



THE CRISIS SIMULATION HANDBOOK

How to plan, design and deliver
world-class crisis simulation
exercises

Grant Rayner

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The Crisis Simulation Handbook

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One of my first major crisis simulation projects was with a multinational financial services firm. I submitted a proposal that the client later admitted to having initially disregarded because they'd never heard of the company I was with at the time. It happens.

After the client found that none of the other submitted proposals answered the questions in their request for proposal, however, they dug out my proposal and gave it a second look. I ended up winning the project.

All in all, I delivered 68 six-hour crisis simulation exercises for this organisation across the Asia Pacific region and in the UK.

Thank you, Kev, for your trust and guidance during those formative years.

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Prologue

The Regional Crisis Team was in their Operations Centre in Singapore when the phone rang.

The field engineer on the other end of the phone informed the Crisis Team of an incident at one of the field sites and reported being en route to investigate.

At the time, the field team was in the southern Philippines, a higher-risk part of the region.

Suddenly, the field engineer swore.

‘There’s a checkpoint ahead,’ he said.

The Crisis Team members visibly leaned in, trying to better hear the call.

The team could hear the vehicle moving down what sounded like a rough dirt road, then slowing to a stop.

‘We’re going to try to turn around,’ the field engineer said.

Over the speaker, the team could hear the vehicle slowly reversing down the road.

The sharp sound of shots being fired suddenly pierced the air. A few members of the Crisis Team visibly jumped at the sound.

It was clear that at least some of the gunfire was hitting the vehicle. The project leader swore, yelling at his driver to reverse the vehicle. Back in Singapore,

the Crisis Team could hear the vehicle reversing as it sped away from the ambush.

Then, without warning, an awful crunch filled the room as the vehicle hit a tree. At least half of the crisis team members visibly flinched upon hearing the noise of the crash.

‘Are you okay?’ someone on the team asked the field engineer across the phone line.

‘I think so,’ he replied. ‘But the vehicle is totalled. We need to leave it and get out of the area on foot.’

The team could hear shuffling and doors opening. Gunfire could still be heard in the distance.

‘I’ve got to go,’ said the field engineer.

Then the phone went silent...

The team members looked at each other.

‘What are we going to do to get our team out of there and to safety?’ asked the team leader.

※ ※ ※

The opening above was from an exercise I ran in Singapore for an American Fortune 100 company. To make the exercise feel real to the team members sitting in the Crisis Operations Centre, I used a complex array of sound effects.

In this guide, you’ll learn how to design and deliver similar crisis simulation exercises that challenge crisis teams and build their capability to respond effectively to crisis events.

Preface

How your organisation responds to a crisis is critical.

A poor response could result in injuries, deaths, extended business disruptions or damage to your organisation's reputation.

Your business may recover over time, but you could still have lost the respect of your employees, your employees' families, your business partners and your customers.

Countless examples highlight companies who failed to effectively manage crisis events. The names of these companies are synonymous with failure.

The approach your own organisation takes when responding to a crisis is constrained by a small set of capabilities: policies and procedures, organisational leadership, and the skill and experience of the team responding to the crisis.

Above all other factors, how your Crisis Team responds to the crisis will define how effective your organisation will be in managing the crisis.

Responding appropriately is the first challenge you will face with any crisis. Here's why: no matter how talented each individual on the Crisis Team is in their normal organisational role, managing a crisis is not business as usual. Each team member must clearly understand their role in a crisis and must be able to

perform that role to a high standard in an entirely unfamiliar situation. This ability relates to not only the tasks they perform but also how they cope as individuals. Not everyone can cope under the inherent stressors in crisis events.

Responding to a crisis demands that members of the Crisis Team can remain calm and rationally think their way through the problems at hand. While all business managers will be experienced in decision-making, not all will be experienced in making decisions when lives are at stake—which is an altogether different ballgame.

Here is where crisis simulation exercises come in. A crisis simulation exercise puts a Crisis Team through their paces in a highly realistic simulated crisis environment. Just like a practice surgery prepares a medical student for operating on patients or a practice match prepares a football team for a big game, a simulation exercise enables a Crisis Team to learn how to manage a crisis by actually managing a crisis.

As you'll learn in this guide, crisis simulation exercises are by far the best—and I would argue the *only*—way to fully prepare a team for the challenges they'll face during a real crisis.

Purpose

This guide will teach you how to plan, design and deliver world-class crisis simulation exercises.

Regardless of your current level of experience in this specialised field, this guide will give you the knowledge you need to be successful.

In the following chapters, I'm going to dive deep into the art and science of building great simulation exercises. I'll be sharing specific details that are based on the countless hours I've spent writing exercise scripts and sitting in the room observing Crisis Teams. My aim is that, once you finish this guide, you'll be able to use this new knowledge to competently design and deliver your own crisis simulation exercises.

Most of this guide is written from the perspective of an external consultant providing crisis simulation services to a client organisation. As such, in addition to the mechanics of exercise design and delivery, I'll also get into the finer aspects of ensuring a positive engagement that will lead to more work. I'll point out the potential pitfalls that may impact the quality of your exercises and the issues that may impact how your client perceives you and your work. Many of these lessons I've learned the hard way.

If you're designing and delivering simulation exercises for your own organisation, you'll also find the details in this guide useful and relevant.

My Narrow View of the World

I've been conducting crisis simulation exercises for more than 20 years. Over this time, I've experimented with different techniques and refined my approach to exercise design and delivery. As I continue my work, I expect that I'll continue to make incremental improvements. In fact, as I explored different aspects of exercise design and delivery for this book, I've made iterative improvements to many of my internal planning tools.

This key point is worth bringing up early in the guide: whatever point you are starting from, always be critical of your own work and seek to continuously improve it.

This guide represents the way I do things. Of course, I'm acutely aware that other people are also out there designing and delivering crisis simulation exercises, likely in different ways than I approach them. It may even be that you have designed and delivered simulation exercises before. Your approach may be completely different from the approach I'll lay out in this guide.

That's great.

There's no one 'right way' to design and deliver a crisis simulation exercise. We all bring our own experiences and influences to the table.

I'm always interested in hearing other perspectives, not only from within my own industry but from

other groups of professionals working on completely different problems. In fact, most of the major changes I've made to the way I work have come from completely different fields—for example, the design and gaming fields.

The approaches I will outline in this guide have worked well for me. I'm confident they will work for you too. Most importantly, I hope that you can build on some of these ideas and techniques to improve them and make them your own.

How I Got To Here

My career in security and crisis management began at the age of 17 when I enlisted in the army.

As you would expect, service in the army meant no end of exercises, from individual drills lasting seconds to collective exercises lasting weeks.

My teammates and I drilled and drilled and drilled. In fact, the more fundamental the skill, the more we drilled. During this process, we learned the value of learning by doing. While theory was an important foundation of training, it wasn't nearly enough to equip us to operate effectively in real-world conditions.

My first introduction to complex simulation exercises was as part of the national counterterrorism exercise programme. The counterterrorism exercises were thoroughly prepared and involved a rich combination of real-world activity (role players acting as terrorists, hostages and the media) and simulated information feeds from a range of different sources. These exercises were always realistic and provided a great demonstration of what's possible when it comes to planning complex and engaging simulation exercises.

My first involvement inside the 'engine room' of a crisis simulation exercise was in the year 2000. I took a short period of leave from the military and assisted as a coordinator for a 60-hour crisis simulation exercise in preparation for the Sydney Olympic Games. This simulation exercise involved every

government and non-government agency involved with the Olympics. It took a large team several months to prepare the exercise, but I only had a minor role: coordinating the delivery of serials for a couple of shifts. Nonetheless, this exercise was a real eye-opener for me and showcased what could be achieved with effective planning and disciplined delivery.

After the 60-hour exercise, I worked with a colleague to plan and conduct crisis simulation exercises for all of the Olympic venues across Australia. This project was my first exposure to the commercial side of simulation exercises, and I learned a lot from the experience.

In 2002, I left the Army and joined International SOS, relocating to Singapore in the process. During my time with International SOS, I wrote crisis and emergency response plans, provided training to crisis and emergency response teams, and supported clients during a host of different crisis incidents. That I had just recently left the military meant this period was a formative one for me, and I was fortunate to have an outstanding boss and mentor to guide me.

Subsequent to International SOS, I worked in a number of different security companies, where I continued to build my experience in providing crisis management services, including simulation exercises.

I founded my own company in 2012, with the express mission of assisting organisations to plan for, and respond to, crisis events.

I've lost count of the number of crisis simulation exercises I've conducted over the years. I've delivered exercises for organisations you'll know well, as well as a lot of organisations you may not know at all.

Today, I'm based in Asia, and one of the benefits of this location is that I've had the opportunity to deliver simulation exercises in a host of different countries. Over the years, I've conducted exercises throughout Australia and in New York, Washington DC, London, Sydney, Dubai, Singapore, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Taipei, Beijing, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, New Delhi and Bangalore.

As you can imagine, running exercises in different cultural contexts can be challenging. Still, I have to say it's one of the most interesting aspects of my work and is highly enjoyable. Culture has a major impact on how teams interact during a crisis. The breadth of my experience in terms of working in different cultural contexts has given me a great appreciation for the nuances of conducting simulation exercises involving different languages and cultures.

I've also conducted exercises for almost every type of crisis event you can imagine. Exercise scenarios have included earthquakes, terrorist attacks, severe air pollution, major transport disruptions, aircraft

crashes, protests, strikes, threats to personnel, kidnappings, extortion, package bombs, power outages, major storms, infectious disease outbreaks, flooding, train derailments, chemical spills, workplace violence, strikes, cyber-attacks and reputation scandals (I've probably missed a few, but you get the idea).

The process of designing exercises for these scenarios has given me a deep understanding of how each type of crisis event affects not only organisations but also the broader community. As you'll learn later, while an exercise scenario is just a vehicle for learning, making the scenario realistic and credible is fundamentally important. Knowledge of how different crisis events play out, and how they impact organisations and communities, is essential to developing realistic crisis exercises.

Along the way, I've also been involved in responding to actual crisis events. Here are just a handful of examples:

- ◆ Supporting clients during the 'Oakwood Mutiny' in Manila, the Philippines, in 2003.
- ◆ Supporting clients in Jakarta, Indonesia, after terrorist attacks in 2003 and 2004.
- ◆ Supporting global clients after the Asian tsunami in 2004 and 2005.
- ◆ Providing crisis management support to clients during the state of emergency in Nepal in 2005,

including assisting to establish emergency communication links during the blackout period.

- ◆ Providing security and crisis management advice to the management team of a major hotel chain in Hong Kong during the Sixth WTO Ministerial Conference in 2005, which were marred by large-scale protests.
- ◆ Planning and executing the evacuation of client staff and families from Beirut in the midst of the Israeli air campaign in 2006
- ◆ Deploying to Kathmandu, Nepal, to support clients and help with the evacuation of trekkers from remote areas after the Nepal earthquake in 2015.
- ◆ Deploying to Colombo, Sri Lanka, to support clients after the Easter Day terrorist attacks in April 2019.
- ◆ Supporting clients in South Korea and Singapore during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

If you hope to design and deliver realistic crisis simulation exercises, the experience of supporting clients (or your own organisation) during a crisis is highly relevant. Responding to crisis events will provide you with the opportunity to learn first-hand about the diverse impacts of different crisis events. That experience will help you create realistic and credible crisis simulation exercises.

Building on my own past experience, I've invested a lot of time and intellectual effort into developing frameworks, processes and tools to help clients (any myself) better understand how Crisis Teams perform during exercises and actual events. Many of these I've shared in [The Crisis Response Handbook](#).

As I mentioned in the opening, the performance of the Crisis Team has a major impact on an organisation's success (or failure) in any crisis. Regardless of how detailed the company's crisis response procedures, a Crisis Team that lacks motivation, cohesion and good leadership will fail the organisation every time. The ability to analyse performance and build competence in a planned and sustainable way is key to maintaining world-class crisis response capabilities.

It is that very reason that I'm such a strong proponent of crisis simulation exercises. In my experience, simulation exercises are the only effective way to improve team performance and ensure Crisis Teams are fully prepared to respond to any crisis.

Who This Guide Is for

I've written this guide for anyone who needs to design and deliver crisis simulation exercises. You may be responsible for doing this within your own organisation, or you may be a consultant providing these services to your clients. Either way, you'll find this guide useful.

While I've focused this guide on crisis and emergency response, you'll find that the process we follow to design and deliver an exercise will apply for simulation exercises in other contexts as well. We're increasingly applying our experience at designing and delivering simulation exercises to a range of other contexts where there's value in experiential learning. I see the demand for this mode of learning increasing over time.

Above all, I'm writing this guide for people in the same position I was in more than 20 years ago. I want to create the reference I wish I'd had access to all those years ago when first starting out.

Terminology

Throughout this guide, I'll be using standardised terminology to make things a bit simpler to follow.

The key terms are outlined below.

Crisis or crisis event. A crisis, or crisis event, is any incident that significantly threatens life, operations, reputation or value.

Situation. A situation is one aspect of a crisis event that a Crisis Team may have to deal with. For the purpose of this guide, a crisis event may comprise different situations unfolding all as part of the same event.

Crisis Team. The Crisis Team is the generic term used to describe the team you are putting through exercises. In your organisation, this could be a Crisis Management Team, Incident Response Team, Emergency Response Team or some other group. The terms 'Crisis Team' and 'team' will be used interchangeably.

Crisis Operations Centre. During a crisis simulation exercise, the Crisis Team will work out of a Crisis Operations Centre. For brevity, the term 'Operations Centre' will also be used. In your organisation, you may call this the Crisis Command Centre, Emergency Operations Centre or a different term.

Exercise Coordinator. The Exercise Coordinator is the individual responsible for designing and delivering the crisis simulation exercise. Some people may refer to this role as an ‘Exercise Facilitator’. If you’re going to be designing and delivering exercises, this is you.

Role Player Coordinator. The Role Player Coordinator is the person responsible for managing role players during the exercise. The Role Player Coordinator will work from the Exercise Control Room and is part of Exercise Control.

Role players. The role players are the individuals who will play different roles during a crisis simulation exercise. Role players will work with the Role Player Coordinator in the Exercise Control Room and are part of Exercise Control.

Exercise Control. The term ‘Exercise Control’ encapsulates the Role Player Coordinator, the role players and any other aspect of the exercise construct designed to create a simulated environment around the Crisis Team.

Exercise Control Room. The Exercise Control Room is the engine room of the exercise. During a crisis simulation exercise, the Role Player Coordinator and role players will operate from the Exercise Control Room.

Exercise scenario. The exercise scenario is the crisis event that’s being exercised. A scenario could be, for example, an earthquake, social and political unrest, or a cyber-attack.

Exercise script. The exercise script contains all of the serials that will be delivered during an exercise, accompanied by supporting notes. A crisis simulation exercise will have one exercise script. The exercise script will be used by the role players to deliver dialogue serials to the Crisis Team.

Serials. Serials are the individual phone calls, face-to-face interactions or media feeds delivered to the Crisis Team. A dialogue serial will include the dialogue the role player is expected to deliver, along with supporting notes. Each exercise script will have multiple serials.

Perspective

A key objective in my approach to writing this guide is ensuring it is equally useful for not only external consultants but also individuals designing and delivering crisis simulation exercises within their own organisations.

Even if you are delivering a crisis simulation exercise within your own organisation, the way you approach the project will be very similar to an external consultant's approach.

In this guide, I'll use the neutral reference to 'the organisation', which may be your organisation or your client's organisation.

Where it's useful or relevant to make a distinction between external or internal roles, I'll make that clear.

Every Simulation Needs To Be Great

When you deliver a crisis simulation exercise, it needs to be great.

Every. Single. Time.

There are several reasons why it's important to deliver a high-quality exercise.

From the perspective of an external consultant, you want repeat business. You can't afford to have a single exercise that doesn't go well. Similarly, when delivering an exercise within your own organisation, you want people in your organisation to have confidence in your capabilities.

Most importantly, you want everyone involved with the exercise to see the value of simulation exercises as a valid medium for crisis preparedness. If individuals start to question the value of the programme because of a poor exercise, there's a real risk you may lose support. If support is lost, the programme may be de-funded, resulting in the loss of an essential enabler of crisis preparedness.

In this way, crisis simulation exercises are delicate. If you screw one up, you'll find it very difficult to build the level of support and trust you need to run more.

The focus of this guide, therefore, is to ensure you have the necessary knowledge to prepare and deliver the best exercises possible. I'll set the scene for this in the first chapter by focusing on the principles of delivering a great crisis simulation exercise.

Using This Guide

Treat this guide as a technical manual. It's designed to be instructional—to impart knowledge and experience to you, the reader. As such, it's designed to be read and re-read.

For your first reading, I recommend reading from cover to cover. From there, as you're planning, designing and delivering your own exercises, refer back to specific sections of the guide where necessary to assist you along the way.

Thank you

Thank you for buying this guide, and thanks in advance for reading it.

Crisis simulation exercises are a niche topic, so I sincerely appreciate your interest and support.

If you have any comments or suggestions, please feel free to get in touch via [email](#).

Onward!