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comment

An author recently told me that a journalist of their acquaintance had questioned – rather superciliously – why the *CRJ* does not engage



in political reporting. I can assure the journalist that this is entirely intentional and will always be one of the main principles of this publication.

Why? Democracy is fragile and must be nurtured; it is essential to any well-functioning country. Yet many political systems have evolved in ways that preclude meaningful long-term planning,

particularly in the areas of national and societal resilience, disaster mitigation and prevention. As Eric McNulty says on p12: "Politicians think in electoral cycles. The action needed to address emerging risks is more urgent and requires consideration of longer time horizons."

In many countries, the roles of ministers or mayors are frequently shuffled; sometimes they don't get to spend enough time on an issue to gain a true understanding of the complexities. And any policies – however bold, enlightened or effective – are at risk of reversal or of being dropped by incoming governments or new incumbents. Sadly, this can often be because the spending increases required are 'politically' unpalatable.

This the opposite of what is needed, especially when it comes to the complex and multidisciplinary breadth of what the *CRJ* covers. These critical areas are far too important to be swayed by partisan, often diametrically opposed ideological agendas. Preserving lives, the environment and economies should not be subject to petty politics, unquestioning tribalism or point scoring.

I was astounded at the naïveté of the comment. It is clearly wrong to think that 'politics' alone holds the solutions as the "risk picture darkens," (Bruce Mann, p8). At best, this view is misguided. At worst, it is profoundly ignorant of what is required to grasp the intricacies of – and interconnections within – this field.

Which is why *CRJ* is so proud of its independence, neutrality and lack of political commentary. Our reports and insights provide reasoned, nuanced analysis written by – and for – the people who are dedicated to improving the safety of individuals, communities, businesses and the governments they work for. Let's listen to the experts.

Stealing our concentration: p16



Gracie Broom

Emerging issues: p22



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Ukraine: p64



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Nigeria focus: p92



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Business discontinuity

Patrick Lagadec and **Matthieu Langlois** say that although standard business continuity is a lifeline in corporate risk management, moving towards preparing for unknown surprises and threats is imperative if organisations are to survive today's turbulent world

Teams have worked for years to open and fine tune the radar screen used to scan the risk horizon, detecting weak signals early and preparing contingency plans that can respond and stabilise any sector of the organisation that is confronted with a specific threat. The aim is rapid response to a list of well-studied, possible impacts. Such a continuous effort is, and will continue to be, crucial to keep identified risks under control and, in case of a sudden blow, to be able to come back to business as usual swiftly.

But we now have to sail beyond the edge of this world of normality. When the essence of risks and crises is mutating globally and rapidly, previous core references are no longer appropriate. The best practices of the past might even appear to be the problem, because the very foundation of the construction has imploded. Shocks become mega-shocks. Specific risks mutate into hybrid threats. Distinctive events cascade into systemic disruptions. Uncertainty gives way to the unknown. Many prefer to flee into the protective world of falsehood and alternative reality and denounce the very concept of leadership. This all presents us with a new ocean to navigate: discontinuity.

We are not prepared for such a voyage over the edge of our normal world. Our radar screens are suddenly out of date; they are tuned to detect weak signals so they cannot detect rogue signals, even when these are loud and clear. Our fast-response mechanisms suddenly freeze and people can become anaesthetised instead of taking action. Experts are brutally confronted with a void and see their solid knowledge disintegrate. Communication implodes into talking points, which no longer work when words and meanings are being crushed; the usual response is to search for perfect storytelling (which will not be successful). The leadership loses its vision, balance and levers. Business continuity (BC) drowns and waits for 'normal' threats. And many can only repeat: "This is shocking, nobody could have anticipated such a blow, the threat didn't play by the rules."

But we are not the ones who set the rules. The usual answers cannot dissolve the unasked questions. Gaining more BC skills will not work; neither more charts, more co-ordination rules nor more media training will help. There is no escape route: we must acknowledge and accept reality as it is. We must turn to a blank page, not the BC plan. We must think differently and invent creatively, not rely on more of the same.

The first step is to open our minds to questions, especially when we are the team best trained to offer answers to conventional disturbing events. We need the intelligence and energy of discoverers: those who can confront the core challenge – discontinuity – and accept a business plan that embeds the VUCA concept:

volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity.

Experience shows that the main obstacle is our fear to leave the (false) security of established visions, grammars and methods behind. The conventional rules are clear: "Do not ask a question if you do not already know the answer," when you must be able to lead and manage without stock answers. "Prepare emergency plans using the visions, organisations and means you have in store," when you have to envision plans for imaginative action. "Train your teams to apply and conform to the best techniques you have," and: "Beware any person who dares to ask unconventional questions." The usual rules – whether hidden or in plain view, but well ingrained by all – pave the way to terrible defeats. Discontinuity smashes false walls of protection. Something more is not the answer; something else must prevail.

Blind spots & traps

Let's be concrete and operational. Let's go beyond the standard charts, tables and simulation exercises (although these are useful and must be still practised for well-known and specific commonplace accidents). Conventional preparation is based on the concept of repetition: "Let's take a specific event and train to apply known responses to deal with it." The new challenge demands a new approach: "Let's work on something we don't know and train ourselves to detect unknown surprises, questions, blind spots and traps to be avoided," and then train for action in the unknown.

This perspective is difficult to accept, since the answers – and the key solutions – are no longer on the table, nor can they be found in a reassuring book. The usual move is to procrastinate. But reality is stubborn: the move must be made and the first step is vital. The longer you resist, the more you will suffer.

The first step is to convince executive leadership of the overarching necessity to lend new impetus to risk control and crisis management. The very survival of the organisation is at stake and senior leaders must be fully engaged in a new deal. A new vision and preparations for the emerging global challenges of a mutating world are required. This is the crucial step and certainly the most difficult, since firewalls of the mind are still resistant to the mutation this requires, becoming even more resistant as organisations run into storms. The usual line is: "You are going to frighten everyone," or "Don't be so pessimistic."

To overcome those fears, we have to make leaders feel that they have much more to gain than to fear from a carefully designed move. The best protection of their position is to go forward and inspire their organisation. This is the only way to secure their power and survival. We must acknowledge that it is still difficult to overcome the fears



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triggered by the idea of accepting the necessary leaps. Given the urgency of what must be accepted and enacted, we must concentrate creatively on those leaders and organisations willing to stay alive and proceed with them at speed.

The stakes are so high that, sadly, a sort of triage cannot be avoided. Taking a more optimistic view, we have to bet that the decisive move made by the best will convince the others before it's too late for them.

The battle of discontinuity will be won thanks to a series of open minds and know-how. In our experience, simple rules can be followed:

■ **Action:** Establish a group of people willing to be prepared for the issues at stake;

■ **Opening minds:** Prepare the group to envision and feel the new horizons of risks and crises – field studies should clarify the questions, traps, new grammars and methods to follow;

■ **Forget the answers, embrace the questions:** Split the group into sub-teams and get

them to close all books and charts. Take a blank piece of paper and invent disturbing scenarios – not the worst kind, but the most surprising. Let each team feel the difficulty of being in the crisis, in a world of questions, not one of answers. The lesson is

always the same – participants are happy to see their intelligence and creativity work beyond the artificial limits generally imposed in conventional crisis games. Thinking outside the box should be used as a sensemaking process;

■ **Confront the unknown:** Ask a team to work on one of the most surprising scenarios prepared by another team. The group is not asked to bring answers to the crisis, but to prepare a list of unconventional questions to qualify the mutating challenge, potential traps to avoid and possible options for the leadership;

■ **Engage top leaders:** Prepare leadership to interact with such teams, which should be invited to share the key ideas they would like to implement with senior leaders. The leaders must react and clarify whether they are better prepared to decide and set sail; they are also invited to pose the team supplementary questions to reflect upon. This combination of questions and stimulating co-operation helps the organisation as a whole to navigate the unknown, step by step;

■ **Rethink audits:** Embed these new frontiers into the core practices of risk control. As one of the authors underlined several years ago, audits must be enlarged decisively: “The focus has to shift towards issues without answers, leadership commitment, reflection groups next to CEO level and bold initiatives with outside stakeholders in order to learn, share and explore.” (*CRJ* 7:7); and

■ **Open new pathways:** A new initiative can then be decided upon. The key rule is to prepare each one to be creative. This does not require a great deal of time. On the contrary, training must be swift to stay aligned with the velocity and turbulence of the world.

We know that the challenge is more than difficult; it is strange, foreign and frightening. To overcome those barriers, we have developed a common experience to inspire and convince leaders and groups. We combine our

two cultures and practices – the in-depth accumulated experience in strategic intelligence and leadership, and the tactical direct action in uncharted, developing events.

We combine our reflections on how to build and develop training strategies to prepare and reinforce a wide array of organisations confronted with the most destabilising surprises and systemic shocks. And, from that common terrain, we suggest practical ways to promote the necessary new culture to empower bedrocks and tactical capacities at the same time.

The goal is to achieve proactive resilience. This kind of practical dynamic, with very specific and practical initiatives, paves the way towards agile organisations. Questions are welcomed and blind spots become an accepted and stimulating focus. Creative moves are actively searched for and then launched. Cohesion prevails in innovation efforts, far from collective blindness and flight. Collective resilience opens the future.

The urgency lies in the need to embed such a dynamic in the daily life of organisations. The aim is not to have a plan to deal with shocks, but to enable them to navigate in surprising environments – our new normality. Organisations must leave the terrain of fear and transform that negative force into creative

energy. The question is no longer how to anticipate the next impact, but to be prepared to be intelligent and collectively creative in a surprising world. Such a shift will be of most interest to young people; they will be fortified knowing that they are part of an organisation attuned to the world as it is today, ready to navigate the waters of our time, and not those of dead contexts.

The good news cannot be overestimated; even a tiny step in such a direction will bring decisive strength in our turbulent world and could be a competitive game changer. Uncharted waters and rogue waves dictate that business discontinuity vision and capacity become strategic imperatives.

The decisive step each leader should take and clarify to his or her staff and personnel is clear: “Our responsibility now lies in the unknown.”

Moreover, it is about performing in the unknown. Let's rise to the occasion. The unknown will not wait, but will destroy our capacity to cope if we are unprepared. Discontinuity is the new name of the game. Let's embrace this new normal and build business plans embedding VUCA realities.

Top leaders have a crucial role to play. The frontiers to cross are certainly difficult and clearly uncomfortable. If leaders can facilitate the necessary leaps and engage in collective efforts, they will reap the rewards.

CRJ

Training must be swift and creative to stay aligned with the velocity and turbulence of the world today

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