



Photo: Christina Morillo, www.pexels.com

Crisis simulation IS crisis preparedness

Lessons learned from a career in international crisis trainings.

Zurich, May 4, 2020. Rainer Westermann, President of The Crisis Protection Network, talks to the CPN member from the Netherlands, Peter Smit, Peter Smit Communicatie & Reputatie, on international, multi-cultural complex crisis trainings and simulations. Peter shares particular challenges and what his learnings could mean for companies struggling with the corona crisis.

CPN: Peter Smit, of all the members of The Crisis Protection Network, you have the most experience with crisis training and simulation in an international environment. Why do companies send you around the world to do those trainings?

Peter Smit: I would say that the companies I work for understand very well that it takes years to build a solid reputation, but it takes seconds to ruin it. They also understand that dealing with a crisis situation comes down to experience, but that it is difficult to build experience. Simulating actual threats in a safe environment of an exercise helps build experience, at least when it comes to going through the process of a crisis situation.

CPN: This is a substantial investment for most companies. Why do your clients believe that it is money well spend?

Peter Smit: They know that when you do not handle a crisis in the correct way this will cost you way more than the investment in building a couple of simulation scenarios, some travel expenses and hiring a couple of experienced trainers. A full blown crisis that is not managed in the correct way will cost you millions, if not more, as recent examples are showing us.

CPN: Can these physical trainings be replaced with virtual sessions? Do you expect to travel less in the future?

Obviously physical training is suspended until we get the Covid-19 virus under control. In the meantime we have set up, together with the clients corporate communications department, the opportunity to consult us on any crisis questions the countries might have. In those instances we go over parts of the presentation we normally do in person and help people understand what the dynamics of a crisis situation are. This at least scratches some of the surface of what normally happens in the actual physical simulation. Hopefully things will return back to normal soon for everyone, but obviously health is the main issue to focus on now.

CPN: Does this crisis preparedness effort have any benefit in the current pandemic situation?

Peter Smit: It would be quite arrogant to say that this could have been prevented, because it is something none of us have ever experienced in our lifetime. However, preparation for communications with your most important stakeholders in times of crisis is always something worth doing. Having a clear command structure, division of tasks and roles, have your stakeholder management up to date, understanding the need for business continuity plans and having them ready. These and more are all things you can prepare before the actual crisis hits you. At the very least you could have thought of them.

CPN: Is a pandemic one of the scenarios you helped companies to prepare for?

Peter Smit: As said, this is something no one has ever come across in their lifetime. I do however helped companies in preparing when an actual emergency situation occurs. This means that when the pandemic started to hit them, they already had contingency plans in place which could then be easily activated. This shows strength and build trust around the future of the company.

CPN: What kind of situations are at the top of the list for your type of work?

Peter Smit: To be honest, there is no list. Every occasion can be a potential threatening situation for a company. But if you twist my arm I would say situations where people lost lives are among the most serious ones. In those cases, the outside world and for that matter also the inside of the company, will judge your moral character. Questions like: what is the cause, have you done everything to prevent this, how are you taking care of victims are key. The answers to those questions determine how you will be seen going forward. I always say to my clients that people understand if you make mistakes, the way you solve them determines the future of your company or products.

CPN: How does crisis training and crisis simulation differ?

Peter Smit: Crisis training focuses for me more on solving an actual situation, simulation brings chaos and other issues to the table. I prefer the simulations because it brings to light flaws in the crisis organization, flaws you can then mend before the actual crisis happens. It allows you to streamline the crisis management. Something you won't be able to do when you are actually in the middle of a situation.

CPN: Can these trainings be done without a meaningful level of crisis preparedness?

Peter Smit: Yes, but you will soon find out why crisis preparedness is needed, so that too is helpful. Overall, I would say that crisis simulation IS crisis preparedness.

CPN: How do you prepare for and conduct those trainings?

Peter Smit: We have a number of scenarios that deal with topics every organization comes across in their lifetime. In preparing for international, culturally different geographies we have chosen to follow the line of head office, which centers around protection of the company reputation. For that purpose, we have invented a fictitious country, so we never have the discussion of “this can never happen here”. Of course, we do find out what the actual topics are for each country so we can give some perspective there as well. The simulation is preceded by a presentation (very interactive) explaining what a good reputation does. We discuss crisis situations that are ongoing and try to open minds on thinking on what went wrong with those organizations. Spoiler alert: it almost always comes down to company culture.

CPN: English is not your mother tongue, neither is it for many participants. How do you ensure that it is a successful training?

Peter Smit: We address this right from the start and encourage everyone to speak up when something is not clear. We regularly check if we are all still on the same page. And although for some it might still be difficult, we find that during the day that barrier completely disappears.

CPN: Aside from the language issue, are there particular cultural barriers you have encountered?

Peter Smit: Some real funny things. For instance, in some scenarios it is necessary to call the police in at a certain point in time. In one of the more challenging countries (won't mention them here :-)) calling the police makes your life not really easier to use a euphemism. We then discuss what could be a potential solution. Also, in some countries corruption is widespread, but the policy of the mother company is crispy clear: don't! This is an additional benefit of these exercises. You get to underline these policies quite clearly.

CPN: What is the most memorable situation you have encountered while conducting these trainings?

Peter Smit: I could write a book about that. From power going down 25 times during an exercise, to being stopped at roadblocks but luckily having armed guards with us, to being transported from the airport by boat with an extremely fun African music band on board. One of the more memorable ones is being the guest of the company for the kick-off of a marketing activity coinciding with us being there. This was done by hosting a football match between the most important teams of Kinshasa in a stadium packed with 100.000 spectators. When riots started to break out, I was happy we could trust on crisis protocols that helped us get out of that situation safely.

CPN: What would be your message to those struggling with the current Covid-19 crisis?

Peter Smit: Make sure you stay in touch with your own people first on what is going on, they are your ambassadors. Be clear and honest on developments. Stay in touch with your important stakeholders, show them what you are doing to keep them happy and in the loop. Understand internal emotions and know that this crisis will pass. Keep your eye on the future, build trust!

CPN: How does being a part of an international network of experts benefit your clients?

Peter Smit: By being part of CPN I have unlimited access to some of the most brilliant minds in crisis work. Between us we have experienced almost every crisis a company could possibly come across. Furthermore, I can offer my clients support on the ground in almost every location on the planet. Priceless!

CPN: What should be the first steps towards crisis preparedness a company or organization should take?

Peter Smit: This may sound a bit philosophical, but I would say be brutally honest to yourself. Go through your organization with a fine-tooth comb and determine your vulnerabilities. Solve them where necessary and set up crisis simulations. Because this is uncharted territory for some companies my main advice however would be: get outside and professional help. This is all about experience and building experience around crisis situations is extremely difficult. CPN can help.

CPN: What tools do you use in your trainings?

Peter Smit: Every tool that can help. That is determined by building a tailor-made solution.

About the Crisis Protection Network:

The Crisis Protection Network is an independent network of senior crisis professionals from all over the world, who share high-level expertise in crisis management and brand protection. Its experts use a proven approach and methodology, which they apply individually or in collaboration with other members of the network. The CPN team combines many years of experience working with multi-nationals, midsized corporations and SME's alike. Comprehensive services are offered in three main categories - Advisory Services, Intelligence & Research and Training & Education. The Crisis Protection Network is an Association under Swiss Law.