

# STOP WORRYING ABOUT RESILIENCE: LOOK AT YOUR CULTURE AND COMPACTS

BY GERRY LEWIS, PH.D.

In the last decade or so, as a consequence of a variety of unfortunate events, an amalgam of knowledge has been ascertained about crisis management. All organizations should be as vigilant about the viability and availability of their workers as they are on IT, infrastructure security and other aspects of continuation of operations.

## Culture is a Critical Component to Crisis Management

Each professional orientation and every workplace has a unique culture. Hospitals differ from retail establishments. Financial institutions are unlike manufacturing settings. And, while both are educational institutions, colleges are dissimilar from public schools. While this may seem a simplistic concept, it appears to go unnoticed when it comes to crisis planning. Cultures evolve over time and set the operational guidelines, interpersonal dynamics, beliefs systems and written and unwritten rules of conduct. Nothing can disrupt a culture more than a crisis. Further, the response of an organization to a crisis is directly influenced by its culture. To understand this, let's look at a few critical questions:

- What are the services or products that are provided and to whom?



- What are the “customer expectations” of the organization?
- If a crisis occurs, do you shut the doors and all go home... as in the case of a restaurant or school? Or, is the expectation that “all hands remain on deck” as would be expected of a healthcare facility?
- Is the organization public or private?
- Is it for profit or non-profit?
- Does it have employees who have been there for decades or is it a revolving door of transitory workers searching for better employment?
- Has it had a previous history of critical events that have impacted its viability?
- Is it union or non-union?
- Demographically, is it made up of predominantly “babyboomers,” “gen xers,” “yrs” or “zers?”
- How about the “genderization” of the workforce?

There are a variety of other determinants that help to ascertain a cultural assessment and thus facilitate a determination as to how the culture is structured and thus how it may react to a crisis.

## Crises, Compacts, Covenants and Contracts... Components to Culture

In, *Why Do Employees Resist Change*, Paul Strebelt<sup>1</sup> talks about 3 levels of “personal compact” between employees and employers:

- **Formal:** basic job description, salaries, conditions of employment (written/spoken)
- **Psychological:** loyalty, trust, commitment (unwritten/unspoken)
- **Social:** career development, values (unwritten/unspoken)

People do not work just for monetary reward. After the formal level of compact (contracts) has been established and satisfied, people look beyond to a deeper level of unwritten/unspoken compacts (covenants) between employee and employer that satisfy their sense of esteem and appreciation. This is the level where organizational resiliency lives and flourishes or withers and dies. This is also where dysfunctionality breeds when covenants or promises are not kept. Anyone knows that job descriptions may change and so, too, may salaries, benefits, conditions of employment... certainly during critical events. Yet, people can sustain such change if the higher level covenants remain intact and satisfied. As a side bar, the current buzzword has to be “resilience.” Yet, it is the opinion of this writer that it is not a fully understood concept. Time and space does not allow for a complete rendition on resilience, however to simplify... resilience is inversely correlated with the level of dysfunctionality in any organization. And all organizations (from human bodies to families to governments) have a certain level of dysfunctionality. So, one way to improve resilience is to mitigate the level of dysfunctionality. One of the primary causes of dysfunctionality is when contracts and covenants become misaligned... a nice way of saying that promises are broken and expectations are not met.

As an example, imagine that you are the crisis manager for a hospital and 1/3 or your nursing staff is contract workers (nurses employed by an outside vendor who “rents” them to the hospital). Also, your security department is outsourced

to a security vendor. This generates different compacts on all levels and thus a different culture from a hospital that employs all nurses and security. There most likely is a different sense of loyalty, commitment, effort, and purpose. As another example, there may be a work organization that has experienced a long and drawn out contract negotiation within the last several months. All has been settled, yet (as is often the case) there are disgruntled employees who feel that they did not get a “fair shake” from management. Then, they are expected to be readily available to the institution at a time of a crisis. Or, a financial institution has merged with another organization and the dust has yet to settle. There is much stress and tension as some departments have been cut and others have been relocated. Some employees have been laid off and others have been transferred. How might this organization respond to a crisis, given these changes in personal compact? When the personal compacts within an organization mutate, dysfunctionality increases and thus resilience diminishes.

### Who Works for You?

The majority of BC plans are based on assumptions that people will do their jobs, show up, care about the organization, and perform rationally. If you build your BC plan with these false assumptions, you’ll be very surprised when your plan doesn’t work. Assessing your workforce and your culture is critical.

Demographic dynamics such as gender, age, race, marital status are extremely relevant when it comes to planning. Taking it a step further, questions such as the following may provide relevant information regarding the culture, and thus the resiliency of a workforce.

- By what mode do you commute to work?
- Do you have children under the age of 16?
- Do you have other dependents that require your care?
- Do you have pets?

One may wonder, “Why is this information relevant to business continuity or crisis planning?” Perhaps an example may be helpful. Prior to hurricane Katrina, Florida experienced hurricane

Rita. In a Florida hospital, 25 nurses were terminated because they did not report to work as their contract delineated. (This author spoke to the director of Human Resources who indicated that there were a number of issues involved and that it was not just as a result of the breach of the contract.) It should not come as a surprise that at times of natural disaster, a certain percentage of the workforce will not be able to return to work for some time, regardless of job description or contractual negotiations. In this case, the hospital was resilient from an infrastructure perspective, had backup generators and was fully functional during the hurricane. However, the homes, schools, and daycare centers were not. Public and private

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transportation was impacted, as were many automobiles. So, many employees theoretically experienced the worst kind of stress, “role conflict,” whereby they must decide which of their obligations takes priority. For most people it is a choice of family duties and responsibilities over those of work. Nonetheless, it is a difficult “lose/lose” proposition that should never have to be the case. Further, a work organization does not want to find out about the availability factor (or lack thereof) of its workforce during an actual event. In the same way that a team can do a business impact analysis (BIA), a personnel impact analysis (PIA) could also be conducted to assess the readiness and resiliency of its workforce.

### Survey the Workforce: The Employee Preparedness Survey (EPS) ©

As part of being responsive to an array of incidents that may impact the

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organization, it is necessary to gather information about the employees. As people often have concerns about “giving up” personal information to their workplace, it is recommended that this survey be conducted by an independent consultant via an anonymous web-based survey site. Individual results are not seen and only the aggregate data is furnished to a work organization.

The EPS is a 25-30 item survey questionnaire that is customized to the specific organization (thus, the variation in the range of items). It is a web based instrument that takes 5-10 minutes to administer/complete. The questions are primarily multiple choice with a few open ended inquiries. The content of the questions focus on 4 different areas:

- **Demographics:** Age, gender, marital/partner status, children under age 16, other dependents, etc.
- **Work responsibilities:** Length of time working at organization, position, crisis responsibilities, training, etc.
- **Availability issues:** Distance from work, method(s) of commuting to work

- **Dependency issues:** Children and/or other dependents, medical issues, other work responsibilities, etc.

Besides demographic data, here are some other questions that can be helpful in your planning. Do you know your responsibilities in a crisis situation? If your immediate supervisor were unavailable, do you know to whom to report? If you were given 12-24 hours to return home and settle your personal situation, would you be able to return to work for 24 hours? 48 hours? 72 hours? Not until the crisis is resolved? Do you have a spouse/significant other, neighbor, or family member who would be able to care for your dependents if you were required to be at work for an extended period of time? If your employer had a shelter in place facility for your dependents, would this make it easier for you to stay at/return to work?

An organization must focus on its culture, its compacts with employees and the characteristics of its workforce in order to build a comprehensive crisis preparedness plan. As an example, when

utilizing the EPS with a multi-campus hospital setting with 4500+ employees, the New York City VA hospital recognized that more than 65% of its nursing staff had children and/or dependents. As a solution, it recognized the need to build a shelter in place program. Further, 65% utilized public transportation, so they are developing plans to have employees carpool or go to campuses closer to home should there be a transit problem. These two areas of vulnerability cannot be prevented, but the impact may certainly be mitigated now that they have the data about the workforce.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gerald (Gerry) Lewis, Ph.D., an international consultant, has worked with a wide range of public and private work organizations. He is the author numerous articles as well as three books, his most recent, *Organizational Crisis Management: The Human Factor*, (March 2006). He is on the faculty of Boston University, Clark University and Norwich University. He may be reached at [glewis@geraldlewis.com](mailto:glewis@geraldlewis.com).

<sup>1</sup><http://harvardbusiness.org/product/why-do-employees-resist-change/an/96310-PDF-ENG>

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