



THE CRISIS RESPONSE HANDBOOK

How to prepare for, and
respond to, crisis events

Grant Rayner

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The Crisis Response Handbook

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Preface

Crisis response is a unique specialisation.

Many of you reading this handbook will be members of Crisis Response Teams at some level of your organisation. Did you learn how to respond to crisis events as part of your university degree or vocational training? It's unlikely. In fact, it's more likely that you've been 'volunteered' onto the Crisis Response Team.

Effectively, you've been thrown into a mission critical role and are now expected to protect your organisation from a host of different threats and risks—without any actual qualifications and, in many cases, without effective training.

As with all professional skills, you can learn how to effectively respond to a crisis. Crisis response is, however, as much an art as it is a science. And the art of effective crisis response is a difficult subject to teach.

The art of crisis response relies on good judgement—more specifically, good judgement during periods of extreme stress and confusion. This type of judgement can only be built through experience. Given that crisis events don't happen every day (thankfully), this experience can be hard to come by.

If that's the case, how do you learn how to effectively respond to a crisis?

Here's what I've learnt over many years of working in this specialised field: even inexperienced individuals and teams can perform at reasonable levels during a crisis, given the right processes and tools. Good processes and tools will enable a Crisis Response Team to work their way through a crisis, guiding them and generally keeping them on track.

In this handbook, I'll share the processes and tools I've developed over the past two decades practicing crisis response. These are the same processes and tools that I advocate to my clients.

However, even sound processes won't prepare teams for the array of situations and challenges they could face during a crisis. There's still a lot of scope for the team to colour outside the lines and make costly mistakes.

Beyond processes and tools, a number of specific techniques must be learnt and applied during a crisis, including leadership, decision making, task management and communication (amongst others). These techniques can be taught, but are often difficult to contextualise and applied in practice during a crisis.

In this handbook, I will share many of the techniques I've learned over the years, which are designed to help Crisis Response Teams perform at optimal levels. However, to use these techniques effectively, you and your teams will need to practice them. Even then, some judgement will still be necessary to know when to apply each technique—judgement that can only be built through participating in crisis simulation exercises and responding to crisis events.

This handbook will provide a start point that will help you build that judgement. To do so, in the following chapters, I'll go into granular detail regarding the key processes, procedures and techniques you'll need to effectively respond to a crisis.

One aspect of crisis response, however, can't be taught: the crisis response mindset.

You'll need to develop a crisis response mindset separately, through completing crisis simulation exercises and responding to real crisis events. As reinforced in [The Crisis Simulation Handbook](#), learning by doing is the best way to assimilate the skills and attributes necessary to be an effective crisis responder.

Who This Book Is for

This handbook has been written for crisis leaders and members of Crisis Response Teams at all organisational levels, as a guide on how to effectively respond to a crisis.

Most people on Crisis Response Teams are not crisis response professionals. Rather, they are, by definition, crisis response amateurs. This is to be expected, as their crisis response roles on the team are secondary to their core roles within the organisation.

As you'll learn shortly, Crisis Response Teams are multi-disciplinary groupings, with people from different functional elements of the organisation. These people may be human resource specialists, communications specialists, legal specialists or security specialists

(amongst other specialities). But it's unlikely that any member of the team will be crisis response specialists.

If you do work full-time in the field of crisis response, most of the information in this handbook should not be new to you. Hopefully it should reflect many of the things you've already learnt in your own work. At the same time, I'm confident there will be some new insights and perspectives that you'll find valuable and will be able to apply in your work.

If you're new to crisis response, this handbook will provide you with the knowledge you need to effectively respond to a crisis. Importantly, you'll also learn how to avoid a host of pitfalls that can affect even the most experienced Crisis Response Teams.

How This Book Is Structured

This handbook will first explain how to build and maintain a robust crisis response capability. Without a strong foundation in place—including teams, policies, plans and preparedness—an organisation won't be able to effectively respond to a crisis.

From there, the handbook will focus on how to effectively respond to a crisis event. The last chapter will share some of the techniques and best practices I've learned over more than 20 years responding to crisis events and observing crisis teams in action.

This Handbook Is Designed To Be Used

Above all, this handbook is designed to be a useful and practical resource. People from organisations of all sizes and from any industry should be able to use the concepts and processes in this handbook to shape their own approach to crisis preparation and response.

Whatever your organisation's requirements, you can adapt parts of this handbook to meet them. Some of the details contained in this handbook can be incorporated into your Crisis Response Plans. Other aspects—particularly processes and techniques—can be conveyed to teams during training and practiced during exercises.

Perspective

You may have seen an online meme about drawing an owl. It's a good one. As shown in Figure 1, Step 1 of the process to draw an owl involves drawing two circles, forming the outline of the body and head of the owl. Pretty straightforward.

Step 2 is to draw the rest of the owl.

In many ways, this meme provides an accurate reflection of the field of crisis response. 'Here's a few hours of training; now go and save the organisation from this calamity.'

Most crisis response training focuses on high-level policies and procedures. Very rarely does such training explain to the members of the Crisis Response Team the mechanics of how to actually respond to a crisis.

How to draw an owl



1. Draw some circles

2. Draw the rest of the fucking owl

Figure 1. How to draw an owl

As a professional in this field, I'm convinced that we need to do more to prepare managers and executives in companies, non-government organisations and governments with the competencies necessary to effectively respond to crisis events.

It's simply not enough to have plans containing policies and high-level procedures gathering dust on a shelf. Instead, we need to provide processes, techniques and tools that can be readily adopted and used with minimal training.

In sum, we need to make it as easy as possible for Crisis Response Team members to succeed.

Helping members of Crisis Response Teams to succeed is a key aim of this handbook.

People-First Approach

Every professional has a unique view regarding what's important and what's not in their particular field of expertise.

When it comes to crisis response, my perspective has always been that people come first in a crisis. The physical and psychological wellbeing of people must come before an organisation's facilities, operations and reputation.

If you take good care of your people, you'll develop the reputation as an organisation that puts their people first. Hopefully, this approach resonates with most of you reading this handbook.

Unfortunately, history is replete with organisations that have not put people first. Faced with threats to share price performance or reputation, organisations have knowingly put the company's interests before the needs of their employees and the public.

The practices and procedures contained in this handbook place people before all other priorities. In my experience, if you put people first, other aspects of the crisis tend to work out okay.

My Background

I've been working as a crisis response professional for over 22 years. During this time, I've focused my efforts on the two areas I consider the most important and impactful: supporting organisations during major crisis events and crisis simulation training.

In the area of crisis response, I've supported clients during a host of different crisis events. Here's just a few of the highlights:

- Terrorist attacks in Jakarta in 2003 and 2004
- Asian Tsunami in 2004 and 2005
- Nepal State of Emergency in 2005
- Lebanon War in 2006
- Nepal earthquake in 2015
- Terrorist attacks in Colombo in 2019
- The COVID-19 pandemic
- The situation in Afghanistan in 2021
- The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022

I've also supported clients through a host of other crisis events, many of these being too sensitive and confidential to share here.

Fortunately, crisis events aren't a daily occurrence, so I spend most of my time supporting clients through the provision of training and exercises. My primary focus is improving crisis team performance through the design and delivery of realistic crisis simulation exercises.

I've been privileged to have worked with some of the world's most successful companies in some of the world's most interesting locations. Over the years, I've supported clients in Australia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Fiji, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Moldova, Morocco, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea,

the Philippines, Romania, Singapore, Solomon Islands, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Syria, Taiwan, Thailand, the UK, the US, the UAE, Vanuatu and Vietnam.

I've spent hundreds of hours in the room with Crisis Response Teams as they've negotiated complex crisis simulation exercises. I've also guided organisations through a diverse range of different crisis events. Through these experiences, I've seen what works and what doesn't work in practice.

I've been fortunate to have watched teams operate at peak levels of performance. I've also seen teams crumble under the pressure of intense situations.

Overall, each of these experiences has helped shape my approaches to crisis preparation and response. This handbook will share what I've learned along the way.

Like most experienced professionals, I'm also acutely aware that there's a lot I don't know and have yet to learn. Accordingly, this handbook is not the only book you should read on the subject of crisis response. Read as many books and articles as you can find on the subject. Also spend time with people who have responded to crisis events. The insights you'll gain from these people will help inform and shape your own approaches.

Thank You

Thank you for buying *The Crisis Response Handbook*, and thanks in advance for reading it.

Crisis response is a niche topic, so I sincerely appreciate your interest and support.

If you have any comments or suggestions, please feel free to get in touch via [email](#).

End Notes

Other Titles

This handbook is a companion to The Crisis Simulation Handbook, which focuses specifically on the design and delivery of crisis simulation exercises.

We have also published a number of books focused on operating securely in higher-risk environments:

- The Guide to Travelling in Higher-Risk Environments
- The Field Guide to Deployment Planning
- The Field Guide to Personal Security
- The Field Guide to Accommodation Security
- The Field Guide to Transport Security
- Under the Radar
- The Security Evacuation Handbook Volume I - Fundamentals & Planning
- The Security Evacuation Handbook Volume II - Decision-Making & Execution

You can purchase these books from our website.

Feedback

If you identify any errors or broken links, or have thoughts to add on the topics in this book, please get in touch.

