Training Civil Servants for Crisis Management

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This article describes and reflects upon actual experiences in training leaders in the Swiss government. Five thematic areas that are fundamental to preparing a government for leadership in a crisis are presented. Additionally, planning the training, the use of expertise and factors which facilitate or hinder strategic learning are discussed. The author recommends the development of a model learning strategy for governments, with the assistance of the European Academy for Crisis Management.

Introduction[1]

A key question in the field of crisis management pertains to the political reality of training for crisis management on the government level. Although it has been said that training is a key for effective crisis preparation, the apparent existence of factors that hinder training leads the practitioners to wonder if effective training is at all possible. Recent experience with training leaders in the Swiss government has highlighted some of the questions and responses that can be utilised in developing a learning strategy which may be useful to the international community and its newly established European Academy for Crisis Management.

Should we Train?

Switzerland has moved from Cold War general defence exercises of the 1980s to a newer approach in 1992 which focused on national security policy issues. A week-long exercise in 1997 was the start of the more modern Strategic Leadership Training Program.[2] It addresses many of the new challenges the government faces in the broad area of national policy. Crisis management preparation and training in the political realm is framed by the ever-present question: Can we, in the turbulent situation of the so-called new world order, prepare for the many different types of crises? Has training a meaning and value to government employees? The answers from civil servants themselves are mixed: yes, no, maybe. For the training professionals, the 'yes' reasons are clearly the more compelling.

The 'Yes's' Reason

Crisis management is essentially the ability to solve problems by adapting very quickly to a fast changing situation. While governmental institutions are historically very slow to affect changes, experience has shown that training can be a rapid and efficient way of improving change management within government. Training prepares the group mind-set to cope with new possibilities, provides structures that frame the decision-making process, and offers learning tools such as checklists which can later serve as the procedural backbone during a crisis. Training practitioners take lessons learned *after* a crisis as valuable inputs for leadership *before* the next crisis, as well as for preventing a crisis.

The following example shows how training can assist a government in preparing for crises. In 1997, the exercise 'The Day After ... in Cyberspace ... in Switzerland' illuminated a series of shortcomings in the Swiss government for preparing and coping with Information Warfare. As a result, an ad hoc group of participants of the exercise assisted representatives of the government and private industry in the formation of an Information Assurance Foundation which became operational in 1999. One of the Foundation's missions is to create an IT early warning system. In addition, the Foundation is co-operating with the Staff of Strategic Leadership Training to prepare a Workshop in 2000, and a major event in 2001 on the topic of Leadership in, after and before a crisis brought about by disturbances in the IT infrastructure. Another result of the 1997 exercise was the formation of the Joint Staff for Information Assurance, set up by the Strategic Information Agency to assist the Federal Council in the field of Critical Infrastructure Protection.

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The 'No's' Reasons

There have been many reasons voiced for not training governmental institutions for crisis management. The training professionals in Switzerland heard loud, defensive voices asserting that each crisis is so unique that it is not possible to prepare for them. Standing Operating Procedures and checklists are useless. Since crises come unexpectedly, it is better not to train and mistakenly think that one is ready. Isn't it better to keep an open mind, to be adaptive and creative in a crisis? Since most crises resolve themselves, why spend the time and money? There is a constant and ongoing crisis in governing nowadays, so that everyday management of governmental affairs equals crisis management for which no special training should be needed. *No time – No need – No money.*

Behind this barrage of NO reasons lies the simple observation that most civil servants in high positions are reluctant to expose themselves to a training process. They do not want to admit what they do not know and they are fearful of making mistakes that could jeopardise their careers. While every civil servant would gladly come to an inspiring, high-level workshop with informative presentations and discussion, leading a crisis management team in a scenario-based simulation game is a totally different story. Thus, the *real* 'no' is psychological and emotional, and difficult to reason with.

To alleviate some of the fear and to increase the level of participation, training professionals in Switzerland arranged such safeguards as barring media from the exercise games, planning scenarios with a reduced level of surprise, operating on the philosophy of 'no fault learning,' and providing extensive preparation of the participants before training. The participation of some of the Federal Council members, the Swiss 'presidents,' served as an incentive for every other level of government employee. In the final analysis, however, it was outside pressure, or the prospect of outside pressure, and not insight, that led to the acceptance of training by Swiss civil servants: a string of 'case studies' of real crises during which the performance of the government was less then optimal led to bad press and parliamentary reprimands.

Because of the resistance encountered, achieving participation in an exercise for civil servants may seem to be the highest hurdle that crisis management training professionals face. Having won the battle of attendance, however, the professional must be ready and understand what to teach, when and how to teach it.

Content Themes

The Swiss experience in Strategic Leadership Training has shown that the following five thematic areas, presented in form of key questions, are fundamental to preparing governmental leadership in a crisis. The answers form the backbone of the eventual content of training, e.g. the *needs assessment* for training and preparation.

1. *Early detection* Is there a form of crisis detection, an early warning system or Issues Management cell in place to draw the attention of the highest governing body to potential political crises? What constitutes a political crisis to this government? Who should take the lead? In Switzerland, the Federal Council's Security Group, composed of the Ministers of Defence, Foreign Affairs, and Justice & Police, holds the responsibility for crisis detection, management, and evaluation for security issues. However, there is also a Federal Intelligence Agency. Its responsibilities have been similarly defined; the agency is now in the process of re-organisation, a common governmental response to role overlaps. Although every country's government has its own structures, the task remains the same: how to delineate clearly the responsibility for crisis detection when there are duplicating, and often competing, bodies, and how to assure co-ordination and co-operation?

2. *Preparedness* What is the level of structural/functional, organisational/procedural preparedness of the government? Is there a crisis management organisation which reacts to the first alert, to the first indications of a crisis? In the Cold War period, general defence readiness was the required preparation. This level of preparation, however, has its limitation in the face of the diverse threats of the 21st century. Switzerland now even questions its need for a large and costly army, and has recently dismantled its centralised organisation for general defence. In addition to the armed forces, the Swiss have organisations and procedures to respond to specific security threats such as nuclear disaster, natural disasters, hydroelectric installation ruptures, and hostage taking. The questions for training remains: how to be prepared for those yet undefined security threats? Are we prepared for combined compounded crises?

3. *Testing and monitoring* Are there regular readiness tests? Are crisis management exercises run on a regular basis (once a year)? Does the possibility exist to assess individual members and staffs of crisis management

cells? When and by whom are checks made? If comparisons are made during crisis management exercises in an international context, the *benchmarking* results may be utilised to plan further training. Do we stress the need for developing scenarios, contingency plans, 'maybe checklists' or conditional decisions?

4. *Communications* What structures assure the transfer of information and communication during a crisis? How are these structures managed? Are communications specialists integrated into crisis management cells? Is an infrastructure in place for the onslaught of the media? Are networking and trust building with the media in non-crisis times a priority? Is communications training available for the crisis management leaders?

5. *Mindset* Is crisis prevention, crisis preparation, and crisis management part of a government's cultural mindset? Is there an understanding of the need for training with scenarios, of the necessity of practising responsiveness to unknown crises, to crafting strategies before crises?

Planning the Training

An assessment of training needs helps to determine the actual content, as well as the timing of the training. An objective approach based on what should be done, in what order, and in what time space is not always workable for civil servants who have their own institutional priorities and administrative hurdles. Thus, the assessment of what training is needed must be partially subjective too, based on what the participating departments or individuals feel to be lacking. To keep the program on target, however, the training professional must have developed a long-term learning strategy, broken into areas of what can be done immediately, what can be accomplished in the near term, and what in the future. In Switzerland, we have developed a five-year Strategic Leadership Training program which we liken to a train. The driving force (the locomotive) of the program contains the three objectives of providing crisis management methodology, teaching styles of strategy crafting, and developing leadership skills. The specific training segments (the wagons) are constructed every year according to a rolling planning process that is tuned to the needs of the administration (the passengers). A careful evaluation of each training segment and an assessment of the learning that has taken place indicate which direction the 'train' must next take.

Because crises do not wait until governments are ready for them, certain priorities should be on a teaching agenda, such as training in the methodology of systematic decision-making during a crisis. The real crises that inevitably present themselves can be a valuable source of teaching material, because evaluation of performance in a real situation, using the concept of 'lessons learned', is a very effective technique. Unfortunately, this fast and cost-effective way of raising awareness of how to improve crisis management is not popular with decision makers, who resist evaluating their own performances.

The ever-present complaint from administration officials of having no time to spend on training may be met with flexible time structures, such as late afternoon or evening sessions, and training segments that are compact in content. High-placed government officials demand a tangible result for any time invested. Each training segment must therefore have a definitive, realisable goal. The Swiss have found that short, cost-efficient, and product-oriented segments are the most successful.

Learning Styles: The Use of Experience

Getting participants to attend relevant crisis management and leadership training courses does not assure that learning takes place. Experience in training civil servants has made the Swiss training professionals aware of the importance of differing learning styles and learning perspectives. Understanding the conditions and restraints operating on high-level civil servants is extremely important to designing successful courses.

The Strategic Leadership Training has observed some distinctly preferred learning orientations. At the top echelon of government, there is a desire to depend on internal resources for learning, and to have limited exposure to outside expertise. This may be due in part to the classic tendency of high officials to see knowledge as something an individual possesses by right of position and experience. The resulting opinion is that the various administrative departments have a collective knowledge base ready to be tapped for training purposes. While this conviction may have some truth to it, professionals usually find the knowledge base uncoordinated and difficult to access. The civil servants who have no time to be trained also have no time to help with the training.

A second factor that contributes to the reluctance of civil servants to welcome outside expertise is a corollary to their demand for a return for time invested: the highest officials want training that furnishes results immediately applicable or beneficial to their everyday reality.

Using real government issues in training, however, raises the concerns of confidentiality, of the need to safeguard information touching upon national interests, and of the need to protect the participants from embarrassing exposure to the weaknesses for which they are in training. This obliges the training professional to provide adequate assurances that outside experts will not gain access to details of the training exercises. In some cases, the design of the exercises must mirror the hierarchy of the participants and must strictly control who has access to what information, who participates, and who sees the results.

To deal with the concerns that cause government officials to turn inward and wish to avoid using outside expertise is of utmost importance for training professionals who must prevail in their plans to use both internal and external experts. What is learned using only internal resources will be severely limited. The emergence of highly complex challenges on the global level and a new breed of international problems requires an expanded approach to national crisis management and problem solving, one that creates solutions that are networked to the international community. While promoting the case for using outside expertise, the professional must develop a cadre of experts who can and will contribute to training of the highest quality. The quality of crisis management and leadership training now available at the international level is convincing even to the most obstinate government official. It is also important to stress the potentials of this expert network in the event of real crises.

In the past four years, the Swiss Strategy Leadership Training program has successfully called on the international community to partici- pate in its crisis management training courses. An impressive list of experts and representatives from international think tanks, academia, non- governmental organisations, politics, and the private sector have helped with the following:

- A crisis management simulation game in an international Peace Support Operation setting. In a complex situation, hostage-taking of a group of individuals from four European countries was simulated. Ultimatums were directed at each of the four countries by organised crime, using cyber attacks and one chemical attack. Members from the highest levels of government had to cope with the simulated threats to Switzerland.
- A strategy crafting workshop on oppor- tunities and risks of new societal and technological developments and trends to modern societies.
- A crisis management and strategy crafting exercise in the field of information warfare

called 'The day after ... in Cyberspace ... in Switzerland,' in collaboration with the RAND Corporation.
- A workshop (Swiss Games 2000) on developing a crisis management strategy for the Balkans based on a scenario developed by the Strategic Research Department of the United States Center for Naval Warfare Studies, and the Geneva Center for Security Policy.

Institutional Memory

One of the constraints of training within a government is the constant restructuring and remodelling of the administrative structures. A typical government responds to new challenges with organisational changes, setting up new organisations and new procedures which are sometimes doomed from the onset. In these situations, the training must adapt to the shifting political and hierarchical reality; the learning curve may be compromised by the energy siphoned off in the internal remodelling. Additionally, there is a need to assure that knowledge does not leave with the individuals or changing structures: the development of a method to assure memory of knowledge in strategic matters is pivotal to the future success of crisis management.

Factors that Facilitate or Hinder Strategic Learning

Every practitioner will find in his course of training a large number of factors that facilitate or hinder strategic training. The following have been important in the Swiss Strategic Leadership Training program:

Compartmental thinking In an administration, issues are often staked off and fiercely guarded within departments. This poses a problem to learning and crisis prevention, because the increasing complexity of political issues makes maintaining boundaries a difficult task. The crisis management training strategy must work towards interdisciplinary thinking, encouraging sharing and transdepartmental thinking. Joint staffs or task forces formed around issues can be helpful techniques.

Benchmarking, a method of comparing one's performance with another, can facilitate strategic training and crisis preparation by raising aware- ness of any performance gap. Comparison is also a natural motivating force. There is an increasing number of resources available to the training professional on how to do benchmarking.

Restricted organisational curiosity and openness complicates the task of training administration officials for crisis management. Even if a hypothetical scenario is used in a crisis simulation game, the willingness of civil servants to 'play around' with new ideas and policies is very limited. The group-think phenomenon can quickly punish people who try something new ('t Hart, 1994). The climate of openness is further suffocated by tight internal rules regarding who participates at which level, from which department, and at which training. One possible solution would be the introduction to crisis management training course of the 'court fool', someone with the freedom to express wildly differing opinions and options openly.

Involved leadership and allocated resources can be called the most essential factors that facilitate strategic training. As it is in the private sector with the involvement of the CEO, the participation and backing by the Federal Council in Strategic Leadership Training and crisis preparation sends a clear signal to the entire administration how important learning is. Leaders can use their high position to demonstrate that they understand and have learned what they want their directors and general secretaries to learn. Unfortunately, leaders often miss this opportunity, having failed to understand that learning is an investment and not a cost. The development of an enhanced capability of crisis management cannot be accomplished without a significant and ongoing commitment of resources.

Summary Recommendation

As seen in this article, providing crisis management training for a government administration is a tough job, but one which all countries must undertake. The newly established European Academy for Crisis Management could assist national efforts by serving as a forum to exchange ideas, and by spearheading the development of a model learning strategy for governments. Additionally, the Academy could co-ordinate international co-operation during specific training exercises, drawing on the expertise of its members.

Notes

1. Thanks are due to Rebecca Carrel for her assistance in the writing of this article.
2. Carrel, L.F. (1998), *Bericht des Projektleiters über die Strategische Führungsübung 1997*, Bern; Carrel, L.F. (1998), *Strategic Leadership Training in Switzerland*, Video Production 582, Armeefilmdienst Bern; Carrel, L.F. (1999), *Strategische Führungsausbildung. Formation à la conduite stratégique, Formazione alla condotta strategica*, Concept 1999–2003, Schweizerische Bundeskanzlei Bern; www.sfa.admin.ch

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