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MANAGING CRISIS AT ALL LEVELS: EXECUTIVES, PRACTITIONERS AND FIELD RESPONDERS

Managing crisis at all levels: executives, practitioners and field responders

April 2025

Carlos D. Torres, Resilience Executive Consultant, Chartwell, Inc.

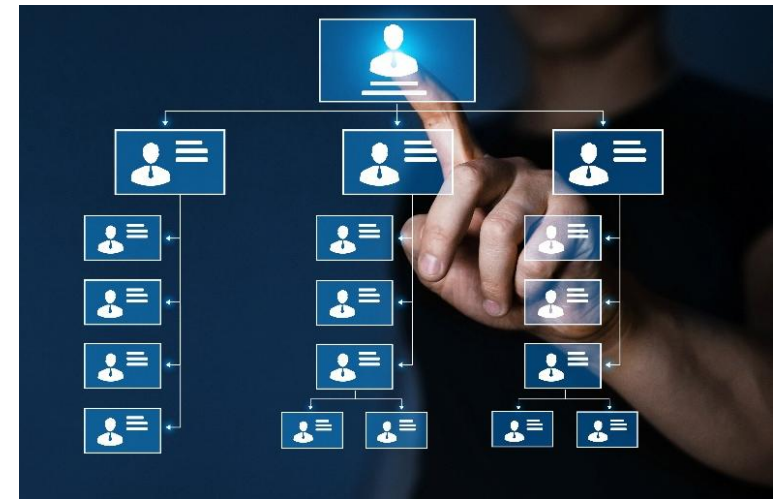
In any organization, everyone plays a role when it comes to preparing for, responding to, recovering from and mitigating a crisis or emergency.

Effective leadership is required at all levels to ensure strong support and coordination—flowing both from the top down and from the bottom up. This is where the Incident Command System (ICS) comes in as the foundation, providing a structured framework for communication, coordination, and command during all phases of emergency and crisis management.

Understanding Crisis Management, Emergency Management and Emergency Response

When a crisis or emergency occurs, the critical first step is understanding what the organization is dealing with (the assessment phase). Gathering accurate information is essential to determine who and what is needed to address the issue effectively. Throughout the response, the health and safety of the public, first responders, and employees must remain the top priority at all times.

Once the assessment is complete, a plan of action must be established to stabilize the situation and begin restoring conditions to normal. The type of crisis or emergency will determine the specific resources required to effectively manage the situation. This is the **respond and recovery phase**. Critical during this phase is unity of message and unity of effort.



Next is the **mitigation phase**, during which the organization conducts an After-Action Review (AAR). This process includes both a self-assessment and input from stakeholders who were involved in the crisis or emergency. During this AAR, it is important that all involved identify the things to be sustained as well as the opportunities for improvement. Once identified, an improvement plan must be established to identify which items need to be addressed, by whom and when. Ownership is critical to ensure completion of the identified items.

Lastly, the organization reviews and updates the plans, policies and procedures used to respond to crises or emergencies, making changes as needed to improve their effectiveness. Once updates are completed, training and exercising of personnel will be needed to ensure everyone in the organization understands their role in light of these changes. This is the **preparedness phase**.

So going full circle, the Emergency Preparedness Cycle of Preparedness, Response, Recovery and Mitigation are achieved to ensure organizational success. The key is when addressing the various types of crises or emergencies, is people (executives, practitioners and field responders) to stay in their lanes of responsibility; however, they need to be there to be supportive of each other throughout the process to ensure organizational success.



Crisis Management at the Executive Level

The main role for executives is to deal with crises (corporate level impacts) and not emergencies (more operational impacts), but they should provide strategic oversight and support during emergencies (i.e. supporting the Incident Commander, IC, but most importantly, not making planning/operational decisions).

Executives may form a Crisis Management Team (CMT) composed of senior leadership to address actual or potential crises. These crises can include – but are not limited to – financial, reputational, and operational issues.



When activated, the general role of the CMT is to:

- Assess crisis risk and impacts on the organization.
- Identify crisis issues emerging from the incident.
- As the authority, make policy decisions for the overall response, restoration, and recovery strategy by the organization.
- Forecast financial, reputational, and operational consequences of the incident.
- Formulate strategies to manage organization's financial and business consequences of the incident.
- Assign appropriate resources to support completion of any incident-related issues and actions.
- In the absence of policy, set policies for those issues reserved for the CMT.
- Receive briefings, as required from the operational and communications leadership at specified meetings and/or time intervals.
- Participate in crisis management training and exercises.

Lastly, the executive's role in supporting the continuous improvement process during AARs is to provide feedback, but more importantly to listen to the issues that others identify and ensure improvement opportunities are established and addressed.

Emergency Management and Preparedness at the Practitioner Level

The main role for the practitioners is to support the entire emergency management process from the executive level dealing with crises and all emergencies down to the field response level within the organization. This begins by identifying corporate risks (Enterprise Risk Management process) and working with leadership, engineering and operations in mitigating these risks or hopefully eliminating the risks. More likely than not, the risks cannot be eliminated and that's where organizational resilience comes in through the Emergency Preparedness Cycle: Preparedness, Response, Recovery and Mitigation.

The bulk of the work is in the Preparedness phase, since it starts with development and maintenance of the emergency operations plan (EOP) and all the associated documents such as procedures, guides, job aids and checklists. Then comes the training associated with the EOP and associated documents as well as the development of a mature and effective emergency management program, the Incident



Command System (ICS). The EOP and associated documents are the “what to do” while ICS is the “how to do.” Some organizations include the ICS within their EOP, but it also can be a stand-alone especially when the organization has an all-hazards approach to their EOPs (based on the scenario the respective EOP addresses).

The next step is to train the personnel assigned to roles within the EOPs and the ICS structure to ensure effective plan execution. To ensure the organization has enough trained personnel to support a response, proper training is critical. It's also important to build depth by preparing individuals who can fill multiple roles, depending on the situation. Training may take several forms: initial training, periodic training (with frequency determined by the organization), or “just-in-time” training. Just-in-time training is typically high-level and designed for personnel who are infrequently involved in response efforts, allowing them to be quickly prepared just before assuming their roles.

Once personnel are trained, the next step is to conduct exercises – where “practice makes perfect.” In this stage, plans are tested, and personnel are allowed to practice in their roles. An effective exercise program involves conducting exercises of various formats such as seminars, tabletop exercises, drills, functional exercises and full-scale exercises.

The Response (make safe and rapid restoration) and Recovery (putting the system back to a normal state) phases are where the EOPs are put into real action. While personnel may reference the EOPs, effective performance is based on “muscle memory” — knowing what to do, how to do it and why it matters. This is where the ICS structure comes into play, with an identified IC with his/her Command and General Staff operating as one in communicating and coordinating under a plan of action, called the Incident Action Plan (IAP) for a defined operational period which is determined by the IC and his/her team.

Lastly, the Mitigation phase involves conducting hot washes and after-action reviews to identify “things to sustain” and “opportunities for improvement.” These are used to develop an Improvement Plan which assigns specific actions to individuals or departments, sets deadlines for completion, and ensures follow-through. During this phase, the EOPs and related documents are also reviewed to determine their effectiveness and updated as needed.



This process leads naturally back to the Preparedness phase where it all begins again, completing the Emergency Preparedness Cycle. This is where the Practitioners are so critical in every organization. They are the glue that keeps things together in the spirit of continuous improvement.

Emergency Management/Response from a Field Responder Level

The primary role for the field responder is to manage the emergency using the ICS process. This means dealing with making the emergency condition safe as soon as possible, accounting for all personnel (the public, if impacted, employees and other first responders like FD, PD, EMAs, etc.) and establishing command and control of the situation as the field IC. The field Incident Commander (IC) is responsible for coordinating with all responding first responders and agencies. To effectively manage the incident, the field IC must assign key roles – such as Operations Section Chief, Safety Officer, and Scribe – to support the response effort. There will be times when the utility may not be the lead agency at the emergency site, and it will be the first responders who take the lead like the FD or PD. In those cases, the utility's field IC is there in a support role to communicate and coordinate as those agencies would be doing if the utility was the lead agency, but each responding organization operates within their own ICS structure during the event.

At Con Edison, a "White Hat" policy was implemented for field responses, designating the field IC by a white hard hat – distinguishing them from other utility responders, as standard hard hats at Con Edison are typically blue. Portable command posts were commonly used in the field, similar to those utilized by fire departments. When field responses were larger in scale and expected to last longer – such as a day or over several days— a mobile command vehicle would be dispatched to the site to support the response effort. The Emergency Preparedness Cycle also applies here on all fronts, especially when engaging with external stakeholders. The preparedness such as training, practicing (exercising) and mitigation steps (i.e. hot washes and AARs) should be incorporated with the stakeholders to ensure future responses are conducted safely, efficiently and effectively.

The Emergency Preparedness Cycle—Preparedness, Response, Recovery, and Mitigation—is essential for organizational success. During any crisis, it is crucial for executives, practitioners, and field responders to stay within their lanes of responsibility while also providing mutual support. Collaboration and clear roles ensure an effective, coordinated response, ultimately strengthening the organization's resilience and ability to navigate emergencies successfully.



What's next?

I'm excited to be part of a complimentary **webinar on April 24, 2025**, at 2:00 ET with Chartwell's Russ Henderson.

Managing crisis at all levels: Optimizing roles throughout the utility

At a utility, everyone plays a role when it comes to preparation, response and recovery from a crisis or emergency. Leadership is needed at all levels to ensure the support mechanism exists through effective communication and coordination as established by the Incident Command System (ICS). Join Chartwell's Russ Henderson and Resilience Executive Advisor, Carlos D. Torres, to hear how utilities can define and optimize roles to improve success. [**Registration link**](#)

On **May 14, 2025**, at 2:00 ET I am hosting a utility-only **Executive Roundtable** to discuss organizational resilience issues with those in senior leadership roles at utilities. To be added to the invitation list, please email me at [**ctorres@chartwellinc.com**](mailto:ctorres@chartwellinc.com).

October 6-8, 2025, please join us in Dallas for **Chartwell's PowerUp Conference** where I will host a Panel Discussion: Executive Perspectives on Resilience: Challenges and Opportunities in the Utility Industry. This session will discuss resilience challenges and opportunities and how to integrate organizational resiliency into corporate strategy to strengthen both preparedness and response.

Other opportunities to get involved**OREC Organizational Executive Council**

Chartwell's utility-only Organizational Resiliency Executive Council (OREC) brings utility leaders together to tackle challenges and create best practice strategies to navigate the threat of disasters.

**ORGANIZATIONAL RESILIENCE
EXECUTIVE COUNCIL INFORMATION**

Emergency Management Leadership Council

Chartwell's utility-only Emergency Management Leadership Council helps utilities strategize to develop best practices for all-hazards planning, operations, drills, escalation, situational awareness, and other issues.

**EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT
LEADERSHIP COUNCIL INFORMATION**

Outage Communications Leadership Council

Chartwell's Outage Communications Leadership Council enables utility professionals to collaborate with industry leaders on the best ways to communicate with customers and other stakeholders during outages.

**OUTAGE COMMUNICATIONS
LEADERSHIP COUNCIL INFORMATION**

CURI Resilience Research Center

Chartwell's Utility Resilience Institute (CURI) Research Center dives deep into the strategic and tactical aspects of utility resilience with benchmarks, analysis reports, case studies, webinars, and more.

**CURI RESILIENCE RESEARCH
CENTER INFORMATION**

**About Carlos D. Torres**

Carlos D. Torres, Resilience Executive Advisor at Chartwell Inc., has nearly 40 years of utility leadership experience. As VP of Emergency Preparedness & Business Resiliency at Consolidated Edison Inc., he led crisis responses, including 9/11, 2003 Northeast Blackout, and Superstorm Sandy. He was asked to lead Puerto Rico's power restoration by their Governor after Hurricanes Irma and Maria and has worked with numerous consulting firms, advising utilities and regulators. He has served as board member and senior advisor to various organizations and currently serves on the boards of Disaster Tech Inc. and the All-Hazards Consortium, helping utilities enhance resilience and crisis response.

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I.S. Dunklin
CEO and Publisher

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Russ Henderson
Director of Research