Episode Four:

Plans are Useless, Planning is Everything

EXTRACTING REAL VALUE FROM HYPOTHETICAL SITUATIONS

POWERED BY:

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Continuity and recovery planning are often disregarded as abstract and unwieldy concepts.

It's something that came up a lot during the series – that from a distance, business continuity is always hypothetical until something actually goes wrong.

That's why it's so important not only to plan, but to plan in the right way. Good planning is the connective tissue that transforms a thought experiment into practical steps and meaningful actions.

The start of continuity planning is always imaginative – participants ask themselves 'What if this happened?' and then work towards a resolution.

But as we'll go on to explore, the most valuable output of planning isn't always the plan itself, but rather the process of creating it. Giving contributors from around the organisation the time and space to think about continuity collaboratively often reveals more accurate recovery priorities than plans produced in isolation.

People underestimate continuity and recovery all the time. What seems simple on paper can be incredibly complex, or just arduous in practice, as Mel Gosling pointed out:

"The first time I performed a disaster recovery test was for an insurance company. My technical manager at the time told me he could recover all our systems within a couple of days. In the end it took him a month to recover the systems.

"The reason his estimates were so off was because he'd made too many optimistic assumptions, which is something people do all the time. People forget the problems that they come up against. They've got the wrong bits of software. They're having to buy things they didn't think they had to buy. Things are incompatible. A myriad of problems and issues come along."

Bad planning can be worse than no planning

Poorly conceived recovery plans are just as likely to disrupt your organisation as the disaster itself. Testing a plan isn't just about gauging how effective the recovery is – it's just as much about observing the operational consequences from a safe distance.

The same is true of more practical tests. Physically running through something as simple as a fire drill can reveal hidden gaps that just aren't clear from the written version. As Stewart Duguid highlights:

"I realised that, as everyone was standing in the car park during one of our six-monthly fire drills, nobody had laptops, mobile phones or jackets, and they wouldn't have access to their car keys, money or anything else they had left inside.

"No one would have been able to get home."

"And yet our strategy, if the building had burnt down, hinged on home working.

"Moreover, given no one had their devices with them, nobody had access to the continuity plan.

So I persuaded facilities to let me run another fire drill, and then 5 minutes after everyone was outside I said 'Right, this is the actual test – the weather is as now, there are fire engines hosing down the building. What are you going to do?' And it was then that they realised they had a big gap."

Impact vs. Scenario based planning

There are two main ways to frame planning discussions: around scenarios, or impacts.

Scenario-based planning looks at different events and focuses on specific responses.

Impact-based planning takes a bottom-up approach, and looks not at the events themselves, but their consequences to the organisation. This can be a more scalable way to think about continuity, because several different scenarios will have common impacts.

There's no right or wrong answer. Lots of organisations prefer impact-based planning because it enables a consolidation of plans, but if you're just starting out, scenarios can be a helpful jumping-off point.

Here's Vicki Gavin on why she prefers impact-based planning at The Economist.

"I don't plan for flood, fire, flu, alien invasion or otherwise. Instead we have impact-based plans such as our premises not being available. Whether it's a smoking hole in the ground, or a police cordon in front of it makes not one bit of difference, it's unavailable.

"Other impacts might be unavailability of our critical resources such as our systems, suppliers or communications channels. We also plan for our people not being able to do their jobs - so no stuck at home, but physically unable to, because of illness or strike action.

"Impact planning scales well - you can plan for a few impacts and be ready for anything, so long has you've practiced crisis management. The more fictional crises you respond to, the better you'll do at the real stuff."

Small modifications significantly change scenarios

Planning and testing doesn't have to be complicated to be effective. Most of the continuity professionals from the series recommended simply gathering different people from around the organisation and asking them to talk through different scenarios. Michael Faber explained the value of adding small modifiers to common scenarios in order to explore different situations.

> **"Sit down for an hour, in a room and just give yourself a simple scenario..."**

"...something like a fire alarm has just gone off in your building.

You must evacuate the building without taking anything with you. Maybe you weren't at your desk at the time. So you just take what you have - no laptop, no phone, no documents.

"Now physically go and stand outside. For whatever reason, the office is irretrievably lost, and whatever was inside has been destroyed. What then?"

Failure isn't failure

Failure is how you learn and improve. Stewart Duguid was keen to emphasise the results of testing are important, but only as a learning exercise. The point of a test is not to prove you know everything. If anything, the reverse is true.

> "Every test I do is preceded with the clear message that failure isn't bad."

"Failure of a test is only bad if you don't follow up on any actions to change what didn't work. You might even retest and find that the failure was an anomaly – in some ways that's positive, but I always believe a test is better value for money if you find an issue. I know some people who are suspicious of successful tests. They don't think they've tested enough if nothing goes wrong."

Avoid repetition

Tests need variation is both content and participation in order to provide ongoing value. Testing the same plan, with the same people, year on year, is pointless. Stewart Duguid explained the diminishing returns of repeat tests.

"If a test becomes business as usual, it's worthless. You need to have different people, and different scenarios involved.

"If you're doing the same scenario, get different people to test it. The changes don't have to be big to be effective. Sometimes I'll pull in a group from a previous test, with the exception that I'll say to the crisis commander, 'You're ill today, go away', and we then test the deputy. I use the same method for IT testing. If I recognise, for instance, it's the same database person as last time, I'll send them away to find somebody else for me to test. It's a great way to push out the boundaries of knowledge and experience."

The five critical seats at the table

In all the chaos of disruption, the crisis management team should exemplify order. There are clear responsibilities to outline, and clear frameworks to operate within.

Vicki Gavin explained her approach. “I use a crisis management framework called SIADI: Situation, Impacts, Actions, Decisions, Issues. That’s our standard meeting agenda for our Crisis Management Team, which is composed of different people depending on the geography and nature of the incident.

“Once a suitable leader is determined, they choose a scribe to record the event as it unfolds and all the decisions and actions taken in response. We then elect a few more key roles: an information lead, who is responsible for following the emerging situation and impacts, a communications lead, who coordinates consistent messaging to crucial parties, and finally an operations lead, who is responsible for ensuring we continue our research, and get our newspaper to print.”

Inclusivity is a form of resilience

The flexibility of the Crisis Management Team at The Economist is partly enabled by Vicki Gavin’s deeply inclusive approach to continuity training. Everyone around the organisation is invited to participate in exercises on a regular basis, which increases the likelihood that anyone, at any time, could perform a crisis management role if required.

“I run exercises for everybody who works at The Economist – from the tea lady in Hong Kong to the CEO.

> **“Everyone is given at least one opportunity a year to do some crisis exercising...”**

...and to practice responding to crisis. My goal is that if everyone has experience of crisis management, then crisis management actually becomes a business-as-usual activity, and you hardly notice it happening. It’s obviously painful at the time, don’t get me wrong, but it reduces panic and helps things go smoothly.”

Ask the right people the right questions

It's important to listen to different stakeholders across the business when you're determining your recovery priorities.

Including a wide range of voices will reveal different recovery priorities based on the systems they use and the processes critical to them. If you limit the voices at the table to a certain cross section of the organisation, then you'll get a very skewed set of responses that only cater to a certain set of requirements.

Further to this, it's important to tailor your questions based on the person you're speaking to, in order to make continuity and recovery relevant to them. Vicki Gavin explained the importance of keeping it technical for the IT team, and tied to operations for the business side.

> "Unsurprisingly, our IT teams took a very technical view when determining business-critical systems..."

"...and our business owners weren't great at unpicking technical and operational interdependencies.

"So I made the radical proposal that we put business questions to the business, and IT questions to IT.

"I went to the business and asked: 'What are the critical things that you do?', and they made me a list of their processes, complete with the systems they needed to do them, and the longest they could be without them.

"Then I could go to IT and say 'How quickly could we bring that system back?', and they'd say 'Well the last time it failed it took us 12 hours.'

"Then I could go back to the business and say 'This critical process needs to resume after 4 hours, but IT can't restore the IT system it depends on back for 12.'

"And whether it was manual workarounds or further investment, suddenly you have business continuity plans that were really grounded in reality. It also meant I could give IT a list of the critical systems, in order of priority, according to the criticality of the tasks that they supported, and their interdependencies."

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