



How to Succeed in the Senior Civil Service

Module 5 - Managing Crises

5.1. Introduction

All senior executives face crises from time to time, but Senior Civil Servants have to respond to such crises in full view of Ministers, the media and the general public. This adds an unwelcome but unavoidable layer of stress and difficulty. The module offers both general crisis-handling advice and some thoughts on how to navigate crises within government.

Natural disasters and other crises require rapid responses which involve making difficult judgements. Sir David Omand reminded Ministers that:

You are going to behave rather differently; the pace of decision-making is going to be much faster than you have been used to; the mechanics of your relationship with your officials are going to be rather different, and very importantly, you are going to have to take more decisions on less information than you have been used to.

That last point means you have to stick your neck out ... it is about risk management. You do the best you can, but it may or may not be the best decision at the time and you are not going to know that as you take it... You have to live with that and just get on. That is not how most policy-making process works.

Officials need to plan thoroughly for crises, and ensure that the necessary resources will be available to mount an effective response. They should '*prepare for the worst and hope for the best*'.

If and when a crisis occurs, it is vital that both Ministers and officials apply the lessons learned by those responding to previous crisis. This is not a time to believe that you know any better. Here, then, is detailed advice from those who have gone before.

5.2a Plan and Prepare for Possible Crises

Officials (and ministers) should practice ('game') responding to crises. This can be through table-top or live exercises.

One incidental but important benefit is that these exercises help build relationships between major players who might otherwise not meet very often or at all.

It is hard to overstate the importance of practising responses to possible emergencies. Voluntary reports to the US *Aviation Safety Reporting System* showed that flight crews handled 86% of 'textbook' emergencies well. But only 7% of non-textbook emergencies were handled well. 93% of crews were overwhelmed by situations for which they had not prepared.

No plan will survive contact with reality. But if there is no plan then reality will take over with disastrous consequences.

When you 'game' a crisis you should:-

- assume that the crisis will hit when your organisation is in some ways unprepared, for reasons outside its control.
- assume in particular that key team members and decision makers will not be available.
 - *Note that the Prime Minister and several other Ministers and senior advisers became infected and so unavailable during the Covid-19 crisis.*

You should also:

- be aware that the first instinct of Ministers will be to limit the reputational damage that they think is going to happen to themselves rather than focus on how to fix the problem.
- prepare public responses to foreseeable damage caused by your organisation.
- not let lawyer-driven responses – seeking to downplay legal liability - cause large reputational damage.

Get your most sceptical staff to check, from time to time, that the detail of the resilience or crisis management plan is up-to-date, sensible and appropriate. Red teaming might be useful.

- In the US, following Hurricane Katrina, mandatory evacuation led to all vehicles leaving New Orleans well in advance of the plan's deadline. Unfortunately the plan made no mention of the need to evacuate those residents who did not have vehicles within a similar timescale.

Beware the Prevention Paradox (see Module 1.3). Activity and expenditure aimed at avoiding future disasters seldom generates political credit. (Example: Y2K). But failing to act will eventually wreak much greater havoc.

You can't see everything coming. You cannot stockpile in anticipation of every disaster. But **disaster planning must include building in some resilience**. Do not eliminate all slack and redundancy in key systems, nor in the emergency and armed services.

5.2b Ask whether you have the necessary powers

Make sure you have the statutory powers – and discretionary powers - necessary to respond to any plausible crisis.

- Legislation will provide strong guidance but you may, for instance, need to ask the security services to act without specific authority. As an American Judge opined – “The constitution is not a suicide pact”.
- I understand that the UK authorities did not initially have the powers necessary to resolve the run on Northern Rock.

Such powers should be subject to appropriate political oversight. It is for ministers to judge when to go to Parliament but, if they are reluctant, you might need to encourage them.

- Internal response planning discussions, including with Ministers, should not be disclosed unless/until their existence will not cause damage.

HMG can if necessary (and with Parliamentary approval) legislate very quickly. It also has powers, in **the Civil Contingencies Act** and other legislation, to act ahead of Parliamentary approval.

Internationally, the UN Security Council can act including by giving strong powers to an international authority under **Chapter 7 of the UN Treaty**.

Serious crises are likely to require the government to take steps which would be unacceptable in normal times, such as restricting civil liberties, allowing police searches, and slaughtering animals. These actions are much more likely to be accepted if the general public is already inclined to trust both ministers and officials to be doing the right thing and acting proportionately. Advance planning, involving ministers - see further below, offers an opportunity to draw attention to this lesson.

5.2c Encourage Scrutiny

But ... In the Emergency State, power becomes highly concentrated and the usual safeguards against misbehaviour are reduced. Those with power will be targeted by those seeking to have the rules designed to suit their particular interests. It is absolutely vital that effective scrutiny, by Parliament, by the courts and by the media, is facilitated as soon as reasonably possible.

In his book *Emergency State*, Adam Wagner lists corruption as a feature of any Emergency State:

'My experience of cases involving institutional failings, such as disastrous hospitals or war crimes committed by the armed forces, is that although people tend not to see themselves as doing the wrong thing, most get swallowed up in the culture of the institution. It takes a very strong personality indeed to rise up against a dominant culture ... So it is no surprise that corruption spreads easily in a state which is sealed shut. ...

In the Emergency State, public power becomes highly concentrated [and] the usual safeguards against misbehaviour, such as scrutiny by the legislature and courts, and the healthy mistrust the public ordinarily have for those in power, are diminished. This is a heady cocktail for those who suddenly and unexpectedly find they have an almost godlike power over others' lives, as well as over the country's resources.'

In the meantime - and afterwards - it is also vital that meetings are properly noted and decisions properly recorded.

5.3. The Initial Response

It can be difficult to know how to react to a rapidly growing threat. There is often no option that will not cause significant harm. Epidemics, for instance, will kill people if you don't damage the economy by implementing a lockdown. In general, though, the sooner you act, the less the harm. We await the conclusions of the formal inquiry but it looks as though the UK was at least a week too late in locking down once it was clear that Covid was spreading very rapidly throughout Europe.

Dr Michael Ryan summarised the issue in this way:

If you need to be right before you move, you will never win. Perfection is the enemy of the good when it comes to emergency management. Speed trumps perfection and the problem in society we have at the moment is that everyone is afraid of making a mistake. Everyone is afraid of the consequence of error, but the greatest error is not to move. The greatest error is to be paralysed by the fear of failure.

There should be well-practised plans to help you cope with predictable emergencies, together with appropriate resources. Even so – and more likely if not so – you may need to take strong action early in the crisis, when the threat appears small. But you should nevertheless take the time – maybe just a few hours or a couple of days – to listen to experts, to discover, to organise, and to absorb what information and knowledge is available. **Then act decisively.**

Ignore those that tell you not to ‘over-react’. A significant proportion of the population and the media will continue to deny reality, even as things fall apart. Psychologists call this normalcy bias. This extract from Albert Camus’ *The Plague* is relevant

“Pestilence is in fact very common, but we find it hard to believe in a pestilence when it descends upon us. There have been as many plagues in the world as there have been wars, yet plagues and wars always find people equally unprepared. ... A pestilence does not have human dimensions, so people tell themselves that it is unreal, that it is a bad dream which will end. But it does not always end and, from one bad dream to the next, it is people who end, humanists first of all because they have not prepared themselves. The people of our town were no more guilty than anyone else, they merely forgot to be modest and thought that everything was still possible for them, which implied that pestilence was impossible.”

Others accept or acquiesce in the new reality far too easily.

- Well over 1,000 were dying each day at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak, and yet this horrendous total seemed to be accepted with a shrug by large sections of the population.

If your decisive reaction prevents the danger from happening then you will be accused of over-reacting etc. etc. **This is not a good reason to delay.**

Equally, we become more comfortable with risks as we get used to them. We also get better at responding to familiar risks. So your initial response might in time become seen (quite wrongly) as over-protective. **Again, this is not a good reason to delay.** But it may be that less firm measures might be appropriate once the nature of the risks have become clearer.

The UK population, for instance, seemed to be less worried about the second and subsequent Covid waves. This may have been evidence of excessive complacency which might have led to reduced compliance with guidance and legal restrictions, compared with the initial lock down. Equally, though, it may have been evidence of learning to live with the risk - agreeing to meet outside (where the risk of infection was less) - or young people still meeting in groups (knowing that the risk of serious illness was, for them, quite low).

There are some very useful **'top tips' for incident management** at *Annex A* below.

5.4. Then Organise ...

One person should be given clear, full-time cross-Whitehall responsibility for leading the response to the crisis. That person should confine him/herself to taking strategic decisions. Other responsibilities should be clearly allocated.

More senior people, including ministers, will be tempted to intervene but this should be strongly discouraged. The Strategic Commander or equivalent is responsible for ascertaining the relevant facts and ensuring a coherent response. It is essential that their authority is respected.

Major incidents last for days, weeks or longer. Make sure that everyone gets plenty of rest etc. or else decision making will quickly suffer. Nautical watch-keeping can offer a useful template.

Tactical decision making should be left to those on the ground.

- During Covid, complaints that too many decisions were being taken in London, and insufficient use was being made of local knowledge and expertise, appeared to have some force.

5.5. ... and Consult

Continue consulting, intensively, as you develop your strategies in response to the crisis. Again, consultation need not be time consuming, but it should include all those who seem to have interesting things to say, and all those who might reasonably wish to be consulted. This will greatly increase the chances that your strategies will be effective – and accepted by consultees, even if they had argued against them. Modern communications, including social media, will allow you to summarise issues, suggest ways forward, and seek comments, against very tight timetables.

Perhaps with the benefit of hindsight, the government seems to have allowed insufficient challenge to some of their more controversial decisions such as that the *Eat Out to Help Out* scheme would not dangerously accelerate the spread of the infection, and that schools should be closed despite the consequential long term damage to young people.

The teachers unions were not properly consulted before the initial announcement that schools were to be reopened for certain age groups.

Be sceptical about **early research findings**.

- Hurried, poorly designed, underpowered studies can be worse than not doing anything at all.

- An information vacuum and public/media concern encourage a flood of low quality information.
- Research groups that have higher standards, are more careful, better understand the issues, etc. will produce fewer papers or don't engage at all.

Try to identify and allow for **unintended consequences**. Measures that might be seem attractive so as to ensure public safety/security do not necessarily have priority over consequences including damage to human rights ... nor do they always trump economic damage. Ministers – and if necessary Parliament – need to make these judgments and agree the necessary compromises.

Be aware, too, that the most important decisions may need to be taken by democratically elected politicians. Helen MacNamara included this interesting comment in her evidence to the Covid Inquiry:

[Our] concern about ‘following the science’ was not because we did not have faith in the particular scientists ... I felt there was a risk of appearing to delegate responsibility for huge decisions on the health of the population to a small group of scientists and medics. I did not think this was fair or right in terms of democracy. ...

The questions about how to respond to Covid-19 were – in my mind – huge political, ethical, moral, social and economic questions that went to the heart of the kind of country we were or wanted to be, alongside a whole set of relentlessly practical operational issues like supply of food and medical equipment. There would be hard choices and they should be made by elected ministers.”

5.6. COBR(A)

Here is blogger *Sir Humphrey's* excellent summary of the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) system¹:

The Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) system is at its heart three things.

- It is a physical suite of secure facilities designed to enable Ministers and officials to meet to discuss a crisis. The heart of the facility is located in 70 Whitehall in the Cabinet Office, which depending on who you speak to is either in a deep underground bunker with flashing lights, flat screens and a direct hotline to Area 52 to enable activation of the Strategic Steam Reserve, or alternatively is a suite of fairly bland Ikea style meeting rooms...
- Secondly it is a communications capability without parallel in the UK with the ability to bring together the right people, at the right time to enable them to engage in meetings. In the words of Bob Hoskins – “It's good to talk” and COBR enables this to happen.
- Finally, it is a concept of crisis management that puts the right people round the table, empowered to make decisions and drive the machinery of central government to fix problems.

COBR is a fantastic crisis management tool when things are going very badly wrong. If you are dealing with complex fast-moving crises involving multiple departments areas of

¹ <https://thinpinstripedline.blogspot.com/2023/08/the-pointlessness-of-calling-cobra-cobr.html>

responsibility, and you need decisions made quickly on what needs to be done – the outcome of which can, literally, be life or death, and you need clarity on what the Governments priorities really are, then COBR is fantastic. It works in a way that enables people to take decisions, ensure these are communicated across Whitehall and that there is no ambiguity about what needs to be done, and what happens next. As a very blunt instrument of crisis response it works phenomenally well – it enables effective information sharing and an initial crisis response mechanism for those really messy cases where you need everyone to help out.

What COBR is not good for is to act as a long-term crisis response tool – the act of calling COBR is effectively the equivalent of pushing the SCRAM button on a nuclear reactor. You are moving to solve the problem, but you're shutting down Government in the process. It takes priority over everything else and will be the focus for involved Departments – this is great in the short term, but after more than a couple of days, Whitehall should be moving to set up a Task Force or other empowered team to own responsibility to lead the response moving forward. COBR can be ideal for really important issues, such as a terrorist incident or urgent issues where a national security response is required, but it is intended for a specific time and place.

At times having a COBR meeting is very powerful to bring experts together. At other times having a COBR meeting with Ministers or the PM present is even more powerful – it represents the pinnacle of decision making in a crisis and should only be used sparingly. Each time you put the PM or a Minister into a crisis management meeting they are no longer doing their main work, leading Government, and their departments. It shifts focus off longer term issues and can impact on delivery - sometimes this can be helpful, but at other times it fixes them in one area and prevents them doing their job.

Attendance may look good, but if its eating into Ministerial bandwidth, is it the best use of their time or could issues be solved as effectively by Officials working in close collaboration with Ministerial outer offices? A constant focus on tactical crisis leadership does not allow Minister to take the broader strategic focus on leading their Departments to deliver their manifesto pledges. We should be wary of assuming the answer is always “more meetings with more senior people” – sometimes the best possible thing to do is step back and let the system get on with fixing the problem at hand. Often the issue will cease to be an issue without any intervention by Ministers.

5.7. This is Not Politics as Normal

The public have a sort of unwritten *psychological contract* with those in power. We expect that the police will treat us with respect. We expect that the government will ensure access to impartial justice. And we expect governments to lead by example, to tell us the truth, to set politics aside and to do everything in their power to protect us when crises occur. Much follows from this:-

Don't promise, unless you are near certain to be able to deliver. And try to avoid announcing 'targets'. Targets are, by definition, often missed. They initially reassure the public that concrete steps are being taken. But they focus media attention and destroy confidence if they are not met. And targets rarely yield the most effective use of resource within government. They can galvanise officials. But they can lead to excessive resource being needed at the expense of other important areas.

Instead, explain what you are doing, and the extent to which you depend on others, and on technology being made to work.

This was a particular problem area during the Covid crisis. There were numerous missed targets for the introduction of effective testing and contact tracing systems, not least the ‘world-beating test track & trace system’. Credit for ‘world-beating’ solutions would have been better claimed if and when the solutions worked. The later announcement of ‘Operation Moonshot’ was met with understandable incredulity and derision.

Relaxed lockdown rules often seemed illogical, or at least poorly explained. Why could we meet only one parent at a time? Was it realistic to allow lovers to meet as long as they stayed 1 metre apart?!

And then there was the decision to invite every manufacturer to bid to build ventilators! How hard can it be? *Answer*—Ministers were told, but apparently did not hear, that it is very hard to manufacture ventilators that are safe for patients to use. It is extremely difficult to build a controllable machine that will reliably – and over several weeks – deliver exactly the right mixture and pressure of gases to the damaged lungs of a very sick person.

Be agile. Learn. Don’t Blame. Admit errors, but make it clear that lessons have been learned. You won’t convince everyone, and political opponents will criticise ‘U-turns’, but most of the public will credit you for identifying things that are going wrong, and addressing them.

During Covid, for instance, Ministers did not respond confidently and effectively to concerns about shortages of PPE, deaths in care homes, and higher mortality rates amongst the BAME population

Lead by Example. Ministers and senior officials must comply with their own legislation, and follow their own guidelines, or else they will lose moral authority, and will encourage others to ignore the same rules.

- During Covid, it did not help that the Prime Minister, in the early days, seemed disinclined to follow his own social distancing and other guidance. Dominic Cummings’ trip to Durham and (the PM’s father) Stanley Johnson’s trip to Greece also caused significant damage to trust in government, particularly because several Ministers, including the Attorney General, refused to accept that guidance had been breached and offered enthusiastic support to Mr Cummings. Health Secretary Matt Hancock’s clinch with his mistress Gina Coladangelo (and Dept of Health Non-Exec Director) similarly suggested that there was ‘one rule for them, another rule for the rest of us’.

5.8. Communications

Identify one person (not the Strategic Commander) who will take responsibility for telling the public what is happening.

In general, it is probably best if the spokesperson is not a minister, given public distrust of politicians, and given the possibility that they will not listen to communications advice. Also, they will attract political questions which will impede clear communication of important messaging.

An (otherwise not well known) expert is often best, such as the Chief Veterinary or Medical Officer.

- They should aim to demonstrate calmness, confidence, trustworthiness and competence.
- They should remember that 90% of the initial information reaching the crisis management team will be wrong, so they should not go into detail at that stage. (But see above for the need for honesty and accuracy once reliable data becomes available.)
- It follows that they should avoid speaking with certainty when there isn't any.
- Avoid judgmental language when talking to or about people who are concerned.
- Once reliable facts are available, they should focus on communicating that information.

In the case of Covid, it would have been much better if the Prime Minister had confined himself to making occasional (Regal?) appearances. Even the Cabinet Secretary said privately: "We are losing this war because of behaviour - this is the thing we have to turn around (which probably also relies on people hearing about isolation from trusted local figures, not nationally distrusted figures like the PM)"

Provide Accurate Information. Once reliable information becomes available it should be published in a form that allows it to be easily understood. It should not be presented in a way that appears particularly favourable to the Government.

Avoid gimmicks and jokey language. The public are unlikely to be in the mood to be entertained.

“Whack-a-mole” is by definition a game which the moles win. It was not a good analogy for an anti-virus strategy.

Ensure that your decisions, regulations and guidance can be easily communicated. If not, there may be a problem with the policies. In particular, guidance must be consistent with legislation.

Covid examples:

- ‘Plain English’ guidance – a bit like the Highway Code – would have been very helpful in summarising lockdown guidance as it develops.
- The preparation of such guidance would most likely have exposed some of the contradictions, illogicalities and impracticalities in the developing guidance.
- Ministers' summaries of the guidance (in their interviews) was often at odds with emergency legislation. This caused confusion, including for the police and others attempting to enforce the 'rules'.
- Many lockdown relaxation decisions were pre-briefed to the media, in general terms only, sometimes many days before they were due to take effect. This encouraged many to apply the new rules (illegally) before they came into force. And the lack of detail caused misunderstandings and some confusion.
- The local lockdown strategy was described as “whack-a-mole”, but no one could tell from this who was supposed to do the whacking, or what sort of mallet to use. It would have been better to explain quite clearly what would trigger local lockdowns, and which powers sit centrally and which locally.
- The announcement of new lockdown rules for Greater Manchester was announced in a tweet at 2116 one evening - so giving less than three hours' notice. This was hardly likely to improve trust in HMG's apparently panicky handling of this issue, and seemed

to many to be grossly unfair, not least to those planning Eid celebrations next day. It was for the Islamic community the equivalent of Christmas lunch and associated festivities - including church services - being prohibited in an announcement at 2116 on Christmas Eve.

But do not simplify complex messages for specialist audiences. Encourage and trust intermediaries to communicate as necessary to their readers and members.

Although you will wish to make full use of social media, the broadcast and print media are an important intermediary in communicating with the public in times of emergency. They need to be assisted and respected.

And Alastair Campbell was right: "- Clichés are best avoided at the best of times, which these most certainly aren't. These are times in which clear straight talking is highly recommended. This is best done accompanied by hard fact and detail. ... every briefing should start with a clear factual demonstration, supported by graphics, of cases, deaths, and issues of capacity such as beds, masks and protective clothing, ventilators etc.

Be honest about the risks.

John Krebs² recommended a five stage approach:

1. Tell people what you know,
2. ... what you don't know,
3. ... what you're doing to find out, and
4. ... what they can do in the meantime.
5. Finally, remind them that the advice might change.

This advice applies equally to conversations with the public *and* with ministers and other senior decision makers.

Prepare to be blamed. The over-adversarial nature of UK politics cannot be totally wished away, so it should be handled as a formal risk to your plans – a risk that should be mitigated in an open way.

Do not promise regular press conferences. The absence of worthwhile announcements soon leads to excessive spin, empty promises, repackaged repetitive statements, and consequential lack of trust – plus wasted official and Ministerial time.

More generally, Marina Hyde was not far wrong when she commented that

"The government's crisis communications strategy could not be going worse if it was being led by the last speaker of a dead language People are still clearly extremely confused by what the advice is. ... **JUST TELL US THE INFORMATION.** It's a public safety briefing, not a fricking ring quest.

The government's inability to clearly define essential terms means we are in a situation where "self-isolating" demonstrably means a range of things to different people. Same

² Chair of the Food Standards Agency during the BSE crisis

with “social distancing”. These urgently need simple and precise definition, and a comms blitz everywhere from social media to news bulletins to short TV ads.”

Finally ... *Private Eye's* MD encapsulated much of the above advice in this comment:

No single expert has or had all the answers in such a complex and uncertain situation, which is why we needed to listen to multiple expert views. Everything you do, or don't do, will harm someone in a pandemic. Whether you lock down or not, you have to spend substantial resources mitigating the harms of that choice. You have to explain to the public clearly what you're expecting them to do and why. And you have to follow the same rules you are imposing on everyone else.

5.9. Further Reading

The above advice draws heavily on Catherine Haddon's [Political decision making in a crisis](#).

The constitutional and human rights aspects of responding to crises are covered in authoritative detail in Adam Wagner's *Emergency State*.

The IfG published its initial 'lessons learned' [from Covid] report in August 2020:- [Decision Making in a Crisis](#).

It followed it up with [Responding to Shocks - 10 lessons for government](#) in March 2021.

It also published [Science Advice in a Crisis](#).

A blog about the psychological contract between government and citizen (by Gill Kernick and me) [may be found here](#).

Tim Harford has written a very interesting blog explaining [Why we fail to prepare for disasters](#).

More detailed advice on handling risks to health and safety, including communications advice, [may be found here](#).

ANNEX A

Here are some very sensible **Top Tips for Incident Management** from Sir James Bevan, Chief Executive of the Environment Agency:-

Lead: if you are your organisation's leader, you need to lead the response to a big incident. Don't try and do the day job as well. The incident is the day job till it's over. Be decisive: be prepared to take big decisions. In an incident the biggest risk is not taking a decision at all, or taking it too late. You will not have all the facts: decide anyway.

Move fast: Flick the switch early to put your organisation into incident mode. If you don't get ahead of the curve you will never catch up. So over-resource at the start: people, kit, whatever.

You can always scale back later. Establish your battle rhythm immediately – which meetings when with whom to do what – and clear roles and responsibilities.

Get on the ground: The absent are always wrong. Being present and visible at the scene of an incident is as important as what you do when you get there. So get yourself and your team to the scene as soon as possible.

Have a strategy: Be clear what your goals are and ensure everyone in your team knows. Be ready to adjust your strategy as the situation changes, because it will.

Win the air war: The media battle (the air war) is as much a part of the incident as your operational response (the ground war). You need to win both. So use the media: don't shy away from it. Have a simple message and keep on saying it. Get the tone right: calm, authoritative, empathetic, commitment to do what's needed. Accept the inevitability of critical reporting: it's not personal. It will go away.

Manage upwards: We all have bosses. Tell them what you are doing and listen to what they want.

Stay well: Look after your staff's wellbeing and your own. Ensure everyone is fed and watered and gets a break, including you. Tired people make bad decisions.

Be ready beforehand: Have an incident plan and practice beforehand. No plan will survive contact with reality, but it's better than not having one. Time spent in preparation is never wasted: what you do in peacetime is reflected in how you perform during the incident.

Learn the lessons afterwards: It will never be perfect. But each time you do something right or wrong, you will learn valuable lessons for next time. Do a wash up afterwards, write down the main lessons and keep them handy. You will need them again.

END OF MODULE 5