensure that their planning takes into account the need to sustain a response at high levels of intensity. They should also anticipate the needs of staff who may be working at extraordinary levels of activity and, possibly, dealing with distressing issues.

It is worth noting that health and safety regulations and the duty of care are not affected by incidents or crises. They apply at all times.

Crises often force organizations to review, transform or defend their choices, policies, culture and strategies, possibly under public and media scrutiny. However, they can bring new opportunities and benefits to an organization if they are handled successfully.

Even if the organization is perceived to be at fault or blameworthy, the demonstration of virtue, integrity and compassion can offset, to some extent, the damage to its reputation and standing. A well-managed crisis can demonstrate the positive qualities of an organization and enhance its general reputation.

Denial, fear and/or complacency on the part of the top management will increase the organization's vulnerability, hamper its response and degrade its capacity to recover from a crisis. If it is a very serious crisis, the organization cannot be expected to emerge from it in the same shape, however successfully it is resolved.

False perceptions, rumours and misreporting should be expected and confronted, without detracting from the strategic direction, priorities and purpose of the response.

Recovery may present opportunities to regenerate the organization and bring forward long-term development plans. Conversely, it might mean ceasing to do certain types of business.

The implications of this are clear. Recovery:

- a) should start as early as possible;
- b) should have a strategic direction from the outset;
- c) actually creates strategic opportunities.

Crises do not always involve direct threats to life, property or assets. However, they almost always challenge an organization's reputation and brand, even if it is only through the need to demonstrate resilience and effective leadership.

Crises can become highly politicized and subject to intense public and media scrutiny. This extends and complicates the environment that those managing the crisis are trying to understand, influence and shape.

Successful crisis management sometimes involves stepping outside the normal "rules" of an organization or its business environment. Indeed, crises often invalidate taken-for-granted expectations on the part of stakeholders and the wider community.

An organization's performance in crisis management, and its apparent preparedness, may expose its top management to public scrutiny. The consequences, in personal, professional and organizational terms, could be significant.

Thus, crises can be so extraordinarily demanding that no assumptions should be made about the ability of staff (of any seniority, grade or experience) to manage them and to steer the organization out of them. Complacency, lack of preparation and wishful thinking almost certainly guarantee failure.

Recommendations regarding 3.3

5. The challenges of crisis management make the selection, training and development of the staff who will run and support the activity a vital consideration. The importance of this should be recognized, and the processes of selection, training and development should be managed carefully.
6. No assumptions should be made about the fitness of any individuals for crisis management roles, irrespective of their seniority in the organization. Part of the planning process may involve identifying individuals outside of the usual management chain who have skills that could aid the crisis management process, along with procedures for facilitating their inclusion when an event occurs.
7. Roles, responsibilities and performance indicators for those involved in developing, managing and implementing crisis management capability should be included in job descriptions, performance assessments and training plans.

3.4 Understanding the potential origins of crises

The potential origins of crises are diverse and impossible to categorize fully, but may include the following:

- a) Those externally generated by changes in the business, political or social environment within which the organization operates. An organization could be surprised and compromised by such changes.
- b) Those stemming from poorly managed incidents and business fluctuations, which are allowed to escalate to the point where they create a genuine crisis. This may include instances of poor or mismanaged communication with customers and stakeholders.
- c) Those originating from the failure (perceived or actual) to deliver products or services that meet the required standards of quality or safety.
- d) Those deriving from breaches (perceived or actual) of standards of probity, ethics or corporate responsibility. These might be associated with well-intentioned “whistle-blowing”, malice, misconduct or simple negligence. Whatever the organization’s actual culpability, the result can be

serious damage to its brand, reputation and image.

- e) Those incubated within the organization, perhaps through a combination of inadequate supervision, under-resourcing, lack of training or poor decision-making over a period of time. It is possible that a particular trigger event will escalate an incident to crisis proportions because it exposes a background of managerial and operational failures. Crisis incubation and latent failures are discussed in 3.7.
- f) Those following disruptions to supply chains, which threaten an organization’s ability to function and deliver its products.

It is possible that two or more of these causes can combine in producing a crisis.

3.5 “Sudden” and “smouldering” crises

It is also useful to think of crises in terms of the generalized distinction between those that present themselves more or less immediately and (as far as the obvious signs are concerned) dramatically, and those that present themselves as a gradual build-up of evidence over time. The different characteristics and

Information Box 1 – “Sudden” and “smouldering” crises

Sudden crises

These are characterized by their immediate onset. They tend to be unanticipated and escalate very quickly, often as result of a severe triggering event or incident that may be out of the organization’s control. The immediate cause may be addressed quickly, but the lingering consequences (including enquiries and legal action) may require continued strategic response for an extended period.

An important implication for top managers is that at least some elements of the crisis will be obvious to all, and so it may be relatively easy to invoke a response and mobilize (at least in the immediate term) the resources needed to manage the consequences.

Smouldering crises

These are also known as “creeping”, “slow-burn”, “long-wave” or “rising tide” crises. Whatever the preferred choice of name, their common feature is that impact on the organization and its stakeholders grows, sometimes undetected, over a period of time, whilst indicators of potential crisis are possibly missed, denied, ignored or misunderstood.

The key challenge for top managers is to recognize that their organization is threatened, and then to find support for the implementation of a proactive response before the challenge becomes a full-scale crisis.

Conclusion

It is generally accepted in the literature of crisis management that most crises are of the smouldering type. This makes a good case for developing a horizon-scanning facility, so that potential and emerging threats may be identified, assessed and mitigated as early as possible. This requires a culture of continuous communication about the possible outcome of events and changes in the business environment. Horizon scanning is discussed in Clause 4.

challenges of the two types are discussed in **Information Box 1**.

3.6 How organizations can become vulnerable to crises

Research into this issue has crystallized a number of ideas that will help top managers understand why and how an apparently effective organization can become vulnerable to a crisis, and potentially unable to manage it effectively.

The basic approach put forward in this PAS is to understand the organization as a system with social and technical dimensions that are complex and interdependent. Neither works in complete isolation from the other, and by studying the way they interact we can achieve a better understanding of the way the organization works.

When trying to understand why part of an organization failed, it pays to be wary of simplistic explanations – such as those which conveniently identify a culprit, a single process failure, a simple act of negligence or the like. Any failure within an organization is almost certain to involve a web of related factors, both social and technical. It requires the top manager to recognize the following:

- a) There are likely to be faults in the organization, its operations and its management that underlie the failure, and the failure itself is only a visible symptom of these faults.
- b) Finding and blaming a culprit, or perhaps changing the failed element of the business process, may be superficially satisfying. It provides a ready answer and does not expose the organization or its managers to deeper scrutiny. However, it may not address the root cause, which leaves the real problems still in place and the systemic vulnerability intact.
- c) A crisis may expose instances or legacies of bad decision-making and a general lack of preparedness to deal with the stresses and dislocation they tend to cause. Opportunities for learning may be lost if enquiries into the crisis focus on technical issues or individual errors.

3.7 How crises incubate within organizations

Crisis can be incubated within organizations by the steady accumulation of faults and bad practice. These may either cause a crisis or compromise the organization's ability to deal with one that is imposed

upon it. They are sometimes called "latent errors", because they lie dormant until a triggering event exposes them. Causes may include the following:

- a) Gradual and incremental slippages in quality or safety standards that go unchecked and become accepted as a normal way of working.
- b) Convenient, but unofficial and suboptimal, "workaround" strategies that become the normal routine. Overcomplicated processes, unrealistic schedules, chronic personnel shortages, undertrained staff and lax supervision all contribute to this.
- c) Flaws in supervision and process monitoring, which promote an expectation of "getting away with" undesirable behaviours or being able to survive minor failures without reporting them.
- d) Blame cultures that encourage cover-ups and the lack of a shared sense of mission and purpose, which generate a defensive (if not actually hostile) "them and us" attitude between staff and management.
- e) Poor training and development of staff and managers, or incremental loss of skills and knowledge.

False or complacent assumptions about an organization may mask the signals that would indicate a systemic vulnerability. Organizations tend to promote a set of core beliefs, values and behavioural norms. It can be difficult to expose issues that seem to challenge this worldview and its underlying assumptions about the organization and its capabilities. Analysis of an organization's vulnerabilities may expose staff to a level of scrutiny that might be considered intimidating and invasive, but it is essential.

It is possible that the main impulse after a crisis may be to protect reputations, fend off criticism and defend livelihoods. These tendencies corrupt the process of identifying and applying lessons and militate against true learning.

Managers should resist the temptation to ascribe a crisis to a single cause. Instead, it should be seen as a symptom of a systemic vulnerability in the organization.

3.8 Achieving higher levels of resilience

Much research has focused on how certain types of organizations are able to operate in very volatile conditions and environments but at the same time demonstrate a very low accident or failure rate. Such organizations are often described as having high reliability. This implies that they are effective in avoiding or mitigating crises.