Crisis Management Essay, Research Paper

Crisis Management

Rosa Beth Moss Canter identifies six issues that surface in any crisis. Any or all of these issues will impair the involved organization or persons ability to respond to the crisis at hand. They apply to situations ranging from individual interactions to corporate functions. For the purpose of example, I will identify them in the joint operation of various government agencies in the disastrous takedown of the Branch Davidian complex at Mt. Carmel, TX.

Internal Politics Interfere with Teamwork

The first place this issue arises is when the BATF decided to serve a warrant on David Koresh and his followers en masse and fully tactical, rather than incorporating Jack Harwell, the local sheriff. There had been a lengthy investigation prior to the warrant service, so they must have known that the local sheriff had some level of personal ties (trust) with the commune residents. Proper teamwork at the very onset of the standoff might have avoided the whole incident. Harwell knew these people. He worked and had contact with them regularly. There was already an established trust and familiarity that could ve been tapped for a peaceful resolution, yet was ignored.

Another breakdown of teamwork occurred within the ranks of the F.B.I. after they took over the operation. The wedge of distrust driven between the negotiations team and the HRTs is a somewhat natural development if these two groups are not used properly together. By its definition, the negotiations team is supposed to build trust with the suspects with the eventual goal of peaceful release of the hostages. Conversely, the HRT is designed to eliminate the suspect as quickly and efficiently as possible, thus freeing the hostages. If these two units are working simultaneously to the same goal, there will be a breakdown of teamwork because they will begin to view each other as the enemy. These teams should be used consecutively. The negotiators should have a go at it and if, after an adequate period of time they are unsuccessful, the HRT does their thing. The only way these units should be used in conjunction is for the negotiators to manipulate the suspects into the best positions for takedown. If this is the tac, then they should be fresh, not having spent excessive time bonding with the suspects.

Lack of Communication Across Functions

Often this issue appears as the result of a decaying structure of teamwork. The best evidence of this at Mt. Carmel is, again, within the F.B.I. Once the trust and teamwork between the HNs and the HRTs was splintered, their communications also crumbled. In fact, their lines of communications deteriorated so much that eventually David Koresh (and Steve) became their mediator. HRT was doing things that the HNs didn t even know about until Steve started raving about it. At the same time, the HNs are promising and granting demands of which the HRTs had no knowledge.

Excessive Rules and Bureaucratic Trappings

The multi-facetted machine of the U.S. government is enormous and intricate. From President Clinton to Janet Reno all the way down to the individual agents of the HRTs, there are hundreds of people through which information and orders must flow. We are all familiar with two concepts that make this pyramid structure prone to disaster. One is the grade school gossip game. With each additional mouth in the chain, the word changes minutely. The other is the concept that the more working parts an object has, the more likely it is to break down. Between six different agencies, each with similar goals yet somewhat varied SOPs and the individual opinions and emotions of each agent/soldier involved, it is no wonder that this operation did not go as according to plan.

Stressing Procedures Over Thinking

SOP for almost any tactical unit, military or law enforcement, is that the first goal on scene is to eliminate the threat. Following this procedure means neutralizing the guard dogs (pets) at Mt. Carmel as the initial approach is made. However, thinking would entail realizing that a) the dogs were pets to the Davidians, 2) killing them would certainly be construed as an act of (unwarranted) aggression, and furthermore, maybe there was another way to eliminate the canine threat without lethal force. There is testimony indicating that the first shots fired were to kill the dogs. In such a high-tension situation, gunshots, regardless of at whom or why they were fired, are sure to ignite the situation which it did.

The most obvious disregard for common sense in deference to procedure is the FBI’s treatment of Koresh and his people as if they were standard terrorists/hostages. The recognition of the Davidians as possible martyrs or just plain old nut cases should have changed the direction of attack for both the HNs and the HRTs. You can t negotiate and promise things to Jesus Christ, he already has everything except an audience. You also cannot flex your tactical might on Jesus Christ and expect Him to cower and surrender. He is bulletproof and his people are going to a better place should they die. The F.B.I. standing strictly by procedure (that didn t accurately fit the scenario), almost certainly guaranteed the violent destructive outcome they ended with. Of course, whether or not this was their intention is the conspiracy theory of the 90s.

Atmosphere of Insecurity and Fear

The internal structures of the U.S. government and military agencies lend themselves to the idea of Shit rolls down hill. Add to that the concept of always finding a scapegoat that is prevalent in U.S. politics and society and you have a natural atmosphere for creating insecurity and fear. From the team leader who follows procedure over thinking to cover his own ass from the rules and bureaucratic trappings all the way up to the President who pretends to have no knowledge of what was going down (he fears the people). Primary example of this is when the two big-cheeses, Janet Reno (AG) and Byron Sage (SSRA-FBI) start playing the blame game and responsibility tag as to who gave the go-code and on what (false?) information that decision was made. Once the two top shots start dodging bullets, the example is set. Leadership has spoken by action and testimonies begin to change, videotapes disappear, and conspiracy theories start to bloom.

This issue of insecurity and fear also has a physical aspect to those in the trenches (or tanks). The insecurity of charging in only to find your support (tactical or righteous) pulled from under you and the very real fear, which was extinguished for several agents, of death. This issue, in both aspects, leads to the final issue prevalent in crisis situations.

People Try to Hide Problems and Resist Change

Janet Reno says she was told by the F.B.I. that the children were being (sexually) abused. Byron Sage says he never gave her that information. The BATF claims that Koresh and his group were reclusive and dangerous suspects in a federal investigation for possession of illegal firearms. Nine days before the raid, two undercover agents visited the compound to engage in target practice with Koresh and two other men. They fired both AR-15s and assorted handguns to include the sharing of the agents personal weapons. This report was buried for years after the incident. Koresh informs the FBI that once he finishes writing his explanation of the Seven Seals, he would come out peacefully. The FBI already had an assault plan finalized. Whether Koresh was lying (probably) or not doesn t matter, what does is that when the FBI submits the op plan to Reno for approval, no mention is made of the offer to surrender. The wheels were in motion and to change course would cause possible embarrassment for the FBI.

There will be crisis as long as humans walk the earth. We create most of it and, ironically, our survival as individuals and as a species depends on how well we resolve our own snafus. We have an endless history of examples of poor leadership in dealing with crisis; however, there are a few we can look to as inspiration. The resolution of the Grenada hostage crisis by the USMC would (of course) be an example of proper planning, action and leadership. A good leader, and we are all potential leaders, will know the SOPs, have a well-conceived plan, and yet be flexible enough to react to unforeseen changes. It is not enough to prepare for and resolve the crisis; we must also prepare for these six issues that would prevent us from reaching our goals.