

# Prepared Together

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## A manifesto for crisis, risk and emergency communication

By Philippe Borremans

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A major crisis is never managed by one organisation alone.

It brings together people and institutions that may have different responsibilities, different information and different ways of making decisions.

- Businesses depend on public authorities.
- Governments depend on communities.
- Emergency services depend on infrastructure providers.
- International organisations depend on national and local partners.
- Leaders depend on communication teams, technical specialists and the people closest to what is happening.

Yet most preparedness still takes place in isolation.

Organisations write their own plans. Departments run their own exercises. Communication teams prepare their own messages. Communities, employees, partners and other affected groups are often consulted late — or not at all.

Then a crisis begins, and everyone is expected to work together immediately.

That is not preparedness.

It is improvisation between strangers.

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## Preparedness is built between organisations

Plans matter.

Clear responsibilities matter.

Decision processes, templates and communication procedures matter.

But none of them can replace relationships.

During a crisis, organisations need to share information, understand one another's constraints and make decisions despite incomplete facts. They need to know who is responsible, who has authority and who may see the situation differently.

Those relationships cannot be created by activating a crisis plan.

They must already exist.

**The most valuable preparedness work therefore happens before the emergency: when organisations still have time to meet, listen, practise and learn how to work together.**

Preparedness is built within organisations.

Effective preparedness is also built between them.

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### **Involvement must begin before communication becomes urgent**

People affected by a crisis are not passive recipients of information.

They are employees trying to make decisions about their families.

They are communities with local knowledge.

They are customers, patients, suppliers, responders, journalists, elected representatives and professionals working in other organisations.

Each group enters a crisis with different experiences, concerns, responsibilities and information needs.

### **There is no "general public".**

There are people whose understanding of risk is shaped by culture, language, previous emergencies, personal experience and their relationship with the institutions communicating with them.

Good communication begins by recognising those differences.

Better preparedness goes further.

It involves people before the crisis. It gives communities, employees and partners a meaningful role in exercises, planning and learning. It listens to those who understand local realities. It treats engagement as part of decision-making rather than as a final step before publishing a message.

People should not encounter an organisation's preparedness arrangements for the first time when they are already at risk.

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### **Trust is an outcome**

Organisations often describe "building trust" as a communication objective.

Trust does not work that way.

It cannot be produced by a campaign, claimed in a press release or restored through a better choice of words.

Trust is an outcome of what an organisation repeatedly demonstrates:

- Competence.
- Honesty.
- Consistency.
- Transparency.
- Accountability.
- Respect.
- A willingness to acknowledge uncertainty.

All of it adding up to a record of acting in ways that deserve confidence.

Communication contributes to that record. It helps people understand decisions, evaluate conduct and decide whether an institution is credible.

But communication cannot compensate for poor decisions or behaviour.

The work that supports trust begins long before a crisis — and continues long after public attention moves elsewhere.

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## **Communication is part of the response**

Communication is often treated as something that happens after a decision has been made: leaders decide, operations respond, legal reviews the language, and only then does communication explain it.

In reality, communication shapes the response from the beginning.

It affects how information moves through an organisation. It influences whether leaders understand the people affected by their decisions. It exposes uncertainty, disagreement and operational consequences. It helps organisations coordinate and gives people the information they need to act.

This is why communication professionals must be involved early.

### **Not simply to draft statements.**

To contribute to decisions.

### **Not simply to manage media attention.**

To help the organisation understand what people know, fear, misunderstand and need.

### **Not simply to defend reputation.**

To support an effective response.

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## **Clarity matters more than certainty**

A crisis rarely provides complete information. Facts change. Experts disagree. Decisions must be made before every question can be answered.

Organisations often respond by waiting for certainty or communicating with such caution that their words provide little practical value.

Honest communication does not require pretending to know more than we do.

It requires clarity about:

- what is known;
- what is not yet known;
- what is being done;
- what people should do;
- when more information will be available;
- who is responsible for the next decision.

Uncertainty is not a communication failure.

Hiding it, minimising it or allowing it to become an excuse for silence often is.

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## **Correction is necessary — but prevention matters more**

False information cannot always be ignored.

Some claims must be corrected, especially when they place people at risk.

But correction alone is not a strategy.

By the time a false narrative has taken hold, it may already fit an existing fear, grievance or suspicion. A factual response may arrive too late to change how people understand the situation.

**Preparedness therefore includes understanding the narratives that could emerge before a crisis.**

It means identifying information gaps, recognising existing concerns and communicating early enough that people are not forced to rely on speculation.

It means strengthening people's ability to recognise unreliable information without treating them as gullible or irrational.

The objective is not to win an argument after misinformation spreads.

It is to create an information environment in which accurate, useful communication has somewhere to land.

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## **Exercises should build relationships, not simply test plans**

An exercise is not successful because the scenario was completed or the plan was followed.

It is successful when people leave better prepared to make decisions together.

That requires exercises that reveal:

- unclear responsibilities;
- competing priorities;
- delayed approvals;
- missing relationships;
- different interpretations of risk;
- assumptions about audiences;
- communication gaps between organisations.

The most valuable exercise may be the first occasion on which a company, public authority, emergency service, international organisation and community representative experience the same situation together.

The objective is not to produce a flawless performance.

It is to discover what needs to improve while there is still time to improve it.

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## **Learning begins when the crisis ends**

Organisations often promise to learn lessons.

Too often, the review is delayed, softened or reduced to a list of procedural recommendations.

Real learning requires honesty:

- What did we believe that turned out to be wrong?
- Whose knowledge did we overlook?
- Which relationships helped? Which were missing?
- Where did information stop moving?
- Which decisions created avoidable communication problems?
- What did affected people experience that leaders did not see?

A review should not search for individuals to blame.

Nor should it protect the organisation from uncomfortable conclusions.

Its purpose is to turn experience into better preparedness.

The period after one crisis and before the next may be brief. That is precisely why it matters.

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## **My role is not to confirm comfortable assumptions**

Everything above is about how organisations, communities and institutions should prepare together. What follows is about the part I play in that work.

Clients have described me as direct, unconventional and passionate.

I accept that description.

- My role is not to agree with a plan because considerable work has already gone into it.
- It is not to reassure leaders that everything is ready when important questions remain unanswered.
- It is not to help manage the appearance of a problem an organisation has no intention of addressing.
- My role is to listen, understand the context and ask the questions that pressure may eventually ask more forcefully.
- If I believe an approach will work, I will say so.
- If I believe it will not, I will say that too — and explain why.

Independent advice is valuable only when it is honest.

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## **Experience must travel, but solutions must remain local**

My work has taken me across companies, governments, public institutions, international organisations and emergency operations in different parts of the world.

That experience has not given me a universal formula.

It has taught me why universal formulas fail.

- Political systems differ.
- Organisational cultures differ.
- Media environments differ.
- Communities experience risk differently.
- Authority, credibility and responsibility do not mean the same thing everywhere.

International experience is valuable when it creates curiosity rather than certainty.

The lessons from one sector or country can open new possibilities elsewhere. But every recommendation must be grounded in the people, institutions and realities of the place where it will be used.

A crisis may cross borders.

The response is always experienced locally.

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### **This is the standard I believe in**

- Preparedness before performance.
- Involvement before announcement.
- Specific audiences instead of an imaginary general public.
- Relationships alongside plans.
- Clarity without false certainty.
- Prevention before correction.
- Communication as part of decision-making.
- Exercises that create understanding.
- Reviews that lead to change.
- Credibility demonstrated through conduct.
- Honest advice when comfortable advice would be easier.
- Local solutions, not universal formulas.

The next major crisis will not be managed by a single organisation. It will be managed by many organisations — and by the people affected — working across boundaries under pressure.

They should not meet for the first time when it begins.

**They should prepare together.**

**Philippe Borremans**

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