

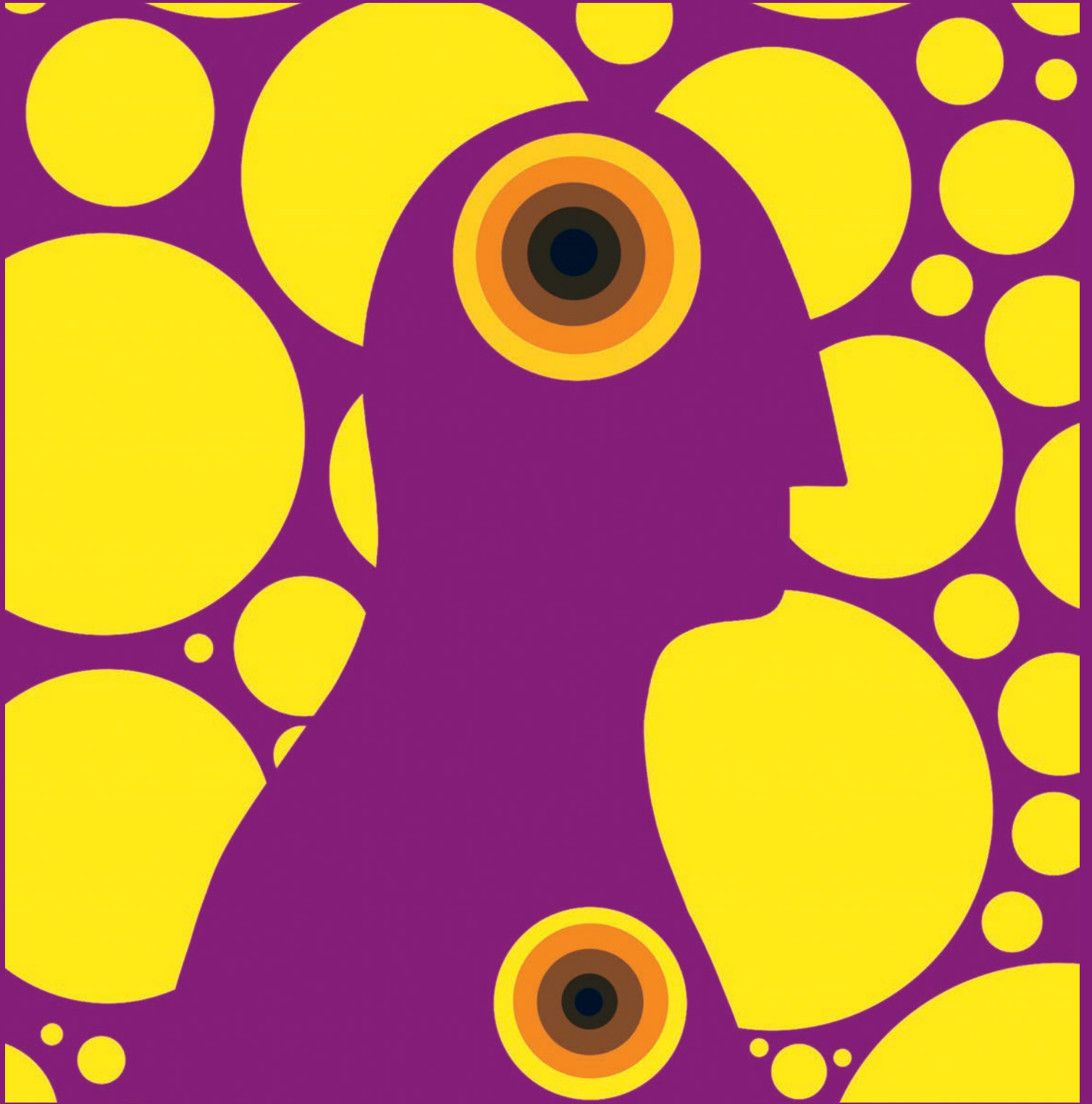
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HEAD AND HEART
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN A CRISIS

Food Security | Supply Chains | Stress,
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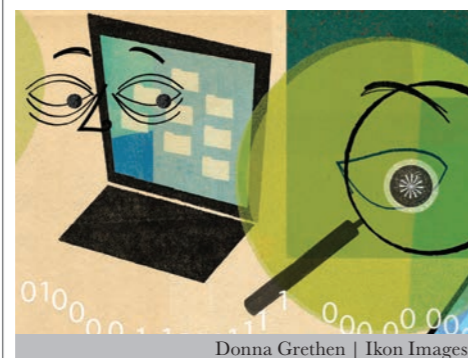
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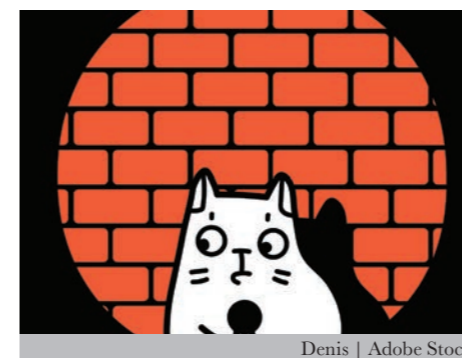
In December 2021, the CRJ hosted a webinar to explore current endeavours to strengthen the disaster resilience links between all sectors and stakeholders. Nadine Sulkowski reports on the event

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comment

As CRJ goes to press, we are on day six of war in Ukraine.



We do not have a crystal ball; you will be reading this several weeks after it has been written, and we could be in a maelstrom of our worst-case scenarios and fears. I fervently hope that we have somehow managed to avoid even greater global atrocity, though it seems to be stalking ever closer, tracking the still-warm footsteps of the pandemic.

That will not, of course, mitigate the suffering happening in Ukraine right here, right now. And what of the other parts of the world also enduring war or terrorism, pandemics, famine, floods or fires?

The greatest privilege of working on this journal lies in how our readers and contributors are motivated to make the world a better place for others. Our CRJ community knows all too well the effects of conflicts and their human toll. Lives lost, intergenerational grief, battered societies, attacks on civil infrastructure and the use of banned munitions all leave deep, long-term physical and emotional scars and a burning sense of outrage.

As you read this, even if we have somehow managed to sidestep cataclysmic escalation, the tragic effects will be pervasive and long lasting.

The first casualty when war comes is truth. The endless scroll of mistruths, propaganda, manipulation, self-centred extreme views, greed and power plays, which sought to divide societies and foment distrust between people, have all played their part.

The darker side of human nature appears to have gained momentum. Many thought – in retrospect, with complacency – that it was under control.

As Tony Jaques laments on p42, we consistently ignore red flags. Buried among the tsunami of news on Ukraine, the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report says that climate change is already affecting every corner of the world. It warns that some impacts are already too severe for adaptation to prevent severe losses and damage, noting that we have a narrow window left for change.

The truth is, we were warned. We did not heed the approaching drumbeats of this war; will we also fail to act upon the even more dire warnings about climate?

I wish I were writing this now with the benefit, relief and safety of hindsight.

Disasters are the new business as usual

Avnesh Ratnanesan and **Derrick Tin** contend that disasters are fast becoming the new normal or business as usual (BAU) in the corporate world and suggest ways that future preparedness might be enhanced



When categorised the pandemic as a major global disaster that has heightened global society's sensitivities on the need for better preparedness, both now and into the future. In Australia, the pandemic was preceded by major fires and floods, both of which were significant disasters. Compounded by the underlying trends of climate change, we can only expect more to come.

So, what is the best approach to guide organisational strategy through the next uncertain phase of the pandemic, especially not knowing if we are in recovery or resurgence from a new variant?

In the initial months of the pandemic, most organisations and societies took a rapid, reactive approach. Initial stances of border restrictions, lockdowns, widespread testing and quarantine facilities were immediate public health measures used to 'flatten the curve' and mitigate some of the healthcare effects of the pandemic. Organisations looked to state and federal governments for guidance, particularly in areas that they were unfamiliar with. Further exacerbating the situation were the human elements of fear, frustration, anger and isolation that so many were experiencing at the time. Healthcare professionals, who we relied on as sources of guidance, had to worry about their own health and their ability to keep themselves and their families safe, while tending to the care and treatment of the public.

Many organisational leaders also learnt quickly that they could not depend on governments alone to provide absolute clarity on how to manage their emergency preparedness and response initiatives. Indeed, many larger, well-resourced organisations went on to hire disaster preparedness and infection control consultants or developed the capability in-house to mitigate the impact on business or service disruption. CEOs, CFOs, leaders of human resources and operations divisions were reassigned as *ad hoc* incident commanders and were often thrust into these roles with little initial training. They were also forced to use tools that were not fit for purpose to audit their emergency preparedness. Hospitals and health systems were more fortunate as the exceptions, thanks to in-house expertise in the form of infection control experts and epidemiologists to guide their response management.

At a business level, supply chain disruption also continues, along with a sweeping mental health epidemic that is anticipated to last the next few years. Studies have shown the impact of job losses alone can affect the mental health of men for longer periods of time

when compared with the loss of a loved one. While vaccination strategies have provided countries with a way out of the mentally debilitating effects of restrictive lockdowns, the rate of mutation of viral strains and the need for booster shots just months after the initial double dose, raises questions as to their long-term effectiveness.

The *post hoc* damage assessment continues as we enter a period of publication of more elaborate and comprehensive after-action reviews. These government and industry reports are providing deeper insight into where opportunities exist for future improvement in a more holistic and strategic manner. While there are many opportunities for improving the effectiveness of clinical therapies, one recent review by the Auditor-General's Office on the state government agencies in Victoria, Australia, identified significant waste in PPE and need for better supply chain management and procurement procedures during a crisis. Future preparedness requires data, sound expertise and improved guidance – either from governments or self-organising teams – and dynamic feedback-loop mechanisms. It is also clear that technology will play a large part in these self-managing systems to enable future optimisation of emergency management processes to make them simpler, safer and more efficient. In the response to disasters, time is of the essence, and any solution that can improve response speed and efficiency could save lives.

Helicopter view

As such, how do organisations avoid being caught unprepared again in the future? And how can forward thinking leaders of business, government and healthcare institutions take a helicopter view in times of distress to truly appreciate the breadth and duration of the problem, and make more meaningful decisions during crises?

It is clear that organisations need to be able to manage infectious disease outbreaks like we manage fires. Leaders require a preventative mindset that incorporates comprehensive safety and preparedness plans, procedures and infrastructure in place. This may include frequent scenario planning and drills as needed, or as embedded into public health policy.

Indeed, we have done a lot of work leading strategic planning and deployment over the last decade, including supporting many large complex organisations, such as Pfizer, in Australia. We have also been involved in leading large-scale continuous improvement and change management initiatives. However, experienced executives and management professionals are acutely aware that theory can be very different from the practical approaches that occur on the ground.

It is the quality of the interrelationship in many organisations, between emergency preparedness activities throughout the pandemic as well as corporate strategy and BAU activities that we found very interesting – a conundrum, in fact. This thinking has evolved through many interviews with CEOs of organisations who are trying to reconfigure how to implement various scenarios in a pandemic recovery world. *Diagram 1* is a highly simplified depiction of the interrelationship of organisational plans and their pandemic response. There is a necessity amid the chaos of crisis response to see the wood for the trees and take a bird's-eye view to assess all the complexities of actual emergency management operational activities in tandem with the usual machinations of corporate strategy development and implementation.

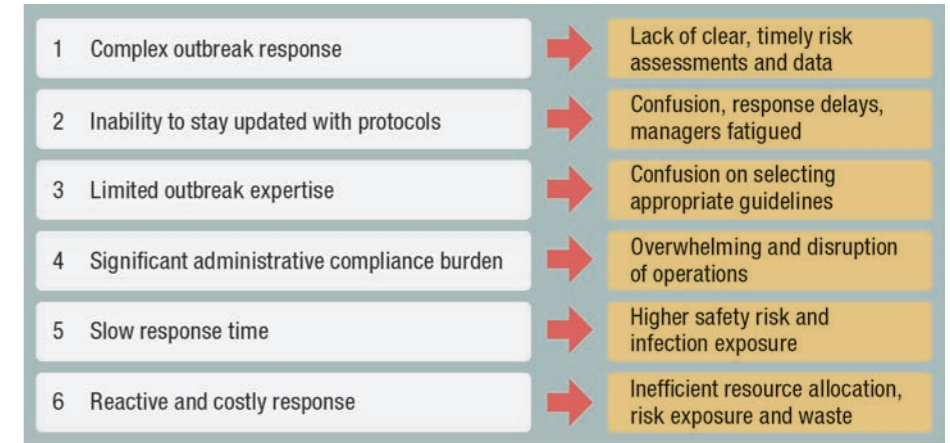



Diagram 1

Underpinning this paradigm is also how leaders can transform risk mitigation strategies into opportunities for growth and improvement, and even perhaps gain a competitive advantage in markets in a structured fashion. Most diagrams and literature in emergency management look downwards at the cascade of activities of incident response teams, rather than look up at how they integrate into operational BAU.

The digital age is likely to ensure that the role of emergency response technology and preparedness systems will grow in importance. Risk management solutions, while providing more accurate data on risk gaps to managers and frontline teams, have largely fallen short in providing adequate decision-making support. This need is particularly acute, especially as the science on Covid-19 exploded in 2020 with over 200,000 coronavirus-related journal articles and preprints. This resulted in multiple 'sources of truth' for organisations to contend with. It is likely that this trend will continue as future disasters emerge and society becomes increasingly polarised by multiple confusing information channels, including social media platforms. Organisational and emergency management leaders will have to make strategic decisions on the key sources of truth that will be relied upon, and how they will be appropriately funnelled to managers and frontline staff in an expeditious, but comprehensive manner.

Organisations have learnt that they cannot rely on one or two in-house experts alone to maintain their mental repository of knowledge on disaster management processes. More distributed and decentralised models of emergency preparedness are being explored, although how this is managed in the context of high employee turnover and knowledge retention within incident command teams remains a key question for forward thinking leaders in the field. 

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