

“Epidemic in Switzerland”: Description of a Strategic Leadership Exercise by the Swiss Government

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On January 20, 2005, a national strategic leadership exercise was held in Switzerland. The theme being the first day response to an epidemic outbreak. Special attention was paid to cooperation and coordination among the various federal departments, the definition of responsibilities within the leadership organisation, and the level of information and communication that served the leadership process, and how these elements played out under time pressure, during a crisis situation and within a federal and international setting. The evaluation of this exercise concludes that short term crisis management could be considered as adequate but strategic decision making was mostly absent. The value of this large scale exercise is considered positive for the preparation on crisis management because of heightened political attention which for example is visible in the swift implementation of the recommendations of the evaluation.

Strategic leadership exercises in Switzerland

In Switzerland, large-scale strategic leadership exercises are carried out on a regular basis. The goal being testing the effectiveness of the command and control ability of the federal government system in overcoming complex crisis situations. This system can be characterized as follows: In general, each ministry has a core staff with crisis management capability that can be extended according to need and be reinforced by the operations staff of other bodies directly affected or specialists placed on stand-by. These existing structures should enable the government to move quickly into the decision-making process using existing or ad hoc task forces (the “free play” concept).

In November 2003, the Swiss Federal Council (the executive body with seven members) officially commissioned the Strategic Leadership Training (SLT) unit of the federal chancellery to conduct a leadership exercise at the federal level, choosing January 2005 as the target date.

In the 1970s, Switzerland began to run week-long general defense exercises on civil-military themes and issues of security policy. In 1995 the Federal Council mandated a change in the training emphasis to ‘Civil Challenges to Modern Society’. Therefore, the weeklong exercise of 1997 addressed such issues as leadership in a terrorist crisis, risk dialogue in modern society, and new challenges brought on by the information revolution. The last

topic featured a war game called “The day after in Cyberspace . . . in Switzerland”. Following this, strategic leadership training was offered on a shorter, more regular basis, drawing themes from three categories: crisis management, strategy development, and leadership competencies. The large-scale training of 2005 is the first one whose name, “Epidemic in Switzerland” actually defines the exercise. Both the 1997 and the 2005 exercises were documented on film; both are available in English and can be ordered through www.sfa.admin.ch. The federal council has decided that strategic leadership exercises will in the future be held at regular 4 years intervals.

The goal of the January 2005 exercise was specified as to test the federal government’s command and control system, specifically the organisation, the processes and measures in place to respond to crises. Special attention should be paid to the cooperation and coordination among the various federal departments, the definition of responsibilities within the leadership organisation, and the level of information and communication that served the leadership process, and how these elements played out under time pressure, during a crisis situation and within a federal-international setting.

The target group for the 2005 exercise thus was the executive branch of the Swiss government, meaning the full Federal Council and its management organisation. The exercise was specifically

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designed for the Federal Council's staff under the direction of the Federal Chancellor, along with the staff organisations of the federal departments, their special and emergency task forces, the directors of the offices and agencies, intelligence services, early warning units and those responsible for information and communication across the executive branch and its departments. In all, some 500 people in management positions took part in the exercise.

Choice of the theme of the exercise

Given the experiences in the spring of 2003 with SARS, an example of a mysterious new disease, and the high probability of an outbreak of old, known diseases such as influenza, the Conference of Secretaries General (the chiefs of staff of all federal departments) agreed to the recommendation of the SLT unit to base the training on a scenario involving an epidemic. This scenario presented a very realistic challenge in the field of public health and touched sensitive political issues having to do with securing national existence and defending national interests. Infectious diseases and the epidemics that may develop from them can threaten national governments and the international community with short, medium and long-term consequences for society, the economy, and the state, and for federal and international relations. The fight to control the first global epidemic of the 21st century lasted five months before it was won. "SARS was a warning", said Gro Harlem Brundtland, the director-general of the WHO. For a description of the dangers an outbreak of avian flu possesses see for example Thorson and Ekdahl (2005).

Because the topic of an outbreak of an epidemic was acknowledged to be highly relevant in today's world, the entire federal government took part in the strategic leadership exercise. All seven Federal Councillors, the Federal Chancellor and the government spokesman participated in the complex decision-making process, with the President of the Confederation and Federal Chancellor assuming leading roles from the outset. All departments were involved either as primary or secondary actors. This level of participation was a first in the history of strategic leadership training in Switzerland.

The scenario

The scenario of the exercise was made up as follows. A rapid increase in the number of flu cases was observed in Switzerland during the second week of January. Of the 31,000 sufferers, 629 had to be hospitalised, and several dozen have already died of the illness. On January 19, 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO)

Influenza Collaborating Centre Laboratory in London identified a new strain of influenza from a virus isolated in Switzerland the previous December. This virus had been transmitted from pigs to humans, and had the capacity to be passed from human to human. Projections of the Federal Office of Public Health and other experts indicated that if no mitigating actions were taken in the next several weeks, up to a quarter of the population could contract the illness, resulting in the deaths of several thousand people. At the starting point of the exercise, it is already too late to contain the spread of the flu virus, which therefore risks becoming a pandemic. An urgent letter from the WHO requests an official reply from the Swiss government by 16:00 (4pm) on January 20, detailing the leadership's plans for short, medium and long term measures to contain the epidemic originating in Switzerland and beginning to spread to the rest of Europe.

This scenario required the involvement of the staffs of the Federal Council and of the ministries to undertake a careful situation analysis, to select an intermediate strategy, and to coordinate short and medium-term communications measures. It challenged the country's leadership not only to tackle the immediate threat, but also to think ahead proactively on a strategic level and take action. The severity of the described situation necessitated that an extraordinary session of the Federal Council be convened.

Some aspects of the organisation of the exercise

In total, some 150 people were involved in the preparation, execution and evaluation of the exercise under the direction of the Strategic Leadership Training unit. In addition to the overall direction provided by the SLT unit, there was a Strategic Leadership Commission in which all ministries were represented and an external advisory board that served as consultants during the exercise. The advisory group consisted of approximately 50 representatives from Parliament, the cantons, the media, the science and business communities, and international experts who acted as 'the outside world' during the exercise, available to those participating in the exercise for consultation and joint problem solving. The composition of the advisory board was determined by summer 2004 and made known to all participants in advance of the exercise. During the exercise, the advisory board also acted as a B-team with the task of drafting possible alternative solutions to the problems confronting the federal administration.

Numerous experts were involved in the development process of the scenario that, along with the planning of the preparatory meetings, comprised the bulk of the project organisers' work in

the first half of 2004. To reduce costs, it was decided to prepare the scenario in-house for the first time. The work was extremely laborious as expert knowledge had to be drawn together from a wide range of fields, necessitating a large number of interviews, research and consultations. The knowledge emerging from the workshops of the first preparatory meeting also had to be incorporated. Assumptions and opinions about the scenario were at times controversial, needing time for fact verification and resolution. Because real epidemic warnings from the WHO intensified during the course of 2004, the scenario and the entire mechanism of the exercise had to be continually revised and adapted to the real world situation in the second half of the year.

In the past, training exercises for the federal administration were always held at central locations and usually in secure underground facilities. January 2005 was the first time that a large-scale strategic leadership exercise was conducted from decentralised locations and facilities, as would be the case in a real crisis. In order to make sure that all participants had access to the same level of information from their given location at the right time, the project organisers used an existing secure communication platform: an Electronic Situation Display (ESD).

This ESD is a web-based, database-supported communication platform developed and operated by the Swiss National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) and is designed to support task forces and command and control bodies. The system has been used to support operations for many years in the field of civil protection and is also used during special events (such as the World Economic Forum) as a management support tool.

Philosophy of preparation

A key element in the process of preparation of the exercise was the involvement of all actors. This aimed at stimulating the preparation on crisis management during a longer period of time instead of having only a one day test of the federal crisis management organisation.

The administrators who would be exercised were invited to a series of five preparatory workshops offered during 2004 in order to exchange experiences and form networks, as well as to ready themselves in general for the exercise. The SLT unit thus aimed to include the bodies to be tested and the relevant staff as partners in the planning of the exercise right from the start, thereby introducing them to the theme of the exercise and the preparation for outbreak management. Participants contributed opinions about details such as the selection of facilities.

The purpose intended by the systematic preparation was to enhance the training effect of the full exercise. In fact, this approach resulted in the

development of broad support and acceptance for the project. Although the jointly conducted preparation had the effect of limiting the surprise element of the exercise, it was felt that the newly created networks generated positive synergies. Operating under the desire that everyone obtains usable benefits from the forthcoming exercise, the SLT unit planned workshops to increase sustainable knowledge transfer and to promote growth in the participants' understanding that they comprised a "Learning Organisation". In premise, the preparation would increase the participants' motivation and interest to practically apply their newly acquired knowledge.

To summarize, the philosophy of the SLT unit is that an exercise should not be seen as a test, but rather as a joint effort to improve the leadership systems' abilities to continually adapt to new circumstances and demands. Experience has shown that not only is there a greater willingness to carry out the exercise, but that there is also a greater willingness to accept and apply the lessons learned from the event than is the case if the exercise is a surprise test (lessons not only learned but implemented).

Preparatory events in 2004 and their results

Five events arranged in 2004 gave participants the opportunity to engage in a learning process to prepare themselves optimally.

The topics of the preparatory events were:

Basic knowledge of epidemics: The first event established the basic knowledge base about epidemics. Eleven specialist-led workshops dealt with the wide ramifications an epidemic can have, and included specific information on microbiology, epidemiology, zoonosis, as well as the probable consequences of an epidemic on the economy, finances, transportation, politics, the legal system, and international relations.

Dealing with crises: The second event utilized the example of SARS to present an outline of crisis management at the international level (WHO and EU) and at the federal and cantonal levels to deliver insights useful for future management in crises, including how to recognize typical aspects of modern crises.

Communication in crises: The large number of attendees in this workshop indicated that the issue of communication is highly relevant. Several interactive workgroups led by communications experts clarified the expectations and challenges of communication during crises, and formulated strategies for effective communication on the federal level in the event of an epidemic.

Leadership systems: The objective of the fourth event was to assess the readiness of all the federal government's leadership systems in view of the

upcoming exercise, and adjust the preparation if needed.

Test run: Toward the end of 2004, a test run checked the functional efficiency of the entire infrastructure and means of technical communication, particularly the Electronic Situation Display, and ensured that those taking part in the exercise were familiar with the systems. Further adjustments were made and additional training offered to the users.

All of the results and findings from the five preparatory events were documented and made available on the government's intranet to those concerned.

All of the events were well attended with about 100 people each, and achieved the objective of familiarising all relevant persons in the administration with the topic of an "epidemic" and with the framework of the upcoming exercise. All of the ministries were represented at these events, as well as the cantons and many business, science and international organisations such as the EU and the WHO. The evaluation of the events revealed that on average 89% of those questioned were satisfied to very satisfied with the events, 85% believed that the exercise organisers and the Federal Council were committed to the exercise, that expectations regarding the participants' roles had been clearly formulated and that nearly 79% of the participants gained new knowledge from the experiences.

The evaluation of each of the preparatory events was based on an anonymous questionnaire given to each participant. The responses were analyzed internally by the training team and made public on the government's intranet. The results of the evaluation of the preparatory meetings are published (a) in the final report page 16–17, appendix D page 1–20 (b) on a CD-ROM. The CD is included in the printed final report or can be ordered separately through www.sfa.admin.ch.

It was therefore concluded that the following three goals of the preparatory meetings had been achieved:

- (1) Establish a joint learning process in which the development, exchange, and application of know-how and competences could occur;
- (2) Facilitate network building;
- (3) Create the best conditions for the success of the exercise by developing strengths and learning from weaknesses.

E-day

The "Epidemic in Switzerland" scenario was presented in two stages in accordance with RAND¹ methodology as follows:

At an orientation event on January 13, 2005 representatives of operations staffs were shown a "documentary" film and given a written portion of the scenario describing the progression of the epidemic up to December 31, 2004. Two fictional news reports recorded by the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation forecast the possible evolution of the epidemic during February and March 2005. Confronted by such information before the actual exercise day, participants were made attentive to aspects of leadership before a crisis. Knowledge about how the early events had been managed enabled them to address the issues of early recognition and early warning, precautionary measures for crisis prevention and preparatory measures for eventual crisis management. The orientation underscored any need for last-minute training or for urgent measures.

The primary exercise day was set for January 20, 2005. For the major actors involved, the work began a day earlier on January 19 with the delivery of the WHO request to the Swiss government. All other participants were informed on the actual day of the exercise of the developments and events of the scenario occurring between the 1st and 20th of January. Beginning at 7:00 in the morning, information on the situation was posted on the Electronic Situation Display. Also, the participants received additional problems, assignments and tasks in the field of crisis management, as well as all the necessary documentation needed for the exercise via the Electronic Situation Display. Subsequently they had to act on their own initiative and in real time to grasp the problems of the crisis, find solutions, reach decisions and implement them or ensure their implementation. The core questions were, of course: Which is the right way out of the crisis? What strategies are needed in order to successfully overcome the worst of the crisis as quickly as possible and implement the necessary measures? What communication strategies have to be drawn up and executed?

Observation and Evaluation

The evaluation of the leadership exercise drew from a range of evaluation methodologies and sources. Designated observers for the evaluation closely watched the activities occurring during January 19 and 20. Divergent opinions and sources naturally resulted in a heterogeneous picture of how, what and why things played out as they did.

The evaluation of the strategic leadership exercise was based on the work of a special committee which functioned foremost as an observation unit tracking the unfolding of different activities in the many locations. Using observation checklists and depending

on the team's guidelines discussed for collecting qualitative data, the team members focused on the participants' reactions and the general process of the exercise. All "products" such as written decisions and information bulletins were collected for later analysis. The non-medical decisions were reviewed by the main evaluation team. All medical decisions were given to a group of medical specialists who judged the appropriateness of these. Additionally, questionnaires were given to the staff leaders of all the participating governmental agencies. A "hot-wash" in the format of a moderated panel discussion with decision makers was held on the closing day of the exercise. Final reports were collected from the different arms of the exercise organization. In sum, 41 sources of data were gathered. (See page 46 of final report for the exhaustive list). All the data were extensively analyzed, discussed and debated over a 4 month period, eventually forming a written report which was officially accepted on June 22, 2005.

A comprehensive report (Federal Council, 2005) of the evaluation and observation presented the following conclusions:

- The leadership exercise was taken seriously by all concerned, and prepared and conducted with a high level of commitment.
- The most important challenges of the scenario were recognised by the involved ministries and offices such as the consequences of a possible pandemic on the government, cantons, economy and society.
- The president, supported by the Federal Chancellor, ensured that the Federal Council was in a position to fulfil its tasks in a timely, effective and coordinated manner.
- The lead crisis management role was appropriately accorded to the Federal Department of Home Affairs (DHA), which cooperated efficiently with the staffs of the other ministries and with the Federal Chancellery. The staff of the DHA was adequately supported by the task force of the Federal Office of Public Health.
- The exercise demonstrated the importance and difficulties of international coordination during the initial phase of a potential international crisis like "Epidemic in Switzerland".
- The importance of strategic leadership training was recognised as was shown by the first time involvement of the full Federal Council.
- The scenario gave rise to two main tasks: first, *immediate measures* had to be developed, agreed upon, executed and communicated. Secondly, *strategies on medium-term measures*

had to be developed as for example was requested by the WHO. Both had to be prepared in a coordinated way by the Federal Chancellery and the ministries on behalf of the Federal Council.

- The Federal Chancellery and the ministries – under great time pressure – placed priority on the immediate measures, which were delivered in good time to the Federal Council for adoption and subsequently communicated to the public. From a medical point of view, the strategy chosen and the decisions taken were deemed adequate.
- The development of medium-term measures fell somewhat short. Consideration from an interdisciplinary and interdepartmental perspective was largely absent, as was thinking about alternative solutions and scenarios. Overall, only a few signs of strategic thinking were apparent. Moreover, the chosen communication strategies did not sufficiently take into consideration the psychological effect of drastic measures. From a medical point of view, the longer-term measures outlined in the motion to the Federal Council were also judged to be inadequate. Cooperation between the fields of human and veterinary medicine fell short.

Looking back from an overall perspective

Looking back at the outcome of the exercise the following can be said.

Because the scenario was very close to reality, the conclusions regarding the medical aspects needing action for improvement are of particular importance. Furthermore, because many epidemics arise from illnesses derived from animals, establishing a close cooperation with the field of veterinary medicine is important.

Given that an epidemic can spread rapidly, as was the case in our scenario, leadership structures must be arranged in close proximity to the specialists, as was the case in the exercise under the lead of the DHA. In the view of those involved, the system of decentralised crisis management as practised in the exercise was considered to be appropriate in the event of an epidemic. Following the conclusions of the leadership exercise, Switzerland's pandemic ordinance was revised in a number of areas. The responsibilities and coordination of cooperation among the various partners in the event of a crisis are now clearly defined. The passage of the ordinance by the Federal Council on April 27, 2005 includes provision for the adaptation of the Swiss pandemic plan and the establishment of a pandemic crisis staff. A newly revised law on epidemics to be prepared will take into account

guidelines on allocating responsibilities that arose from the exercise.

Given the short duration of the exercise, it was not possible to get into potential medium and long-term measures in greater detail. This however should be done in order to be adequately prepared.

The exercise demonstrated the importance and difficulties of international coordination during the initial phase of a crisis like "Epidemic in Switzerland". According to the representatives of the European Commission and the World Health Organisation on the exercise task force, the most significant decisions must be taken in consultation with the international community about 12 hours after a real threat has surfaced. This international cooperation should be greatly improved following the adoption of the International Health Regulations at the World Health Meeting in May 2005, and through closer coordination with the EU. Participation on the part of Switzerland in the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in Stockholm should also be sought.

The strategic leadership exercise 2005 injected an impulse into the capacity of the Swiss government to lead under difficult conditions. It demonstrated that training based on real-life scenarios

could improve the cooperation and coordination among the most diverse agencies and bodies within and without the federal government, and increase their effectiveness to solve complex crises. It is noteworthy, that following the exercise, the Federal Council approved all 8 proposals stemming from the exercise, and has forwarded specific tasks to various agencies and officials for their implementation.

Note

1. RAND (Research and Development) Corporation: [Http://www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org)

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