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From the Field...10 Lessons Learned From the Asian Disaster of 2004

BY ROBERT A. JENSEN | JANUARY 10TH, 2006 |



The Asian tsunami disaster of 2004 was a reminder of the incredible and sometimes destructive power of nature, as well as a wake-

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up call for countries and organizations to ensure they are prepared to deal with emergencies and crises. While the scale of destruction and geographic scope made the tsunami disaster extraordinary, in many ways it bears the same lessons that governments and companies have experienced in their own crises. These lessons are fundamental to understanding how to protect investments in people, property, and reputation.

Teams engaged in crisis management, crisis communication, and humanitarian assistance in Phuket, Thailand, learned a number of lessons from the experience. Each illustrates a new commitment to helping protect companies and institutions in crisis.

1. Consequence management plans are fundamental.

It is no longer enough just to have crisis management plans in place; the tsumani taught us that the tip of crisis management planning – consequence management – is what can make or break a company. Clearly good crisis management plans are helpful; yet in that one percent of the time that exceeds a community's or company's ability to handle a "normal" crisis, an understanding of consequence management planning is vital.

2. Public and private partnerships are essential in disasters of this scale.

While it is true in almost every crisis, the Asian tsunami demonstrated how public and private cooperation can make a big difference in helping resolve issues and come to common standards. In the case of Phuket, private business shared its expertise in the fields of information management systems, logistic support, DNA analysis, and communication.

3. Early establishment of mutually understood relationships with all groups in the crisis is necessary.

The size and scope of the tsunami disaster prompted more than 30 nations and various private companies to respond. With so many resources coming from such a large number of sources, it was critical that each entity understood what its role was in relation to the others.

4. Early protocol controls and hierarchy within all cooperating organizations is critical.



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With 30 nations involved, standards had to be set and agreed upon early in the process. The Thai government did an excellent job of building a framework for cooperation among the nations involved, and even then protocols sometimes varied. In the sensitive area of victim identification, a common protocol was necessary to ensure all victims and their families are treated with care and dignity.

5. Extreme flexibility is required for varying environmental, political, and cultural factors.

Given the number of victims in the Phuket area, now estimated at over several thousand, the highest standard of care for victims and their families was needed, recognizing that cultures are different from country to country. For example, Buddhist monks from nearby temples participated in remembrance services, as did religious leaders from other faiths.

6. Uniform information sharing is vital so that all parties have the same information in the same time frame.

In any crisis, over-communicating is a minimal concern. A good model for this is what the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and other civil aviation authorities do in the event of an airline accident: holding twice-a-day press briefings. But before information is released to the media, it should be communicated to each of the response agencies and, to the degree possible, the families of the victims involved. In Thailand, however, this model was not adhered to with uniformity and regularity. International disasters also require experienced translators who can skillfully articulate the disaster response process.

7. Ensure proper funding is in place to sustain relief and recovery operations.

This is a difficult area because of what is not known at the time of the crisis. However, a fundamental axiom in crisis management applies here. It is much easier to spend money correctly the first time than to spend money to do it over.

8. Provide continual health and welfare support for all employees deployed to the disaster site.

During a crisis, most companies naturally focus their efforts on the needs of the survivors of a crisis or their families and support groups. Companies discovered that sustained support for those who are deployed to a disaster site is equally important. For some, it is their first experience with a mass fatality disaster. For others, it may be their first experience outside their home country or working in a different culture. Long hours, difficult work, and the stress of being away from home may foster emotional issues long after a responder has returned home. For that reason, medical doctors, psychological counselors, and health and safety teams were deployed to Phuket to work with response and recovery personnel.

9. Have the depth and breadth of personnel to sustain multiple operations over an extended period of time.

In addition to providing care for those team members at a disaster site, it is also critical to rotate them in and out of the disaster area at the end of a typical three-week deployment. Too much exposure to a disaster can dull the senses and lead to both physical and emotional stress. On the other hand, an organization needs a significant base of trained personnel to redeploy them after their rotation. Without that breadth and depth, a company would have a continuous learning curve and would not have developed the relationships necessary with other interested parties.

10. Need for a dedicated, experienced crisis management team.

A crisis is not the time to train people. A company's very existence may be at stake, and proven people are essential in such areas as incident management, communications, human resource management, safety, transportation, security, and logistics. The bottom line: experience counts.

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Robert A. Jensen is President and Chief Operating Officer of Kenyon International Emergency Services, Inc., the world leader in disaster response coordination services. He has directed response efforts to numerous mass fatalities including the most recent Asian Tsunami from Phuket, Thailand; the UN Headquarters in Bahgdad, Iraq; the Bali nightclub bombing; mortuary work at the 9/11 World Trade Center disaster; the crashes of United 93; Alaska Air 261; Egypt Air 990; USAirways 5481; Swissair 111, and TWA 800.

He is the author of Mass Fatality and Casualty Incidents, A Field Guide, the only published forensic text focusing strictly on the response to mass fatality incidents. He can be reached at (281) 872-6074 or by email at www.kenyoninternational.com

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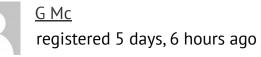
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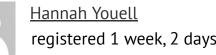
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