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contents

News	4	Lawyers and communicators together	28
Comment		Conflict between legal and communication advice is still a real problem, says Tony Jaques	
Environment, economy and peace	8	Systems and people	30
Serge Stroobants and Lea Perekrests explain that ecological crises are significant threats to international stability		David Wales says contemporary crises models are fundamentally unsuited to future needs	
Unveiling the systemic nature of risk	12	Crises & urban areas	
We can learn early lessons to assist a green and sustainable recovery from the Covid-19 crisis, according to Rosalind Cook and Sebastien Penzini		From refugee to responder	34
Leadership & innovation		Alistair Harris describes how the Palestinian Civil Defence in Lebanon has been transformational for young refugees	
Terra Incognita: Vision and action	14	Complex urban environments: Beirut	36
Today's global situation demands that we lay to rest our pre-established crisis visions and move towards creative and flexible leadership, say Emily Hough, Patrick Lagadec and Matthieu Langlois		Albrecht Beck, Marc Arnold and Andra Covaciu argue that a focus on operational governance remains crucial in adopting the resilient cities concept	
The danger of too many fresh eyes	18	Disaster recovery by design	38
Crisis leadership demands acknowledgment of knowledge limitations and humility in taking advice from those paid to know the subject. As crisis leaders, do we listen to our people?		Idrees Rasouli outlines why he is setting up the Institute for Post Disaster Recovery	
Kaleidoscopic learning	20	Response & security	
Most of us prefer to be optimistic rather than look at the downsides. But we can combine positive and negative thinking towards positive action, says Gareth Byatt		Deliberate mass casualty incidents	40
Leadership, AI and the collective brain	24	There is a multiplicity of medical care protocols, writes Juan José Pajuelo, but optimal co-ordination among first responders remains elusive	
Artificial intelligence and data centres are causing social transformations that are changing our world. Jean-Jacques Martin asks what this means for leaders		Technology to rebuild communities	44
Leadership powers	26	Pix4D collaborates explores a use case in California following this year's devastating wildfires	
Randall Collins explores how different bases of power relating to leadership apply to emergency managers		Enhancing rural safety and security	46
		Charles L Werner shares the success stories of the Lincolnshire Police drone programme	
		Keeping an eye out for deception	48
		Andrew Staniforth explores the need to review and reform the radicalisation risk management process	

Leadership vision p14



Ann Kiernan

Too many fresh eyes? p18



Lovelyn Medina | 123rf

Embassies and security	52	Medically fragile & socially vulnerable	78
Embassies, consulates and diplomatic missions are a desirable target for terrorists, militants or mobs, writes Lina Kolesnikova		Marcus T Coleman and Sarah Baker provide insights to help officials and community leaders lead their communities through crises	
Covid-19 crisis analysis		Lockdowns and lives lost	80
Pandemics and national insecurity	54	Lyndon Bird presents an objective examination of the rationality of government policies and decisions around Covid-19	
Confusion, disparate policies and indecision contribute to collective denial and reluctance to give up freedoms, says Jennifer Hesterman		'Hidden' threats	82
Private security services	58	Andy Blackwell explores hidden and insider threats to civil aviation and provides guidance on the actions organisations can take to protect themselves and safeguard their people, assets and reputation	
In times of crisis private security services are essential, but they need both support and recognition, notes Catherine Piana		Pandemic psychosocial problems	86
Covid-19: Gaza	60	Todd Benham, Michelangelo Bortolin and Gregory Ciottonone say it is imperative to address the psychosocial effects of Covid-19	
Azzam Abuhabib, Samer Abuzerr and Said Abu Aita look at responses in the Gaza Strip		Connecting with young people	88
No breathing room	64	Attempts to encourage young people to change their behaviour during the pandemic show that more needs to be done to connect with them, observes Amanda Coleman	
Covid-19 and Pakistan's smog problem have devastating parallels – and they're about to collide, warns Luavut Zahid		Take a deep breath	90
Covid-19: India	66	Lyzi G Cota offers techniques that can help people who are accumulating signs of anxiety, depression, PTSD and even suicidal behaviour	
Peter Patel reviews the pandemic management and challenges faced by this diverse and enigmatic country		Regulars	
Global risk perception	72	Events	94
Ali Malvern questions whether governments are considering how society behaves when setting strategy and managing their response		Mary Robinson, Chair of the Elders, and Asahi Pompey of the Goldman Sachs Foundation provide some enlightening insights ahead of the next World Humanitarian Forum event	
The unrelenting challenge	74	Frontline	98
Jacqui Semple explores how resilience professionals can find support to help prepare for the next stages of the pandemic		Tamer Khatib of the Palestinian Civil Defence in a refugee camp in Lebanon tells Claire Sanders how the scheme is a force for good	
Survive and thrive	76		
Flexibility, agility and inventiveness shown by organisations should provide the confidence needed for recovery, advises Mike O'Neill			

Kaleidoscopic learning p20



Sergey Nivens | 123rf | Chris Pettican

Handling the next waves? p74



Maxim Usik | Ikon Images

Cover story: A year of cascading, complex crises
Cover image: Miles Cole

comment

This edition's front cover depicts some of the events that have occurred in 2020, which has most certainly been one of the most challenging and tumultuous years any of us will have experienced. We may be overworking the Pandora's box (or jar) analogy, but these last 12 months truly exemplify the myth of 'great and unexpected troubles'. Of course, many of these had been foreseen, or were heralded by clear precursors and signs. But unheeded warnings notwithstanding, these events have certainly combined to strain individual, professional, community, business, national and international resilience as never before. Twelve months ago, *CRJ*'s front cover warned leaders that: "All eyes are on you." In today's landscape of repeated shockwaves, cascading crises and, "instant systemic contamination that piles up challenges on multiple fronts," leadership across all disciplines – political, business, governance and institutional – is being scrutinised as never before. Sadly, reactions and responses to the pandemic have been, to put it politely, erratic in many areas. Worryingly, we know that more shocks are on the way – wishful thinking will not magically sweep away the harsh onslaught of climate-related events. The "toxic polarisation, anti-scientific mindsets and retreats into alternative realities" mentioned on p14 are symptoms, not the cause of today's lack of coherence and solidarity in the face of global threats. Yet, as with Pandora's box, there are glimmers of hope. Human innovation, creativity, business and science have combined to develop vaccines and deliver other life-saving products and services in record time. Stories of self-sacrifice, dedication and love abound. People are still caring for others. All of us in society, but particularly our leaders and those responsible for the safety and security of communities, must not let the next wave of crises come to pass in a wilful paroxysm of inattentional blindness. And here's hoping that 'deceptive expectation', which is the alternative interpretation of 'hope' in the Pandora myth, does not hold true.



Systems and people: Time

In our last edition, **David Wales** provided insights into research that fundamentally changed understanding of the relationship between the public and those who provide services. Here, he says that contemporary crises models are fundamentally unsuited to future needs

The global pandemic illustrates the limitations of the current approach to crises; many people had recognised this long before Covid-19 brutally exposed so many deficiencies.

We need a radical transformation of how we think about and organise for crises. Tweaks to the existing set-up may feel more comfortable in the short term, but are likely to prove increasingly – even catastrophically – insufficient.

Looking more broadly at social trends, research into emergency and other organisations is increasingly identifying the need to change the nature of the relationship between government, institutions and the citizen. In the UK, these include the Centre

for Public Impact (*A manifesto for better government*), The Royal Society for Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (Government as first follower concept) and New Local (Think big, act small).

While there is some variation in how the new relationship should be expressed, they all seem to recognise that the current flow of institutions doing things to individuals and communities must be reversed. We must move from a command and control mindset to one in which providers aim to enable and empower, building on the inherent capabilities and capacity within communities. For those in the crisis field this should not only include helping in the moment, but doing so with the ultimate purpose of using adversity as an opportunity to help communities grow.

This requires a fundamental shift in mindset, policy and practice. It means going beyond good

for transformation

engagement with communities, to putting them in the driving seat, trusting them to direct what is needed, and when, and serving them in the truest sense.

This transition may also be a necessity for many organisations if they wish to survive and flourish. In sectors such as health, there is already a growing people-powered and tech-enabled movement, such as the innovation foundation NESTA, which provides options and choices outside of the traditional service providers. For example, apps can be developed quickly, are cheap to produce and secure wide adoption. If ignored or resisted, these will introduce competition. If embraced, they represent opportunities to anchor existing providers more firmly.

Covid-19 has placed an enormous strain on health and other systems across the world. Its scale and prolonged nature create additional challenges, such as employee fatigue, further depleting stretched resources. Citizens have been both directed to reduce their use of systems and to act as volunteers where possible. They are also asked to accept restrictions and outcomes that would not normally be tolerated. Limited resources have led – directly and indirectly – to the loss of lives that would not otherwise have been lost.

Intuitively, this temporary sacrifice of everyday standards and expectations is difficult, but can be understood, yet there are reasons to believe that it is not an inevitability. One of the main limiting features of the current model

is the widespread reliance on adapting everyday facilities to an emergency setting, which can quickly overwhelm capability. Professional service models can be developed to cater for everyday purposes where supply and demand can be reasonably predicted and kept in balance. But crises do not conform to this premise and may be both unexpected in their timing and nature, creating surge demands.

Clearly it is unrealistic to maintain a sufficient reserve of trained professionals or stockpile equipment for every eventuality. But that cannot excuse the lack of a strategy to deal with a known requirement for additional equipment or skills. The problem is that the thinking is rooted in solving a logistics problem within the current system, rather than standing back to consider reframing the issue and other strategies.

Thinking and practice should be inverted to begin with the community and not the professions. There is willingness and ability within the public that leads to people dealing with most low-level events without calling upon professional services. This contribution is not visible to most professions and is therefore not acknowledged in strategies or policies. Rather than only turning to this

capability and capacity once the professional organisations are overwhelmed, the public should be the foundation upon which everything else is built. The wide range and number of skills and perspectives, networks and local knowledge among citizens provide a solid and unrivalled foundation upon which services could be built.

In line with this, it is suggested that a public service organisation's first duties should be to help communities to be as self-reliant as possible, create strong relationships and pay as much attention to promoting what works as to solving what does not. Only then should they directly provide services that communities cannot perform themselves. Even so, this should always be an act of co-creation.

Unfortunately, as the public service and associated professions have grown, many of them now increasingly keep the public at a distance, both intellectually and physically, building a protective set of rules and restrictions around them. At worst, this can limit access to information or services and influence how the public is viewed and treated by staff. The services funded by citizens and established to serve them can become remote

and daunting by design.

This gap is unhelpful in normal operations, but becomes even more so in the event of a crisis, when the services come under strain. Not only does it limit the ability to engage the public in a meaningful way at short notice, but it can also lead to distrust, frustration, societal divisions and tensions.

In the current top down model, policy is delivered to the public via a complex and often hierarchical system of multiple separate stakeholders, including statutory, charitable and private bodies. Each of these have their own purpose and origins and will deliver services accordingly, and within their resource capability.

To deliver an integrated service to the end user, there needs to be strong alignment of purpose and practice throughout. If not, there is a risk of an unintentional and but predictable 'sum of the parts' outcome, which was something we found in a recent study researching arrangements for pre-hospital burns care in England.

For example, at the scene of a fire, the immediate saving of life was the primary and largely sufficient outcome, with the aim of then getting the survivor to hospital as quickly as possible. Once in hospital, the burn care teams had a higher aspiration of returning the survivor back to pre-event condition. This discrepancy in aims meant that opportunities to enhance quality of life outcomes at the scene were missed and avoidable injury outcomes incurred. Further, little was known or understood about the survivor's experience and expectations. While

Services funded by citizens and established for the purpose of serving them can become remote and daunting by design



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the survivor is the only one who will see the system from end to end, they have very little influence on the design or operation of the care they receive.

Where there is no organisation or body with responsibility for the end to end journey, the potential for this fragmentation is greatly increased. Our research also revealed that individual agencies introduced interventions without knowledge of their potential upstream or downstream consequences. This gave rise to the risk of agencies actively creating the potential for avoidable harm and missing opportunities for better outcomes. Individual agencies within an unmanaged system will naturally self-organise around their specific interests. This approach is not designed to ensure a common focus on delivering the best outcomes, particularly where there is complexity or a prolonged period of operation. This fragmentation is currently and tragically highlighted by the ongoing Inquiry into the UK's Grenfell fire and wider fire safety system.

Our insights into the burn survivor experience and outcomes were achieved by using both the available evidence and mapping the end to end journey from their perspective. The latter is a technique commonly employed within the customer experience (CX) sector. This young profession has grown quickly and accelerated during the pandemic, as companies recognise that they must do more than just focus on the technical aspects of their products or services. To attract and retain customers, they must understand how the brand and products or services are perceived and experienced, often going beyond the point of transaction. This requires various methods of getting close to the customer, as it is virtually impossible to determine this accurately from within an organisation.

While not competing for customers, a CX mindset and techniques should also be a core feature throughout the emergency and crisis sector. In times of distress and fear, understanding your customers, including their emotions and specific desires, is critical. Supporting them to achieve what they value should be the aim, rather than building ways to get them to conform to assumed outcomes.

Within this, balanced and objective consideration must be given to risk and benefit. There is evidence that some organisations are risk averse (prioritising organisational concerns over helping citizens), do not use recognised risk management techniques, and underestimate the public capability. Transparency and wide stakeholder input are essential safeguards against these tendencies.

An emerging field alongside CX is employee experience (EX), which adopts a similar focus on an organisation's personnel. This generates benefits, not only for the employee, but also for customers and the employer. The rise of CX and EX point to an increasing recognition of the need to focus on people. In comparison to technology and process, investment and development of human skills has been much lower. And yet they are hugely influential on all aspects of work and communities.

The wide range of skills, perspectives, networks and local knowledge among citizens provides a foundation upon which services could be built



Organisations must have the ability to manage human factors with the same objectivity and range of approaches that underpin other areas of their activity. This should not be confused with traditional human resources (HR) function. In some respects it challenges HR by encouraging rule breaking, ridding organisations of bureaucracy based on micromanagement, flattening structures and trusting personnel. Creating a common purpose that flows through organisations and partnerships is essential to avoid silos and sum of the parts outcomes.

Beyond the pandemic or other crises, society and work are visibly being transformed by technology, but also increasingly by changes in citizens' expectations. It is time to acknowledge it is not sustainable to keep fixing current models incrementally, and we need to step back and reorientate around a new and bolder vision for the sector.

A new relationship with the public in which people are the true foundation for all that is done in their name requires a shift: The need to aim higher

in terms of limiting the full range of immediate and long term harm from a crisis; the need to see it as an opportunity for growth in society and organisations; the need to think and operate as a system; and the need to move from fixed and hierarchical models to ones that are agile, flexible and scalable. These should all be approached from a human-centred perspective, in which technology is used to enable greater humanity.

If we adopt these principles, new solutions will appear. However, in order to reach a new view, you must first change your perspective.

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