

# How to Conduct a Post-Crisis Evaluation

by Suzanne Folsom and Robert Garretson

**The coronavirus pandemic has put a strain on countless organizations, public and private, large and small. As a result, disruptions are happening faster and cutting deeper than any time in recent memory—and serving as the ultimate “pressure test” for an organization’s crisis plans and protocols.**

Ongoing regulatory actions, supply chain disruptions and devastating human consequences are challenging management teams as never before. Indeed, companies and governments alike are discovering in real time the effectiveness of—and gaps in—their crisis management plans. Such insight is invaluable for strengthening and guiding the enterprise’s crisis planning and response going forward.

Keeping both individuals and organizations healthy has pushed many people

to a new level of anxiety, exacerbated by out-of-control disease progression and resulting macroeconomic impacts. Amid this environment, people are acting under stress and time pressure they may not usually face during crisis response, making it even more critical to review the challenges faced and decisions made.

As the saying goes, “In the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity.” To benefit from such an opportunity, it is critical for all of those involved in the crisis response to engage in a process of honest



and transparent reflection and analysis known as an after-action evaluation, or what the U.S. Army calls a “hot wash.”

Today, most organizations spend the majority of their planning and preparation resources on addressing current and potential operational challenges. Far too many neglect to take the critical next steps to learn from the organization’s successes and failures after a crisis. In doing so, they needlessly discard a valuable resource for continuous improvement. Moreover, even when an organization does perform a crit-

ical lookback, it is often not used to maximum effect. The days and weeks after a crisis abates can provide leaders with a unique opportunity to identify the organization’s strengths that should be sustained or built upon and weaknesses that require improvement.

High-performance teams—including the U.S. Navy Fighter Weapons School (TOPGUN), elite special forces units and the emergency preparedness community—have long recognized that a hot wash is one of the most important aspects

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of every mission or crisis response. The immediate after-action discussions and evaluations of the organization's performance are where policies, decisions and implementation can be reconstructed and analyzed to determine what was done right, what was done wrong and what could be done better the next time (even if the next threat vector is different).

Debriefing after a major crisis is a challenge. Critically, a senior leader like the CEO must clearly articulate the value of this effort, stressing what the process is meant to accomplish. Participants need to understand that the post-crisis review is not intended to critique or grade success or failure. Instead, the process is meant to be a candid discussion and analysis of the

established, organizations should take the following steps:

### 1. Conduct a Baseline Analysis

At the outset, team members should individually answer a series of key questions before reviewing them as a group, including:

- Did we have a crisis plan in place? If not, why not? If yes, was it helpful or why was it not useful in this situation?
- Did we stick to the plan or did we improvise?
- What caused this variance?
- Did our response have the necessary flexibility to accommodate a crisis situation as it continued to evolve?
- If they were similarly affected, what did others in our industry do in response to the crisis, and what can we learn from their actions?
- What are the takeaways and lessons-learned that can help inform the company's crisis strategy and contingency planning for the future?

### 2. Honestly Assess Accountability

For the organization's long-term success, it is critical to embrace accountability during the debrief. Everyone, from the organization's senior leaders to junior staff, must be candid about their decisions and actions. It is important for every participant to understand that accountability during this review is about individuals assuming personal responsibility for the results of their choices. Rather than assigning blame or punishment, the organization should foster a constructive environment in which the team seeks solutions to any issues it encountered.

Organizations should seek an accurate understanding of the events that occurred and focus on any issues or problems, while de-emphasizing individual personal performance. Since the desired result is to drive improved organizational

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organization's actual performance during the crisis, either in keeping with or differing from the established crisis plan.

To be most effective, all participants must contribute insights, observations and questions without fear of critique or retaliation. The findings from a post-crisis review should not be used in performance evaluations, so participants should feel comfortable self-identifying the mistakes they made as well as those made by others across the organization. Ultimately, the evaluation should skew toward results-oriented solutions that identify options and conditions that the organization can successfully leverage in future crises.

Once the ground rules have been

performance during future crises, the focus needs to be on finding root causes for both successes and failures. The goal of this approach is to prevent mistakes from being repeated and to change the corporation's crisis management plan by incorporating lessons learned.

Recognizing that conversations during post-crisis evaluations may be uncomfortable, participants must check their egos (and their organizational rank) at the door. They must recognize that the uneasiness that comes with having their decisions and actions reviewed is minor

tion. Employees' willingness and ability to openly discuss pitfalls in performance is driven by the commitment of senior corporate leadership to create, emphasize and embrace a culture of commitment to accountability.

While it is wise to use discretion and be respectful of senior leaders, superficially handling their miscues robs the organization of important feedback. Even the most seasoned executives can benefit from learning how their decisions and actions influenced the organization's crisis response. When senior executives make



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when compared to the peril of repeating suboptimal practices during future crises. Every person or action is subject to the same scrutiny, regardless of hierarchy or job function.

A strong environment of accountability starts at the top with a company's most senior leaders so that it can cascade through the entire organiza-

tion. When senior executives make themselves vulnerable and own their personal decisions and actions, it encourages other participants to do so as well.

Each participant in the debrief must be prepared to accept praise and criticism, with equal interest in absorbing both. In the end, it is about organizational improvement and is not personal. The goal is to create and foster a learning environment,

and not point fingers or make excuses. An effective debrief is centered on the specific performance of the organization's leaders, including vertical and horizontal teamwork. It should not be the venue for defensive behavior or after-the-fact justifications for poor performance.

To foster greater accountability and help control some emotions in the assessment process, organizations may wish to have an external facilitator assist with the formal review conversations. Constructive feedback and recommendations for improved performance may be misread as finger-pointing if the individual whose performance is being discussed perceives that their superiors are dissatisfied or annoyed with their performance. If others sense tension in the room, it may discourage them from being forthcoming, reducing the ability to identify and solve problems and incorporate lessons learned.

### 3. Drive a Constructive Analysis

A well-executed retrospective drills down to identify specific opportunities to improve overall performance. Evaluate every aspect of the organization's performance during the crisis. Identify any breakdowns or flaws in the plans, processes, procedures and protocols. Take the time to ensure that all events have been reconstructed and analyzed to address integration issues such as inter-departmental or inter-organizational coordination, enterprise-wide leadership and communication.

For example, it is useful to ask whether additional internal or external resources would have been helpful, evaluate (perhaps with a survey conducted by a third party) whether stakeholders were satisfied with the content and pace of the communications they received, assess whether opportunities for assistance were missed due to poor relationships with government decision-makers or financial institutions, and identify the specific

stakeholders (investors, for instance) who may require additional attention to repair any bruised relationships.

While the post-crisis evaluation should be conducted as an inquiry-based event, in which each individual is free to question the events and the roles that they and others may have played, it should not be an inquisition. The growth of each team member is vital to the long-term success of the organization. Creating a constructive feedback loop is indispensable to enhance learning. The goal is to learn from other participants and hear new opinions about what can be changed to create continuous improvement.

Finally, it is important to preserve confidentiality. At the culmination of the debrief, ensure that whatever was covered during the session does not leave the room, aside from the information captured as part of the documented lessons learned.

### 4. Make the Evaluation Actionable

No part of an organization's performance during a crisis should be off-limits. Strike a balance and simultaneously cover big-picture strategic issues as well as specifics. If some facet of the crisis management strategy worked well, avoid simply patting each other on the back and moving on. Detail what worked well and why. Then, examine how to use those "wins" to further refine the overall crisis management plan and incorporate these practices in the future.

Even events that transpired out of sheer luck are worth analyzing to ensure that any learning points are appropriately captured. It is essential to recognize that significantly more lessons are learned from errors than from successes, so encountering problems is fantastic for brainstorming opportunities for improvement. If the organization failed to accomplish a task, there is probably a lesson to be learned.

Institutionalizing the practice of

conducting a robust and thorough post-crisis evaluation can undoubtedly improve an organization's crisis management plan as well as its execution. Given that the most valuable lessons often emerge from the most stressful situations, experience is an excellent teacher. Failing to review and benefit from its lessons is truly a lost opportunity. Having already paid the price for enduring the crisis, organizations should seize any chance to improve the crisis preparation and become stronger, more resilient enterprises going forward. ■

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