

# **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 organisations. 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 the proper 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. The art of effective crisis response is difficult 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 domain: 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 my organisation uses and advocates to our clients.

But 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 myriad of different techniques must be learnt through trial and error during exercises and crisis events. These techniques can be taught to Crisis Response Teams, but are often difficult to contextualise and put into practice. This handbook will share a host of different techniques designed to help Crisis Response Teams perform at optimal levels. However, to use these techniques effectively, 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, you'll dive 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 the 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, amateurs. For most people on these teams, their crisis response roles are secondary to their 'day jobs'.

As you'll learn in this handbook, 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 they'll be crisis response specialists.

If you do work full-time in the field of crisis response, most of information in this handbook should not be new to you. It should reflect what you've 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. You'll 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 having a strong foundation in place—including teams, policies, plans and preparedness—an organisation won't be able to 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 the last 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 useful and practical. 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 detail 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.

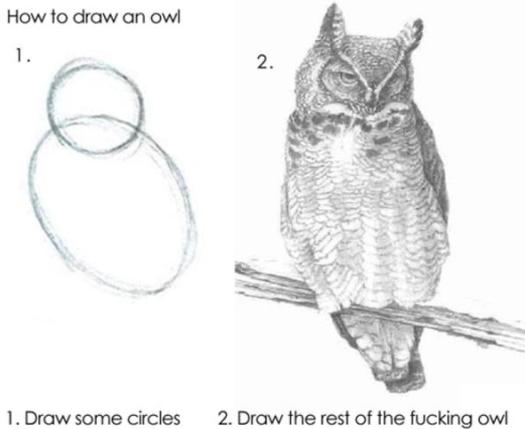


Figure 1. How to draw an owl

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.

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.

## **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 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 financial 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 20 years. During this time, I've focused my efforts on the two areas I consider the most important and impactful: crisis response 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
- ✦ 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 development of crisis plans and 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, 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 observed Crisis Response Teams respond to many different types of crisis events. I've spent hundreds of

hours in the room with 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 in advance 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](#).